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Whole Child, Whole Day, Whole Year

Assembling a
Comprehensive
Child Development
System for America

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Executive Summary

There is a fundamental mismatch between the K-12 public school schedule and the professional hours typically worked by parents. Children are in school from ages 5 to 18, school days mostly end by 3:00 pm, and classes stop for two months in the summer. Parents must piece together a safe place for their children during those nonschool times. A public and comprehensive Child Development System supported by federal funds would provide every child the right to a safe environment while their parents are at work. While ambitious, this system would largely be assembled from structures and practices already in place, which include a patchwork of federal grants and funding and a network of existing providers. There are various ways such a Child Development System could be structured—administered by states, federal funds flowing directly to providers, or, as recommended in this report, a blend of both. Early childhood, after-school, and summer camp providers would be reimbursed based on labor and capital costs, and programming would offer children an enriching social and emotional learning experience that public schools typically must deprioritize to focus on academics. While there are tough challenges to account for in designing such a system—like ensuring access for all children and preventing competition with public schools—such an investment in children and families not only holds promise for economic equity and prosperity but is an imperative for a thriving society.



Introduction

There is a fundamental disconnect between the K-12 public school system and the labor market demands faced by parents. While most parents must return to work mere weeks after a child is born and typically work 9:00 am to 5:00 pm, children are in school ages 5–18, and school days mostly end by 3:00 pm and stop for two months in the summer. The gaps—before children are school age, outside of school hours, and during the summer—fall to parents to fill, either by providing care themselves, finding unpaid care arrangements, or purchasing private care.

At minimum, all children should have access to a safe environment while their parents are at work, and parents shouldn't have to ration work because they can't find or afford a safe place for their children to be during the workday. The patchwork approach that many parents must use in finding care—a mix of formal and informal, paid and unpaid, regular and irregular providers—is not serving parents or children well. We need a comprehensive system for filling these gaps that starts in early childhood, spans after school and summer, and is affordable for all families and accessible by all children.

While it sounds ambitious, many of the pieces are already there: The funding streams, reimbursement model, administrators, and regulatory system are already in place, as are a base of providers. But this existing patchwork serves only low-income children who are lucky enough to benefit from limited public funds or children whose parents are rich enough to afford private care.

We wouldn't intentionally design the system we have now, but we *can* use it to build something better—a new system that this report refers to as the Child Development System. A new, comprehensive Child Development System doesn't need to be built so much as assembled, funded, and augmented. On the public side, we can take the current, myriad funding streams for early childhood, before and after school, and summer programming and combine them into a single fund that is large enough to offer all children access. Providers that currently sell care on the market could join the Child Development System via a reimbursement model. Instead of selling care, they would be reimbursed for it at cost by the government. Providers that currently use patchwork public funding to provide programming, such as using Title I funds to have before- and after-school programs, could similarly join a new comprehensive reimbursement model.

The North Star for such a system's design would be meeting families where they are. Parents want quality, proximity, affordability, and options—things that the private market for care and before- and after-school programs mostly fail to provide, and that are hard to find during the summer. They want a situation that is safe and enriching, to know that their child is in good hands and that if they don't like a particular place they can always go somewhere else. That requires communities to have numerous options



for early childhood, after school, and summer arrangements and that those options reflect the economic, cultural, and transit realities of the community. The key is having ample and diverse providers that reflect parent and community preferences.

Combining early childhood, before and after school, and summer into a unified Child Development System is a statement of values: These three areas are not ranked, and policy should not be triaged between them. The minimum that parents and children deserve is universal coverage for child development. It also reflects basic logistics of parents and providers: Using complements in administration, funding, and staffing to foster an ecosystem of care in local areas is more efficient and would allow families with multiple children of different ages to deal only with a single system.

The system proposed here spans multiple age bands and existing fields and programs—sometimes called care, or education, or camp—so the use of the word “development” is deliberate. It is a way to encompass what exists while also distinguishing the proposal presented here. “Development” evokes the idea that the system has a broader goal: A system of development can balance the academic exigencies and performance testing of school with child-led learning and a focus on individual growth. In the early years, this includes screening for milestone delays and access to supplemental therapy. As children age, it grows to encompass child-led learning and exploration outside of the formal academic record—a kid can fail biology, but not science camp.

Done well, this system could bolster a public school system struggling to keep up with the evolving and expanding needs of children. The public K-12 system does not meet the time demands of parents’ jobs and realistically never will. It will not expand to include infants or increase its hours or cover summer months. It often does not meet many of the developmental needs of children due to its prioritization of academic instruction and scholastic achievement. That is not a shortcoming but a constraint; many schools and curriculum incorporate development and socioemotional learning, but there are only so many hours of instruction, and academics will always be paramount.

Either those constraints can continue to weigh on families, or their solutions can be features of a new, complementary Child Development System. The two systems would work not in contrast but in concert to invest in children—not just some of the time and not just in some ways, but fully: whole child, whole day, whole year. In multiple senses, the Child Development System represents potential—it both is within our potential and has enormous potential to benefit children.



The System Today: A Patchwork with Potential

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 88 percent of working parents with a child 18 or younger have a regular daytime schedule (9:00 am–5:00 pm), and 85 percent are working on any given weekday ([Bureau of Labor Statistics 2019](#)). But public schools run an average of 170–185 days a year for 6.8 hours a day ([DeSilver 2023](#); [Snyder et al. 2008](#)). In some areas, schools have even begun to cut back to four days a week in order to save money and address teacher shortages ([Peetz 2024](#)). The labor market and the public school system are a version of the proverbial unstoppable force and immovable object—neither able nor willing to yield to the needs of the other. The logical conclusion is to build a bridge between the two.

The prospect of building that bridge—a universally accessible and affordable Child Development System—would be daunting if it were necessary to start from scratch. But luckily, many features of such a system are already in place. First, existing federal sources of support for care and education have created a base of funding, administration, and provision. Second, in the absence of broader public support, a diverse set of private providers offer paid early childhood care, after-school care, and summer opportunities ([Dutta-Gupta 2025](#)). The Child Development System needs to effectively marry these two existing resources and augment them to provide coverage to all children.

Base of Public Funding, Administration, and Provision

Three main sources of federal funding flow to communities for early childhood, before and after school, or summer programming. They vary in how the money is distributed and what it is spent on.

State and local governments often pursue their own initiatives or expansions to what federal dollars alone support. However, this proposal discusses federal funds only, as the intention is that the federal government would support the Child Development System or that a federal-state cost-sharing model would still have the vast majority of spending come from the federal government. In either case, any state and local funds that duplicate the proposed Child Development System would then be freed up to spend on other services.

Child Care Development Fund

The federal government sends money annually to states to support the care of children from low-income families outside of school through the Child Care Development Fund ([Lynch 2022a](#), [2022b](#)). Each state designates a lead agency within the state to administer these federal funds, such as the Department of Education or Child Services. The lead agency's tasks in this role include

- 1) designing and implementing a plan of how the federal funds will be distributed;
- 2) determining licensing requirements, issuing licenses, and regulating license maintenance;
- 3) selecting beneficiaries among the eligible population; and
- 4) setting the reimbursement rate (to send to providers) and the copayment rate (to collect from families) of the vouchers.

The Child Care Development Fund targets families with children under 13 who have a parent who is working or training for a job, whose household income does not exceed 85 percent of state median income, and whose household assets are under \$1 million. The program is not an entitlement—most eligible families are not selected as beneficiaries—and eligibility varies meaningfully by state ([Lynch 2022a](#)). Most of the Child Care Development Fund is spent as vouchers. Families find care on their own, and the state pays tuition to the provider, less a family copay, which goes back to the state.

The largest component of the Child Care Development Fund is the Child Care and Development Block Grant, which began in 1990 and is allocated to states based on the number of children they have under the age of five, the share of children receiving free or reduced-price lunches, and state per capita income. In 1996, Aid to Families with Dependent Children, commonly called welfare, was ended; the same legislation renamed and repurposed childcare money that supported Aid to Families with Dependent Children beneficiaries to be grouped and spent with Child Care and Development Block Grants. This new tranche of funds, called Child Care Entitlement to States, has some priority requirements for individuals on Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). Otherwise, Child Care Entitlement to States can be spent in the same way that the Child Care and Development Block Grant is spent. Many states elect to augment their Child Care Development Fund grant to serve more families.

Federal Funds for Public School K-12 Programming

Many public school systems offer before- and after-school and summer programs that are supported by federal funding education streams, including the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act. These are colloquially referred to as Title I and Perkins, respectively ([Congressional Research Service 2022b](#), [2024b](#)). Schools receiving Title I and Perkins funds can use them for programming outside of the typical school day. In addition, schools have access to the Nita M. Lowey 21st Century Community Learning Centers. Lowey is the only federal funding source that exclusively serves after school, before school, and summer programs ([Afterschool Alliance 2021b](#)). The Department of Education also funds community schools through the Full-Service Community Schools Program.

Public schools are not necessarily the providers of programming funded by these programs—often, they regrant money to contract providers. The Department of Education, for example, currently holds a spotlight competition for Lowey subgrantees to highlight best practices as well as innovative after-school and summer programs that come from private partnerships.

Head Start

Head Start, a program dating back to 1965, omits state involvement and sends money directly to local providers to provide preschool for very low-income children whose household income is below the poverty line,¹ who are in foster care, whose families are experiencing homelessness, or whose families receive public assistance. The federal government monitors providers through data reporting and on-site inspections. Like the Child Care Development Fund, Head Start is not funded enough to serve all eligible children, only a fraction—an estimated 36 percent nationally ([National Head Start Association 2022](#)). The Government Accountability Office has also pointed out that the proportion of children served varies widely by state, some serving more than 36 percent of the eligible population and some fewer than 36 percent, a result of outdated funding allocation formulas that are mismatched with the impoverished child population ([Government Accountability Office 2024](#)).

Head Start has a long history and proven track record of improving outcomes for participants ([Bailey et al. 2021](#); [Duer et al. 2022](#); [Puma et al. 2010](#)). It has been through one previous major expansion: The original program was limited to three- and four-year-olds in preschool but in 1995 expanded via Early Head Start to children zero to three years old ([Lynch 2014, 2019](#)).

There are numerous proposals to expand Head Start so that it better serves its eligible population, and more. Research and policy advocates have considered ways to make Head Start universal, though they typically think of Head Start as a preschool program, or even a model, rather than a full zero-to-five early childhood program ([Meek et al. 2023](#)).

Like the Child Care Development Fund, Head Start has an existing and experienced administrative infrastructure—but one in service of direct provision, rather than vouchers (like the Child Care Development Fund) or subgrants (like Title I, Perkins, or Lowey). Many states have also supplemented federal funding with state funding to serve more children, invest in program quality, or both.

¹ Technically, states can enroll up to 10 percent of total slots to children in households above the poverty line; if they don't have families below the poverty line on the waiting list, they can enroll up to 35 percent of total slots to families with income between 100–130 percent of the poverty line.

Base of Private Providers

Parents have a wide array of preferences around the type of early childhood, before- and after-school, and summer care arrangements they seek for their children. For each, a mix of private providers accompanies public provision. But the extent of this private provider network—or really, the extent to which it would need to be expanded to provide a universally offered system—is not clear.

Early Childhood

Early childhood providers, who serve children from age zero through kindergarten eligibility (typically age five), include licensed, informal, and public school arrangements. There is no consensus estimate of the number of licensed childcare providers in the US, in part because the data is not collected similarly or at all in each state. The organization Child Care Aware surveys providers in 41 states for their annual reports on supply. In 2022, it estimated that there were 93,000 centers and 94,000 home-based providers in the states surveyed ([Child Care Aware of America 2023](#)). Licensed care providers are just one type of early childhood arrangement—many children are also looked after through informal arrangements with friends or family (though the exact number is unclear). This informal care can be the sole type of care, or used in conjunction with formal, licensed care. In addition, many school districts offer de facto childcare through expanding pre-K programs that enroll children as young as three or four.

In 2019, the National Center on Education Statistics estimated that 41 percent of children aged five and under who were not yet in kindergarten had no regular nonparental care arrangement. Or, put differently, 41 percent of children were with a parent at home ([Cui and Natzke 2021](#)). Read from the point of view of capacity, the current providers of early childhood care would need to expand considerably to absorb two-fifths of children into nonparental care. However, that share varies strongly by age. For children less than a year old, 58 percent are home with a parent. For children one to two years old, the number falls to 45 percent. For preschool-aged children three to five years old, it falls to 26 percent.

In a universally offered system, childcare enrollment would likely be higher than what it currently is, but not 100 percent. Researchers at the Bipartisan Policy Center used surveys and analysis in 35 states to estimate that the US is short 3.5 million childcare spots, representing 31 percent of all preschool-age children ([Smith et al. 2020](#)). Separately, economists have attempted to model potential enrollment under different subsidy regimes and have projected that under a free or mostly free childcare system, families would shift away from informal and parental care to licensed home-based and center-based care, but that the former two would still be used ([Borowsky et al. 2022](#)).

Before School and After School

The need for before- or after-school programming varies with the exact schedule of the school day. Before-school need and programming are much less common than after-school need and programming. Currently, after-school programs are offered by about 8,800 private and public (school) providers ([Afterschool Alliance 2024](#)). A 2020 Afterschool Alliance survey found that for every child in an after-school program, there are three more who are waiting to get into one—an unmet demand of 24.6 million children. In addition, the survey estimates that 7.7 million children are left unsupervised for hours after school each day ([Afterschool Alliance 2020](#)).

This report refers to “after school” instead of “before and after school” in discussing the Child Development System, but this is just for brevity and ease of reading. The Child Development System would cover both before- and after-school programming.

Summer

Data also show that many children are excluded from summer programming. The same 2020 Afterschool Alliance survey found that just half of all school children had access to at least one structured activity in the summer ([Afterschool Alliance 2021a](#)). At the same time, the American Camp Association reports that, in 2016, 26 million children attended one of roughly 15,000 day and overnight summer camps ([American Camp Association 2016](#); [Gay 2022](#)). Although that number has likely fluctuated in the years since due the COVID-19 pandemic, the American Camp Association typically reports enrollment growth summer-to-summer.

Expanding Providers for a Child Development System

All told, the current base of private providers suggests that a Child Development System built on the network of private providers would ultimately need to expand capacity to accommodate 3.5 million children in early childhood programs, 24.6 million in after-school programs, and up to 26 million in summer programs.

Those numbers show just how many children are left out of the current patchwork of options and make the task seem formidable. Yet, these existing providers are a valuable base to build upon and integrate into a new system, even if insufficient on their own.

The Potential in the Existing System

A universal Child Development System needs to marry these three major streams of federal funding for early childhood, after-school, and summer programming—for states (Child Care Development Fund), public providers (Head Start), and public schools (Title I, Perkins, and Lowey)—to the private provider network. This would require, at a



minimum, a substantive increase in federal funding and a reimbursement rate for compensating private providers. The potential for both is already evident.

During the pandemic, each of the public streams was greatly augmented by relief funds through three pieces of legislation enacted over a nine-month period in 2020 and 2021. Between mandatory closures, health regulations, and lower employment, the pandemic put existential pressure on the private childcare system. Appropriations for the Child Care Development Fund increased by 42 percent during the pandemic, spent out over three-and-a-half years ([Lynch and Boyle 2023](#)). The relief funds were distributed at states' discretion, though some funds were earmarked specifically for COVID-19 response and preparation. They were rapidly absorbed by states and providers who described federal support as a lifeline ([National Association for the Education of Young Children 2023, 2024](#); [Smith et al. 2021, 2022](#); [Sun et al. 2024](#)). The Office of Child Care estimates that 94 percent of states used the pandemic relief money to fund childcare start-up and expansion grants to create additional spots ([Office of Child Care 2024a](#)).

Head Start received an additional \$2 billion in funds that was allocated to providers via supplemental grants ([Office of Head Start 2022](#)). Providers could use the grants to increase enrollment, expand to summer programming, make physical changes to facilities, or pay staff—all areas in which the pandemic had created a strain on providers ([Shaw et al. 2023](#)). Finally, the federal government sent relief funds to stabilize and invest in public education that could be spent on after-school and summer programs ([Afterschool Alliance and National League of Cities n.d.](#); [Afterschool Alliance 2023](#); [Congressional Research Service 2024a](#)).

Looking back now, the pandemic relief funds can be seen as pilot programs for a full build-out of a Child Development System.

A reimbursement rate—the critical financial linchpin that compensates providers for care—also has a base of experience. For after school and summer, there is a de facto rate in place since schools already contract out these services to private providers. This rate is not sufficient for providers to attract and retain staff, but it means schools and providers have experience with a reimbursement system. In contrast, early childhood care is currently sold at a market rate directly to families; that market rate is typically used to calculate the subsidies paid out by the state. However, the federal Office of Child Care, which administers the Child Care Development Fund, designed and rolled out a cost model by child age and childcare setting in 2014 ([Office of Child Care 2024b](#)). The cost model—the Provider Cost of Quality—was offered as an alternative to market rates in the state subsidy calculation for vouchers.

The Provider Cost of Quality model has been used by a few states to estimate the cost of care in the state (see, for example, [McClain 2023](#); [Office of the State Superintendent of Education 2024](#)). But the user base for the model is much larger, including a growing number of experts and advocates that use the cost of quality model to advocate for

moving away from a market-based system. The cost of providing care is routinely shown in a quality cost calculation, like the Provider Cost of Quality, to be more expensive than what the market currently charges and what parents can afford. This is proof that the private market system cannot provide quality care without significant intervention: The market is simultaneously expensive and inadequate. Hence, the potential reimbursement model established 10 years ago has been widely used ([Bipartisan Policy Center 2020](#); [Office of Child Care 2024c](#); [Isaacs et al. 2022](#); [Caronongan et al. 2022](#); [McClain 2023](#); [Capito and Workman 2021](#)). There is also separate accounting of reimbursement rates for public preschool programs, which is another valuable assessment of best practices for reimbursement ([Friedman-Krauss et al. 2024](#)).

A Child Development System does not need to be built so much as assembled and augmented. There is already some funding for childcare, but it is limited to serving only low-income populations and disbursed so stingily that only a fraction of even that subpopulation is helped. Some administrative architecture exists, but it is spread over multiple funding streams. There are some providers, but they are limited to serving only those who can afford care at a market-rate profit or struggle with meager reimbursement. To truly serve all children, all day, all year, we must simply put all of these pieces together and increase funding to meet the total need.

The System Assembled: Paths to Universal Child Development System

Moving from the patchwork of early childhood, after-school, and summer programming that we have now to a fully universal Child Development System requires deciding, in simplest terms, how federal money will be distributed. No matter how the funds are administered, a unified Child Development System would include:

- **Combined programming fund:** All of the current funds that go to early childhood, after school, and summer programming (including the Child Care Development Fund, Title I, Perkins, Lowey) would be combined into a single fund: the Child Development System (CDS) Fund. This fund would be augmented so that it covers free, universal access to the Child Development System.
- **Capital/start-up fund:** The programming fund would be accompanied by a separate capital fund that grants money to new and existing providers to increase the overall capacity of the system. This fund would initially be large, to move from the current patchwork system that does not serve all children.
- **Federal policy office:** An office within the Administration for Children and Families would oversee the Child Development System through rulemaking, minimum service standards, program data reporting, technical assistance, and research.

- **Incorporation of current private providers:** Private providers who join the Child Development System would no longer sell care on the market but be reimbursed for care based on the nature of the program (early childhood, after school, summer), the number of children served, and their age.
- **Incorporation of public school providers:** Public schools that offer preschool would be reimbursed directly for it. Public schools that offer after-school and summer programming would be reimbursed if they provide it or if they offer it on-site through a subgrantee.
- **Incorporation of employer providers:** Private and public employers would be able to partner with a provider or directly establish a Child Development site attached to their place of business, with the option to give enrollment preference to parents among their staff, but with some conditions for maintaining enrollment for departing staff.

The basics are simple: The federal government will fund a universal Child Development System. Existing and new providers will be brought into that system via a reimbursement model that compensates them for the programming provided at cost. They will be paid out of a single fund that combines all existing sources of funding and is increased to be large enough to guarantee universal coverage.

The key question is who receives and administers that large, combined fund. By extension, that fund administrator will oversee the development of the landscape of providers, will be at the front line of monitoring quality and guaranteeing access, and will dictate how families and providers interact with the program's administration. Since the funding will come from the federal government, a federal office will have oversight regardless of how it is paid out.

The existing patchwork of public funds offers several potential administrators. Currently, the Child Care Development Fund flows to *state governments*, which, through their lead agency, decide how funds are distributed to families (mostly as vouchers). Head Start flows directly from the federal government to *providers*, who then provide care. Title I, Perkins, and Lowey instead are allocated mostly to *public schools* that can provide after-school and summer programming or subgrant it to a private provider.

There are many options for how federal funds large enough to support a universal program would flow and to which entities. I discuss three options, one in which funds flow to states, one to providers, and one to locals.

Option 1: A State System

In this system, the CDS Fund would flow entirely to states, essentially expanding the existing infrastructure of the Child Care and Development Block Grant and Child Care



Entitlement to States to a universal system. The state's designated lead agency would design and administer a universal implementation plan for the Child Development System. States would have full discretion over their systems, so long as they meet enumerated federal standards.

Advantages

Streamlined Federal Sources: A state system reduces the number of funding streams, thus standardizing and streamlining the rules, reporting, and administration attached to each. In addition to the three sources already discussed, early childhood, after-school, and summer funding can be supported by the following programs at states' discretion ([Katz 2024](#)):

- Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five
- Social Services Block Grant Program
- USDA Rural Development Programs
- Individuals with Disabilities Education Act
- Temporary Assistance for Needy Families
- Child Care Access Means Parents in Schools Program

Tailored State Design: States have different economies, employers, geographies, transportation norms, populations, and resources. A pure state system would allow each state to design its own implementation plan and base the landscape of the Child Development System on the state's needs and preferences.

Leveraged Administration: A pure state system would leverage the administration currently in place for the Child Care Development Fund, which has years of experience in allocating federal funds and networking with providers and families in the state. In addition, states already set the licensing requirements for early childhood care and have a process in place for doing so.

Issues and Concerns

Willingness: An unfortunate lesson of the Affordable Care Act is that states can refuse federal investments, even if foregoing the investment leaves the state's economy and population worse off. For example, 10 states have still not expanded Medicaid to adults with income up to 138 percent of the poverty line ([Kaiser Family Foundation 2024](#)).

Possible solution: Develop a federal implementation plan for states that opt out and allow cities and counties in those states to apply for funds separately.



Administrative capacity: Even under the current fractional system, many states struggle with basic tasks, such as getting Child Care Development Fund reimbursements to providers in a timely manner. A larger fund with larger scope requires consistent and capable administration.

Possible solution: Invest in administrative capacity at the state level and include rigorous staffing requirements and accountability measures for state lead agencies, with contingency plans for federal takeover.

Quality across states: States can vary in their approach in a way that produces differing quality of development. While allowing for innovation is good, one concern is how to bring up low-performing states and the extent that federal standards could effectively do so.

Possible solution: Require consistent data collection and performance measurement across states, require regular (annual or biannual) updates of federal standards, and include grants targeted at low-performing states or areas in overall funding assistance.

Resource distribution within states: Rural areas have fewer resources and lower incomes than cities, as well as fewer potential partners (such as community colleges, universities, large employers, or public places like museums, libraries, and theaters) to bring into the ecosystem of the Child Development System.

Possible solutions:

- Ensure that the funding allocation for states takes into account total number of children, number of children in poverty, and children in rural areas. Additionally, have best practices around collection and policy sharing specifically for less dense, rural areas.
- Break up grants so that large cities and/or metro areas are awarded grants separately from states. The 15 largest cities in the US, which currently have a population over 900,000, would be allowed to apply independently from their state.

Option 2: A Federal System

In this option, the CDS Fund would flow directly to providers from the federal government, taking Head Start, Title I, Perkins, and Lowey as models. The administration and coordination of the program, including grants to expand the number of providers, would be executed by the regional offices of the Administration for Children and Families, which would act as the lead agencies. These regional lead agencies would be separate from the central federal office that oversees the CDS Fund.

Advantages

Inclusive of all communities: A federal system is better characterized as a direct-to-provider system. It would be a grassroots, bottom-up design of the Child Development System. As providers see demand for programming, they could apply directly for funds without having to go through a centralized design or plan, which is an advantage because state or federal planners might ignore or be unaware of local needs. For example, an immigrant community may want to establish a Child Development site to teach younger members about their heritage, culture, or language, which a state government might oppose.

Leveraged administration: The 10 regional offices of the Administration for Children and Families have considerable experience administering funds and overseeing programs.

Issues and Concerns

Confederation rather than system: A federal, direct-to-provider system may lack comprehensive design and administration, making the Child Development System more of a confederation of providers in an area rather than a system. This could increase the administrative burden on families to find sites and apply.

Possible solution: Require the regional coordinator to oversee the Child Development portfolio in an area and work with providers to ease burden on families.

Quality across locations: States ensure quality of early childhood centers through licensing, while Head Start ensures standards through term-limited grants and on-site visits. The latter is a key part of Head Start's quality guarantee, but scaling to a federal level would be challenging.

Possible solutions:

- Establish a new quality standard system that varies by age and nature of the Child Development site.
- Partner with provider member groups that can or could offer accreditation, such as an association of camps and after-school programs, and partner with state governments to adopt these licensing standards.

Resources across communities: Localities have very different resources, such as the urban-rural disparity discussed above in potential partners (like community colleges, universities, large employers, or public places like museums, libraries, and theaters). The Child Development System should reflect communities, but a direct-to-provider

system may reinforce inequality between them. In addition, it takes considerable time and a degree of expertise to apply for federal grants, as well as knowledge of the availability of funds. Bottom-up expansion can leave communities behind.

Possible solution: Require the regional coordinator to oversee the Child Development portfolio in an area and have additional grants or assistance for localities struggling to enroll students or establish program offerings.

Administrative capacity: Each regional office would be dealing with potentially tens of thousands of providers interacting with thousands of public schools. Even with additional staffing, this is a considerable portfolio to manage.

Possible solution: Require regional offices to staff intermediaries to serve as frontline coordinators that are numerous and distributed throughout the region.

Option 3: A Local System

The state system and the direct-to-provider system have trade-offs that are complementary to one another, which suggests that a Child Development System may work best in a local system that aims to blend the strengths of both.

In 2020, voters in Colorado approved proposition EE to support funding high-quality, universal preschool for all Colorado children. As part of that implementation, a Transition Working Group was tasked with designing a transition plan for the new preschool program and held stakeholder meetings to identify the preferred method for administering preschool, cognizant that policymakers viewed preschool as a first step toward a comprehensive zero-to-five early childhood program. The Transition Working Group recommended coordination of early childhood programming through local coordination organizations, or local leads, often a public government or nonprofit organization. The local leads are not limited to a minimum or maximum geographic area, and some span multiple counties while others span a city within a county ([Colorado Department of Early Childhood 2022](#); [Transition Working Group 2022](#)).

In a local system, the CDS Fund would flow to a state's lead agency. The state lead would be tasked with overseeing the subdivision of the state into local lead agencies, and pass the entirety of the CDS Fund to them. Those local lead agencies would design and administer a universal implementation plan for the Child Development System in their area. Local leads would have full discretion over their system, so long as it meets enumerated state and federal standards.

Advantages

Community-led and -oriented design: A local system would respond to the needs and demands of localities, giving communities a much stronger voice in the landscape of development and even letting localities define what constitutes their “local” area.

Administrative proximity to families: A local system would place much of the decision-making in the development and implementation of the Child Development System at the local level. This would give families much easier access to help navigating the system or to be able to redress issues or bring forward ideas.

Issues and Concerns

Quality across localities: Localities can have very different levels of expertise and experience that can influence the quality of their design. A Child Development System would build from existing infrastructure that can also vary widely.

Possible solution: Instruct the state lead agency to collaborate with local leads on design and implementation through staff support and technical assistance. This could include a statewide technical working group of stakeholders and experts to assist with planning. Also allow some local areas to opt out of leading and defer implementation to a state lead that serves as a backup for local areas.

Resources across localities: A purely local system may reinforce inequality between localities. In addition, some communities may be willing and able to establish centers, while others might lack the knowledge or motivation to create as complete or comprehensive of a system.

Possible solution: Require the state coordinator to have additional grants or assistance for localities struggling to enroll students or establish program offerings.

Extra administration: A local system would create three tiers of administration at the local, state, and federal level. This could create administrative burdens for families and providers and decrease the efficiency of the system.

Possible solution: Have a clear division of duties, rules, and reporting for each level of administration so that each has a well-defined scope and role.



Preserving and Expanding Head Start

In either the state, federal (direct-to-provider), or local system, Head Start must either be folded in with the other combined funds or kept separate. If Head Start is folded in, Head Start's administration and implementation system would likely be eliminated, leaving current providers—who serve an at-risk population with special needs—in a kind of limbo. But if Head Start is kept separate while early childhood education is offered to all children, it would create a two-tiered system that puts low-income children on a separate track. So, what should the role of Head Start be in a universal system in which poor children are no longer excluded from high-quality care options because of their income?

The answer comes from thinking of Head Start as what it is instead of who it serves. Head Start is an early intervention program to promote school readiness for children through education, health, and nutrition services and the promotion of family well-being. The need for intervention is identified using proxies such as having very low income, experiencing homelessness, being in foster care, or being on public assistance. In the future, Head Start can simply operate with a different proxy. The program can serve as federally funded early intervention centers for children in need of services, regardless of income. As long as it remains high quality—and indeed, in the current system it is often much higher quality than private licensed care—families will want to send their children.

Children currently served, such as those in foster care or experiencing homelessness, can still be prioritized at Head Start locations, and the wraparound services for families can still be offered. The critical difference is that Head Start shouldn't be the only place poor children get care, nor should it be limited to poor children. Head Start should be greatly augmented and integrated as a service for all children, if they need it. Head Start can remain a federal direct-to-provider program that exists within the Child Development System, but with an expanded role, offerings, and funding that is separate from the rest of the system and therefore guaranteed to be insulated from competition for funds. The dual funding streams would have to be designed so that states or localities don't have a financial incentive to not send children to Head Start (such as losing funding if a child switches to a Head Start center), or vice versa.

This expansion of Head Start poses two critical policy questions. First, how Head Start would interact with children covered by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). IDEA funds early intervention services for children in the specific case of developmental delays and disabilities. Children are referred by their pediatrician to a local service provider and assessed. If delays and needs for intervention are found, services are arranged through that provider and mostly

take place in the child's typical environment, such as their home or their childcare. For example, a developmental delay serviced by IDEA might be a child who is late in being able to walk and needs regular physical therapy.

Head Start and IDEA already interact, to a degree; Head Start centers are meant to have 10 percent of children come from the IDEA-eligible population. However, they have different screeners and different interventions. Head Start screens are economic and social, based on the vulnerability and precarity of the family situation. IDEA screens are medical, based on diagnosed delays or disabilities. Both parent populations would likely be wary of any plan or policy that simply lumps them together. Similarly, service providers may be wary of any streamlined funding in which their children are competing for funds.

Like the Child Development System overall, there are options of how to integrate two programs that serve distinct but overlapping populations that require additional services into a free and universal early childhood system. It is difficult to move beyond the scarcity and shortage operating mindset that early childhood care has had to contend with for so long, but with abundance comes creativity.

One option is for a greatly expanded Head Start to include IDEA-wed Head Start centers where IDEA children can attend and receive services, and these IDEA Head Start sites would be co-funded by the Child Development System and IDEA. Or, IDEA can stay separate and the IDEA service provider can be one mechanism for Head Start referrals. Each option has trade-offs. But it is paramount that children in need of intervention, of whatever type, are served better than they are now.

The second policy question concerns age. Head Start is, quite simply, very good at helping children. In the fractured patchwork system, it is an early childhood program, and predominantly a preschool. In a unified Child Development System, Head Start could be expanded upward, serving children and families in need of the same interventions but at older ages by becoming an after-school provider or even a summer provider. Head Start would become a parallel resource to school and development, taking referrals from both, with a separate, noncompetitive source of funding that ensures that it is always available and doesn't crowd out or get crowded out by other providers.

The biggest advantage of this would be that Head Start can provide continuity of services to children and families whose needs do not end when the child turns five. However, it would certainly expand the scope of Head Start's practice. Older and younger kids aren't the same, and, much like the delicate and sensitive

relationship Head Start can have with IDEA, there are more relationships, services, and resources to manage that serve older children or public school children.

This proposal includes an expanded Head Start that is available to children of all ages as an after-school and summer provider, which this report will refer to as Head Start Model (HSM). HSM incorporates the early intervention goal for children and wraparound services for families that Head Start exemplifies as well as the direct-to-provider federal funding scheme, but it is distinct from the actual Head Start early childhood program.

Leveraging Federal Resources

Whichever funding and administration allocation option is pursued, the Child Development System it creates would transform the patchwork system currently in place into a universally accessible system that addresses the time needs of parents and aids in the development of children.

This transformation cannot occur in isolation and will be aided by effectively using federal resources across an array of executive agencies outside of childcare. The Small Business Administration, for example, could provide technical assistance, grants, and mentorship to aid the expansion of providers, especially home-based early childhood programs. The Institute for Museum and Library Services could do the same to support new or expanded programs at museums and libraries, or help them convert spaces. The Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership could similarly support programs that use public parks. The Department of Labor could design apprentice programs for specific workers within the Child Development System. AmeriCorps could apply or create a service program to help communities build their system.

The System Tomorrow: Development at All Ages

A key motivation for a Child Development System is the mismatch between school schedules for children and work schedules for parents. But if done well, the Child Development System can do so much more than just care for children until their parents come home.

Public schools are a performance-tested environment. Classes are graded and scores are recorded in a permanent record, which is then used when applying for jobs or for college. On top of this, states have their own grade-level exams. Test scores determine not only how students are measured but how schools are assessed. Thus, schools must prioritize academic instruction and scholastic achievement. Increasingly, however,

academic curricula are integrating social and emotional learning—a recognition of its importance.

In 2021, the American Academy of Pediatrics, American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and Children’s Hospital Association declared a national emergency in child and adolescent mental health. Although the pandemic was an obvious and acute stressor, the declaration pointed to long-simmering issues children and adolescents face ([American Academy of Pediatrics, American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and Children’s Hospital Association 2021](#)). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention regularly monitors youth health and behavior. It found that there was a spike in severity around the pandemic, but, even beyond that, youth mental health is on a secular and worsening trend ([Centers for Disease Control and](#)

Looking back now, the pandemic relief funds can be seen as pilot programs for a full build-out of a Child Development System.

[Prevention 2024](#)). The causes of this decline in mental health are myriad, but grading systems—the pressure to perform academically compounded by the pressure to outperform peers—are one key factor ([Eyler 2022](#); [Horowitz and Graf 2019](#)).

Schools are following these developments and making efforts to meet children’s needs, but schools should not have the sole burden of providing this support. Social and emotional learning, as well as nonacademic enrichment, cannot be given as much space in school because of schools’ academic priorities. But this does not have to be a limitation. A Child Development System can create a place that prioritizes child-led learning—putting individual growth, social and emotional learning, and nonacademic enrichment first—where mental health is a goal, not a consequence. These two systems would work in balance, complementing one another’s priorities and strengths.

Their only real mismatch is that public school does not start until age five, and the Child Development System would begin at age zero. Yet, a comprehensive approach to development must start in early childhood. In the current childcare market system, poor children, on average, receive much lower-quality care. This contributes to the disparity in school readiness between rich and poor children ([Flood et al. 2022](#); [Isaacs 2012](#)). In turn, that disparity puts enormous pressure on the K-12 system, and on children themselves. Pure academic instruction may not be appropriate for children under five, but development is vital to enabling and improving future academic instruction. Some advocates have even begun calling for establishing a legal right to early childhood education ([Lowenberg 2024](#)).

The Child Development System proposed here emphasizes establishing a federal base—a floor of funded, minimum standards—that leaves room for lead agencies and providers to be creative about policy. The following section provides an overview of how each arm of the system—early childhood, after school, and summer—would determine a pool of providers, navigate reimbursement, and meet parents’ needs.

Early Childhood Development

In a Child Development System, every child would have access to full-day, full-year early childhood care from infancy until they are age-eligible for kindergarten. Early childhood care is the plinth of both a Child Development System and the public school system. Development at this age and stage is designed to encourage a strong base for children's growth and education.

Who Provides Early Childhood Development?

The providers of early childhood development would be a mix of private and public operators who are reimbursed for their services based on the number of children served and their ages. Current providers who sell care on the market would have the option of joining this reimbursement-based system, and new providers could start up by applying to the CDS Fund administrator (whether that be state, federal, or local). Licensed providers would span:

- Home-based care: private providers located inside a home
- Center-based care: private providers located outside of a home, including those attached to an employer, housing, public building, school, community center, or religious institution
- School-based care: public preschools attached to and administered by elementary schools

Alongside these reimbursed providers are federally funded and administered Head Start centers for children in need of early intervention.

Having an array of early childhood options is intentional; the goal is to meet the preferences and needs of children, parents, communities, and local economies. The reimbursement model would remove the need for care to be profitable, allowing much more entry into the provider space to meet parents where they are, rather than simply to generate profits. Large employers could apply to create an on-site Child Development center to serve their workforce, and colleges and universities could apply to create an on-site Child Development center to serve their students and faculty. Similarly, houses of worship and community centers could apply to create on-site care.

Critically, no restriction would limit the care to being provided solely during a typical nine-to-five workday. Child Development centers could meet the needs of employers and workers who have nonstandard work hours. Toyota, for example, has run 24-hour daycare at two of its manufacturing sites in the US for over 20 years ([Hartmann 2022](#)), something not every business is inclined, or has the capacity, to do out of pocket. A Child Development center could be built around parents who work in emergency

services departments like fire or police departments, parents who work in hospitals, parents who attend night school, or parents who have early, late, or overnight shifts that extend beyond the typical nine-to-five workday. For example, the San Diego Police Department created a care center for its officers that is open from 5:30 am to 7:00 pm to accommodate shift timing and last-minute shift changes ([Cohen 2024](#)).

The Child Development System could also guarantee that there are no childcare deserts—that is, geographic areas in which there are few to no licensed care options. When early childhood care is backstopped by reimbursement, the landscape of provision can match the needs of the community: Parents in rural or low-density population areas could be guaranteed access, something the private market cannot do. States and localities could have a much wider berth in shaping or fostering supply. At the start, however, recruiting and establishing providers would pose big challenges—which is why the Child Development System would include a separate fund for capital development—but in time could be the greatest advantage of the system for states and localities. They would get more control than the private market gives them in determining the supply and type of providers.

And parallel to the Child Development System, running on a provider-reimbursement model, would be Head Start, directly providing public early childhood early intervention programming.

How Would Reimbursement Work?

A cost-of-care reimbursement model would estimate the labor and capital cost of providing early childhood care. It can be calculated separately by the type of provider and the age of the children, with regional differentiation. The reimbursement would flow directly to providers, who would not need to charge parents or manage any tuition payments. All costs would be covered by the reimbursement. This is in contrast to the current voucher system, which attaches a subsidy to specific children. Those children's parents pay a lower tuition and the state makes up the difference (the value of the voucher).

The largest cost in the reimbursement model would be the wages of Child Development workers. Instead of the very low market wages the sector currently has, reimbursement rates would be set at much higher wages. These wage schedules could include requirements for staff development, training, and continuing education, keeping staff up to date on necessary certificates such as CPR training as well as best practices and research in the field. In effect, reimbursement would allow the Child Development System to design wages and staff experience around what results in the best care for children, something the private sale of care simply does not support.

Recent evidence demonstrates the incredible benefit of higher-paid staff and, more specifically, staff paid at higher than current market wages. The District of Columbia

(DC) introduced the Early Childhood Educator Pay Equity Fund in 2022, which creates pay parity between early childhood educators in licensed childcare facilities and public school teachers through payments from the city to workers, on top of their paychecks. In two years, the fund reduced turnover and absenteeism, increased employment, reduced stress among workers, and improved their financial well-being. Researchers estimated that the fund had a 23 percent return on investment for the city ([Sandstrom et al. 2024](#); [Schochet 2024](#); [Belfield and Schochet 2024](#)).

In addition to wages, the reimbursement's capital cost would cover things providers need to purchase to provide care, like rent, materials, supplies, books, and toys. At the same time, the Child Development System could work in conjunction with an expansion to the Child and Adult Care Food Program so that all children could be fed on-site meals that meet nutritional standards, a key way to support child health ([Economic Research Service 2025](#); [Stierman et al. 2021](#); [Ward et al. 2021](#); [Williams, Burns, and Rudowitz 2023](#)). Currently, the Child and Adult Care Food Program reimburses participating licensed childcare centers for the food provided to children from low-income families, in a manner similar to free and reduced school lunch for K-12 school children. The Child Development System would include a universal expansion to this eligibility, so that any participating provider could get meals for their students.²

Will Parents Want This?

Parents want quality, proximity, affordability, and choice—things the private market for care mostly fails to provide. The Child Development System is built around ensuring those principles. Children would not be assigned to a center but would enroll in one of their parents' choosing. Child Development sites would be funded to such a level that even low-density areas would be assured access, and the landscape of providers would reflect local preferences and needs. With higher pay for workers built into the reimbursement, quality of care would improve. And for children who need additional help, Head Start would still provide an early intervention wraparound.

After-School Development

In a Child Development System, every child would have access to after-school care. The content of after-school programming would change and mature as the children do. Development at this stage is designed to complement academic instruction during the school day with enrichment, education, and growth that can emphasize social and emotional learning, mental health, confidence, and exploration.

² This expansion isn't without hurdles; even if the federal government pays for the food, many providers would fall under local food preparation and service regulations that could be prohibitive to participation. Federal expansion of access to food would need to be accompanied by guidance and implementation resources for localities to enable participation.



Who Provides After-School Development?

The providers of after-school development would be a mix of private and public operators who are reimbursed for their services based on the number of children served and their ages. Current providers who sell care on the market could join the new reimbursement-based system, as would schools that provide care. New providers could start up by applying to the CDS Fund administrator (whether that be state, federal, or local). Licensed providers would span:

- Home-based after-school care: private providers located inside a home
- Center-based after-school care: private providers located outside of a home, including those attached to employer, housing, public building, school, community center, or religious institution
- School-provided after-school care: school provision of after-school programming
- School-based after-school care: private providers located on-site at a school but administered by a separate organization

Federally funded and administered Head Start Model (HSM) centers for children in need of intervention services would exist alongside these reimbursed providers. The services provided at these HSM centers would also evolve to fit varying needs as children get older. For older children in the after-school setting, HSM centers could partner with community health centers to create a space dedicated to the physical and mental health of adolescents. HSM centers could transition from full-time providers in a programmatic sense to resource and intervention centers.

As with early childhood care, there is room for considerable creativity and flexibility in expanding access to after-school programming. Much of it could take place at the child's school, but other institutions, such as public and private employers, community centers, or places of worship, could also apply to become Child Development sites for after-school programming.

After-school care can offer an array of programming, from career exposure, to arts, to athletics. One appeal of after-school programs is the opportunity for children to explore in a setting where they won't be graded on their performance. The majority of after-school programs have some STEM component, for example, giving children a place to "try out" hard subjects before entering a graded class ([Afterschool Alliance 2015](#)). All of these current positive features can be expanded—more STEM exposure, more arts, more athletics. Practitioners in this space refer to this as "child-led learning," giving children a space to find out what they are interested in.

Critically, after-school care does not necessarily have to achieve any specific educational goal, so it can span a range of activities. This offers the opportunity for

diverse partnerships—made easier with full funding and reimbursement. Indeed, after-school programming can work in combination with summer programs to create “ecosystems of development” that work in conjunction with community institutions. An after-school program can partner with a local theater, for example, to come to school for a visit or short course, and that local theater can then offer a week-long summer program. Or, substitute local theater with a library, cultural community center, large employer, industry group or association, occupation association, or other institutions in the community.

In some ways, after-school programming could be similar to early childhood care: Children might be served through a mixed delivery system, but attend a single location and attend every day. There would be a high emphasis on safety, reliability, and even predictability for parents. But the programming for after-school programs would be much more exploratory, like summer programming, where the shortened length and a parental willingness to shift through locations and activities gives children more opportunity to explore and develop.

How Would Reimbursement Work?

As with early childhood programming, providers would be reimbursed based on the size of their program and its location. That reimbursement would come with minimum standards for workers’ wages, as well funds to cover capital expenses. A Child Development System could change the landscape of after-school programs offered and require higher pay for staff, who could also have requirements for training and continued education.

There are many examples of current reimbursed and subcontracted after-school programs through Title I, Perkins, and Lowey. The Child Development System would bring them under a single umbrella, building off of this successful model.

Likely, the biggest recipients of these funds would be schools that could either design an after-school program for their students that they operate, subcontract out to a private provider who comes on site, or a mix of both. Even though these schools would be the biggest recipients, they should not be the sole recipients. Providers who are unaffiliated with a school should not have to go through the school to receive funds but should be separately funded within the Child Development System. This would relieve administrative duty from schools and allow parents and communities to continue to have a voice in the landscape of coverage.

Will Parents Want This?

After-school programming is incredibly popular with parents, who value opportunities for their children and perceive after-school environments as safe and enriching. According to surveys from the Afterschool Alliance, parents agree that during



after-school programming, their children engage with peers, build confidence, learn life skills, build positive relationships with adult mentors, learn responsible decision-making, and are less likely to engage in risky behaviors ([Afterschool Alliance 2021a](#)). Parents want their children to come home with their homework done, but not to be in a silent study hall for three hours.

Research and practices are also advancing quickly when it comes to school-age child development, formalizing parents' preferences with an evidence base of best practices. The Positive Youth Development framework, for example, is a guide for communities and policymakers to organize support, opportunities, and community structures to help young people reach their potential, akin to a how-to guide for fostering conditions for youth to thrive. It is based on research that has found that “protective factors” can help young people succeed and avoid behavioral problems. Specifically, these include a variety of opportunities to learn and participate at home, in their community, with peers, and at school as well as family support, caring adults, self-esteem, and involvement with their school and community ([Family and Youth Services Bureau 2024](#)). The Child Development System is aligned with these values of the Positive Youth Development model.

Indeed, in a way, the existing after-school system is already emblematic of what a Child Development System should be, helping children develop interests and develop as individuals. But the current system faces severe constraints. It does not serve all children, staff wages are low, and the myriad funding streams can create a high administrative burden for providers. A Child Development System would need to expand after-school opportunities so that all children can access them.

Summer Development

In a Child Development System, every child would have access to summer camp. Like after-school programs, the content of summer programming should change and mature as children do. But it should always complement school's academic instruction with enrichment, education, and growth that can emphasize social and emotional learning, mental health, confidence, and exploration.

Who Provides Summer Development?

The providers of summer development would be a mix of private and public operators. Many summer camps are “full-time”—hosting children every day of the summer, in sessions of various lengths—and being a summer camp is their primary purpose. Some summer camps are “overnight,” and children live on-site for a period of time. In contrast, some summer camps are “moonlighters,” that is, institutions that do not primarily function as a camp but offer one for a period. Some providers in the space have been serving campers for decades, or, in the case of the YMCA, over a century

([YMCA n.d.](#)). Other providers—often the moonlighters—range from universities, local government, professional sports teams, religious institutions, nonprofits, arts institutes, private businesses doing career exposure, or unions doing skill exposure. One key provider of summer care is municipalities, which offer an array of summer programming.

This mix of provider types can be confusing in the summer setting because parents often have to select more than one. Summer camps are of various lengths, with some spanning 10 weeks and others just 1. This creates a lot of work for parents who must find and string together camps to cover the entirety of summer, as well as successfully enroll in them. Indeed, summer is one of the most difficult times for parents to find care for their children. Sign-ups can start as early as January, fees must often be paid in full up front, and many camps become full in minutes—a process which parents have referred to as “a nightmare” that causes “sheer panic” ([Haspel 2024](#); [Manley 2023](#); [McNamee 2024](#)).

A Child Development System should balance giving families options for summer while limiting administrative burden. For these reasons, summer development needs much more creativity in coordination than early childhood or after-school care. Most children enrolled in childcare are permanently enrolled. Similarly, parents aren’t required to find many separate after-school programs to fill in coverage for the school schedule. They can find just one—typically the one offered at their child’s school—for the school year. But because sign-up for summer camps can be a repeated process—signing up for multiple camps in a single summer—provision of summer development is about not just expanding the number of providers but also coordinating them.

One option would be to have lead agencies of the Child Development System (whether local, state, or federal) implement a summer schedule. This could include policies such as:

- Designated “moonlighting weeks” (though perhaps named something based on the children’s experience rather than the providers’ role), where any non-camp provider who wants CDS Fund money to provide a one-week camp can do so within a certain window
- Requirements that full-time camps must have a minimum length of two-week sessions
- Restrictions of the number and timing of sessions across all camps in a summer so that enrollment falls into “tracks” of 10 weeks (e.g., one 10-week enrollment, two 5-week enrollments, five 2-week enrollments)

Another possibility would be to have lead agencies of the Child Development System oversee a summer catalog of offerings in their area, removing the burden of having to find options by providing a list of those approved for reimbursement. Lead agencies

could centralize enrollment applications for all camps in their area, or regulate the timing and process of enrollment. Lead agencies could also explore and innovate successful enrollment policies.

How Would Reimbursement Work?

As with early childhood and after-school providers, summer providers would be reimbursed based on the number of children they serve and the type of camp. Reimbursement could also include the cost of transportation. Since moonlighting providers, by definition, are institutions that offer short summer camps and those camps are not their primary purpose, they would hire fewer staff for camp and also use the staff they already employ. Full-time camps, on the other hand, would have full-time staff hired for the purpose of providing summer camp, but still differ based on whether they are day camps or overnight camps. Reimbursement would need to meet camps at the level of programming they provide. That would include higher reimbursements for overnight camps.

Summer programming is unique compared to early childhood and after-school programs in that philanthropy is very active in summer camps, both in directly supporting specific camps as well as funding “camperships” that pay for children who cannot afford camp tuition to attend ([Summer Camp Opportunities Promote Education n.d.](#); [Matthieson 2024](#)). Current care models in early childhood as well as philanthropy and camperships can serve as a guide in developing a reimbursement model for summer.

The benefit of a reimbursement model is that it brings providers into a regime of minimum standards; a program cannot be reimbursed if it does not meet standards required by the funder. These standards ensure that children in different settings, of different backgrounds, with different resources, are guaranteed a similar investment. Summer camps can benefit from these minimums, whether that be higher wages, training requirements or knowledge areas for staff, nutritious food, or more.

Will Parents Want This?

Summer camp has long been part of the American childhood experience ([Crader 2022](#); [Malinowski 2011](#); [Smith 2006](#)). From the first summer programs over 100 years ago, summer camp was promoted as a way to balance the many ills or failings of American childhood and development as it was evolving in everyday life, which is why summer camps are often associated with the outdoors, exploring nature, and getting away from the distractions of technology ([Gay 2022](#); [Miller 2024](#)).

Parents like summer experiences for their children. Like after-school programs, but to a greater degree, summer camp gives children a chance to explore, test their independence, build confidence, learn outside the classroom, engage with peers,

engage with mentors, and learn new skills. With the help of movies and books, summer camp has become a quintessential component of American childhood—for those who can afford it.

A Child Development System must ensure that all children can attend summer camp. The existing large and diverse provider base is a good start. At the local level, camps could partner with after-school providers in the “ecosystems of development” for children that reflects community institutions and values. Other nature-related and residential camps would benefit from steady funding and support to serve all children.

Complementing Public Education

Many aspects of a Child Development System exist already but are limited to children whose parents can afford to access it, limiting offerings to what is profitable or what a certain set of parents prefer. Within each component of the Child Development System, there would be no performance testing of children. So long as it fills the gaps faced by working parents created by the timing of the K-12 public school, a program can be considered successful. The goal of a Child Development System is to balance the offerings and exigencies of K-12 education with a chance for enrichment and growth.

The Hard Questions

The basics of a Child Development System, as proposed here, are to take existing federal funding sources and administrative infrastructure, streamline them, and expand them to ensure that all children have access to care, using the existing private system and public options as providers. Opportunities for children’s health, nutrition, education, enrichment, and growth abound in a Child Development System. But however tenable this system is, it still faces tough questions.

Should Parents Have to Pay, and How Much?

As a reminder, the funding stream proposed here is federal—the CDS Fund—and it would be administered by either a state, federal, or local lead agency. It would subsume other sources of funding that exist to serve a similar purpose in order to avoid duplicative or competing administration and, at the outset, would be accompanied by a capital fund to expand the number of providers. The CDS Fund would operate on a reimbursement model, wherein providers would be reimbursed based on the type of programming, the setting, and the number and ages of children served. The reimbursement model would be set at cost, meaning that it would be large enough to pay for everything.

But the question remains whether families should have to contribute to participate, such as by paying a user fee. As a rule, the more expensive a system is for parents, the



fewer children will attend. Having parents pay into the system would come with the risk of deterring enrollment.

If policymakers were committed to charging for participation, one policy might be to charge a user fee for children attending. Payment would be required for parents but would not equal the full costs of the Child Development System. That user fee could be a flat per capita charge or a sliding scale based on income. The latter has appeal—having higher-income parents pay more to participate—but any fee that needs to be administered alongside income tests or proof of income is orders of magnitude more difficult to implement than a flat per capita charge. Incomes change, families change, resources change—getting a good measurement of household income every year, if not multiple times per year, would be a lot of paperwork for providers, administrators, and families. A flat per capita fee would be transparent, straightforward, and easy to collect.

The flat per capita fee could be based on what part of the development system the child is in—early childhood (the most expensive to provide), after school (the cheapest), or summer (highly variable). Regardless of its level, a flat fee would need to be waived for lower-income families so that their children aren't deterred from participating, requiring some form of income checks. Since it would not be set high enough to cover costs, the actual amount of the flat per capita fee would be somewhat arbitrary and borderline symbolic, which does raise questions of why a fee is necessary.

Which Children Would Come First for Services?

If the federal government says that all children will have access to a Child Development System with no or capped tuition costs, the most predictable response is that it will be immediately oversubscribed—more families will sign up than providers can cover. The CDS Fund would cover both the cost of providing services as well as the need to build out more providers, but the latter would not happen overnight.

Given the structure of the CDS Fund, the answer of how to expand provision of care goes back to whichever level of administration is charged with implementing the fund—a state lead agency, a federal lead agency, or a local lead agency. The federal government could give the lead agency a timeline to complete its transition and provide technical assistance in the process, but the lead agency should have the freedom to design that transition in a way that suits it best. Agencies would have to submit a plan to the central federal office for oversight and review, but could have considerable flexibility in how to do so. Lead agencies may prefer to allocate services by income groups, by types of providers, or by some other strategy, like piloting a plan in a specific geographic area before expanding.

Creating space for enrollment would be only one part of the expansion. Lead agencies would also need to design an enrollment process for parents to navigate that is not so



difficult or complicated that it's a deterrent. And while some families may be eager to enroll, others may need outreach and education about a Child Development System—they may not know what is available to them or might assume that they cannot afford it. Further, the Child Development System proposed here includes referrals for early intervention services through Head Start and HSM. How to design this screening system, or, really, how to handle assessment and referral, would also be part of the expansion plan.

What If a Parent Cannot Find a Spot for Their Child in the Development System?

An expansion to the current patchwork system implies that there will not be sufficient supply to meet parent demand *at least at the start*. Including a capital fund at the outset to support that expansion would help expand the patchwork into a comprehensive system. But even after it has been established, what happens if a parent cannot find a spot for their child? The public school system has to make room for children, but will the Child Development System do the same?

Part of the technical support mandate for the federal sponsoring office within the Administration for Children and Families must be first to project demand for the Child Development System based on data on births, school enrollment, and moves and then to compare that projected demand with spots supported by the CDS Fund. For example, based on the number of births in a county, the office could project early childhood demand based on participation within a range (such as assuming 70 percent, 80 percent, or 90 percent of children enroll in early childhood development by age one). The office could then compare this with the number of current reimbursed spots (number of spots currently funded) and provider capacity (number of spots total across all providers, whether reimbursed or not). To avoid a shortfall, the federal office could mandate that capacity be maintained 5 percent above current enrollment, or something to that effect.

Minimizing shortfalls will not prevent them entirely, and redress in this scenario will likely depend on how the system is structured and what Congress, states, and localities feel is appropriate. That said, one backstop could be public provision. If parents cannot enroll and there are—at least after a minimum period past the initial rollout of the system—insufficient providers, the federal government could create a publicly run center, program, or camp.

Which Providers Can Become Part of the Child Development System?

Building a Child Development System, as proposed here, would mean bringing the current landscape of providers into a reimbursement system. There are two questions around which providers should be allowed to join.

The first deals with certification. What type of certification should providers need to be part of the Child Development System? In practice, both the central federal and lead agencies would answer this question. The federal government would set the minimum for safety and quality, but how to confer certification, whether that be licensing or accreditation, to the providers in their states depends on how lead agencies are structured. Currently, early childhood providers can be licensed, summer camps can be accredited, and after-school programs are a mix of both. Safety is a priority, as is keeping the administrative burden of providers low. Again, the deference would be to lead agency preferences so long as federal standards are met.

The second question deals with ownership. Current providers of early childhood, after-school, and summer care include nonprofits, for-profit businesses, independently owned for-profit chains, for-profit chains owned by larger companies, and for-profit chains owned by investors (private equity funds). Should there be any restrictions on providers based on ownership, or preferences for providers by type of ownership? Yes, there should.

To start, private equity ownership introduces enormous risk. Funds can fold—private equity is associated with both debt and opaque finances since they are not public companies. When a fund collapses, so do all of the businesses in its portfolio. This happened to the largest provider of childcare in Australia in 2008; it was spun off from the failing fund and turned back into a nonprofit ([Carson 2008](#); [Mariner 2012](#)). In general, when it comes to human services, private equity is associated with a number of red flags, especially in elder care ([Atkins 2021](#); [Gupta et al. 2021](#)). In the labor market, private equity is associated with significant child labor violations; many businesses that are at the top of child labor violations are owned by private equity companies, sometimes the same company ([Standaert 2024](#)). Despite these documented problems and risks, private equity is rapidly expanding into childcare unchecked ([Haspel 2023](#)).

If the government were to start reimbursing for services at a fixed rate based on the number and ages of children, the profit wedge would come from providing cheaper care than covered by the rates—a guarantee of sacrificing quality. Indeed, the only way to make care profitable is to care less, which is why research has shown that for-profit care in the early childhood setting (owned by private equity or not) tends to be lower quality ([Cleveland and Krashinsky 2009](#); [Sosinsky, Lord, and Zigler 2007](#)).

In early childhood, protecting the supply of providers is an easy decision—prohibit private equity- or investor-backed providers from participating in the system. For-profit firms can be allowed, but should have profit caps to ensure that profit isn't reducing provision or quality. With capped profits, there might be concern that providers would be wary of entering the space. However, the existing childcare provider network suggests there is untapped potential. The majority of home-based (sometimes called family-based) providers, for example, are owned and operated by women, often women of color, in operations so small they qualify as “microbusinesses,” with very low take-home income. Many are willing to enter the business but do not plan to stay for long—a means of building up the provider network ([Adams and Hernandez-Lepe 2021](#)). However, in after-school and summer programming, in which the ecosystem of care can include employers or businesses in the area, a profit requirement would have to be written carefully so that those partnerships are excluded from any profit prohibitions.

A Child Development System would direct an enormous amount of resources to providers, and so there is no clear advantage to having them profit greatly from government funds, especially as the risks to quality would be high.

Where Will Workers Come From?

Staffing is one of the biggest problems that early childhood, after-school, and summer providers face. Pay is low, resulting in challenges of retention and frequent turnover. The reimbursement model could solve the pay problem by requiring it to be higher. But still: Will there be enough workers, and where will they come from?

On one level, the answer is simple: If pay is competitive, workers will come—drawn away from other occupations or industries where the pay is lower or the work less meaningful. But a Child Development System having that kind of pull would depend on what the credential expectations are. If anyone can come off the proverbial street and work in the Child Development System, competitive pay would be all it takes. But if workers will require specific training or credentials, pay will only be part of the problem.

So, what type of training or credentials do these workers need? First, the current care workforce should be used, not discarded or made obsolete. That suggests building on-the-job training and education to invest in workers and help them develop new skills. That training could include staff development days, small workshops, or even continuing education classes. The federal government can offer technical assistance in this effort, to design or approve curriculum for staff development or create mini-credentials for workers to accrue.

Second, workers should be able to have a career in the Child Development System. There should be opportunities for career advancement that don't require time out of



work as a full-time student. This suggests apprenticeships. While there is not currently a national registered apprenticeship, several states have created apprenticeship programs for their early childhood care workforce ([First Five Years Fund 2024](#)). One challenge in expanding apprenticeships has been low industry pay—even after an apprenticeship, pay is still not high enough to merit the time spent in the program. If apprenticed workers were guaranteed higher pay in a Child Development System, that could motivate more apprentice enrollment. The federal government could also design national apprenticeships.

Third, with regard to after-school and summer programs, public school teachers should be used as a resource, not a crutch. There are teachers for whom working in after-school programs or summer camps is a good fit, and those for whom it is not. It should not be assumed, or be a goal, that building out the workforce for after school and summer programming is simply a matter of getting teachers second shifts or additional jobs. Elevating the Child Development System means having a dedicated Child Development workforce. Teachers can be an integral part of that workforce, but the Child Development System still needs investment, education, and career opportunities in non-teacher (or really, non-college-educated) staff.

Where Does Accountability Come From?

The Child Development System proposed here would use federal dollars distributed via lead agencies. If there is a problem, whose job is it to deal with it?

This would be another issue for lead agencies to address in their plans. Parents need a very clear chain of command should they have a problem with a provider, whether it's private or public. The federal government could require that all lead agencies have a centralized office for handling complaints, problems, or issues. At minimum, there should be a clear steward of accountability for this system, especially at the start, that is communicated clearly to parents.

Lead agencies would also need to have a clear plan of accountability to oversee the proper use of funds, such as an auditor. Put plainly, this would be a big spigot of federal money, and money draws fraudsters. States would need to be able to guarantee that money is serving children.

How Would This Impact Public Schools?

A Child Development System is both necessary for parents and children and an ambitious proposal. Building that system will be difficult and will undoubtedly come with challenges, especially at the beginning—space shortages, staff shortages, underqualified staff found working at a provider, providers putting children in front of television for hours, etc. Agencies should be prepared for mistakes.

Separate from the difficulties of starting a system, there could also be some spillover effects that are a function of the proposed design, specifically on locally funded public schools. For example, if federal money supports an after-school arts program, school districts may be incentivized to drop their arts classes—same with music or physical education. Further, if federal dollars are creating high-paying jobs in a Child Development System, that may put pressure on schools to raise teacher and staff pay.

While the Child Development System is meant to be in balance with the public school system, balance in theory can turn into competition in practice. The key to success on this front will be to ensure that schools feel like the Child Development System is a resource for their students and families that makes the job of educating easier. In that sense, schools are also a stakeholder and constituent in the system, and should be considered as such.

Money also helps. In the absence of a Child Development System, states and localities must raise funds to expand early childhood, after-school, and summer programming. A federally funded Child Development System would free up those funds to be spent as state or localities choose—including by reinvesting them into the school system. Policymakers could even specify in legislation their priority or requirements for the use of displaced spending.

Isn't This a “Threat to Families”?

A Child Development System establishes the right for children to access early childhood, after-school, and summer development programming. In the current absence of that system and that right, many families provide care during those time periods—especially, but not exclusively, if they cannot afford to purchase it in the private market. Many critics of a public childcare system, particularly those who lean conservative, have raised concerns that the expansion of care represents a government encroachment into family.

No, a Child Development System wouldn't displace family—it would replace the private market for care. The majority of families contend with this expensive system, spending an incredible amount of money and time trying to find care for their children that works around their employment needs. The proposed system would be a windfall for families who no longer have to pay for care. In addition, many parents who cannot work due to care constraints could enter the labor market, earning more income for their families. These two effects—obviating the need to spend and creating the opportunity to earn—would be incredibly beneficial to children and families through an increase in economic security. The economic security of families provides enormous downstream benefits, whether that is relieving financial stress in parent-child and partner relationships or enabling families to meet their fertility goals.

The system itself is also a benefit, creating a community ecosystem of care and development that gives to children the needs enumerated in the Positive Youth Development framework: a variety of opportunities to learn and participate, caring adult relationships, self-esteem, and involvement in their school and community ([Family and Youth Services Bureau 2024](#)). A Child Development System would be social infrastructure. That is not a threat to families but an asset for families, and at the moment an asset many cannot afford for their children.

Finally, no part of the Child Development System would be compulsory. Parents who do not want their children to participate do not need to enroll them in early childhood, after-school, or summer programming.

What About Stay-at-Home Parents or Friend and Family Care?

Parents are not required to work (unless they are in a social welfare program that subjects them to work requirements so as not to risk benefit loss), nor are they required to participate in the public school system. Parents who want to stay at home or keep their children at home can do so whether a Child Development System exists or not. Even then, a Child Development System could meet unique needs of parents for early childhood development that the current system cannot by offering half-day, early-release, or part-week programming: A parent could still be at home and use a Child Development System for part of their childcare.

The likely concern here is what a Child Development System implies about care from parents or, relatedly, from friends and family. These are sometimes grouped together as informal care: Adults who aren't licensed, in a center, or even compensated looking after children—especially very young children. To be clear, the existence of a Child Development System would not be a comment on the quality of that friend or family care. And it wouldn't say that families can't continue to use parent, friend, or family care if they prefer. At the end of the day, parents decide.

Proponents of parent, friend, and family care may argue that their care—and compensation for it—should be incorporated into a Child Development System. Parents, friends, and family can provide excellent care to children. However, incorporating that care into a formal, licensed reimbursement system creates two problems, both related to incentives.

First, providers in the Child Development System must meet minimum standards of staffing, training, and setting in order to become part of the reimbursement system. If parent, friend, and family care were not subject to the same requirements, this could create an incentive for would-be providers, such as a home-based provider, to tell parents to claim them as a “friend or family” in order to subvert licensing standards and

requirements or avoid inspections. Second, compensation for friend and family care could create an incentive to keep children out of the licensed Child Development System in order to redirect resources to a friend or family. This incentive—regardless of the actual amount of friend and family compensation—would be of greater value the lower the family’s income, creating new inequities within the Child Development System of who participates and who does not.

That said, it would be possible to create a waiver system that localities, especially during the rollout and scale-up of the Child Development System, use to incorporate parent, friend, or family care. It could also serve as a way to recruit more providers into the system or a way to guarantee access in underserved areas. The federal policy and rulemaking office can oversee those waivers and provide guidance, support, and oversight to help localities in that process.

Conclusion: Whole Child, Whole Day, Whole Year

A Child Development System is motivated by the gaps created by the K-12 public school system—a system that will not expand in ages served, hours, or months, nor substitute away from academics. Unless those gaps are deemed harmless, they are proof positive that we are underinvesting in families and children. A Child Development System isn’t a windfall; it’s a necessity.

Realistically, creating a new Child Development System does not move the education and development of children from a world with lots of problems to a world without. Even when it is fully expanded and operational, the Child Development System will face challenges—but they’d be far preferable to what we have now. Today, we grapple with parents who cannot work because they do not have a safe place to put their children, children left in unsafe situations, administrative and financial tolls on families finding care, gaps in school readiness for children whose parents cannot afford or find early childhood education, enrichment flowing only to children whose parents can afford it, and underpaid and underappreciated care providers. We can eliminate those issues and instead turn our focus to answering the complex question of how to maintain quality and equity in a universal system. Comparatively, that’s a great problem to have.



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