

# Child care turning point

*In January legislators will face the governor's insistence on containing child care costs—and advocates' insistence on expanding child care quality and availability*

By Jean Tepperman

Sandra Jacquez is a welfare eligibility worker with a three-year-old daughter. Dealing with domestic violence kept her out of work receiving disability payments for almost a year. Recently she went back to work—but only for a week. That week she lined up various relatives to take care of her daughter, but the next week she had no child care and had to stay home. Jacquez says she can't afford to pay \$600 to \$800 a month for child care, but the waiting list for a subsidy is years long. "I don't want to end up losing my job," she says.

Michelle Thomson is now receiving a child care subsidy as part of the welfare-to-work program, but in May she'll reach the time limit. "There's no way I could pay for one summer," she says. She takes home about \$1,600 a month, her house payment is \$650, and summer child care for her four school-age boys would cost at least \$1,200.

Lack of state child care subsidies could push Jacquez, Thomson, and thousands of other parents onto welfare. A study of 500 low-income parents in Los Angeles found that more than half had lost a job because they lacked child care. Because funds are limited, at least one-third of the children who need subsidies don't receive them.

Now subsidized child care for low-income families will be at the center of a major political struggle when the legislature meets again in January.

Governor Gray Davis last year asked for an "administrative review" (AR) of the child care subsidy program. The AR report, issued in May, predicted that costs could spiral out of control because parents who have left welfare for work continue to receive child care subsidies as long as their incomes are low enough to qualify.

The AR predicts the number of ex-CalWORKs families receiving subsidies will grow from 45,000 to 88,000 in the next three years, increasing costs, assuming no increase in funding, that would shut out families who were never on welfare. The report lists options for containing costs and making the system fairer, including raising the sliding-scale fees parents pay, lowering the income "ceiling," setting a time limit for families receiving subsidies, and paying providers less per child.

In July, Davis held up \$24 million in child care subsidy funds. He will release the money, he says, if the legislature, by the end of January, passes measures to contain child care costs.

The Women's Caucus of the legislature has declared that it will "lead the legislative response to the governor's challenge." The caucus invited child care advocates to contribute ideas for reforming the system while ensuring that "harm to families and providers [is] mitigated."

Women's Caucus member and long-time child care advocate Dion Aroner,



Parents and child care providers meet in Oakland to push for quality child care for all.

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(D, Berkeley), told a parent group in Oakland, "We're not going to do anything without parents at the table." In late October the caucus held public hearings in Los Angeles and Sacramento.

**Child care advocates** have been organizing.

■ In Los Angeles, family child care providers organized by ACORN are rallying the support of unions, churches, and the City Council. Organizer John Jackson says the group will "challenge the governor to expand resources instead of diminishing them and come up with the money to fund the increasing need for child care."

■ In Oakland on September 29, more than 200 parents and providers participated in Parent Action for Child Care Today, a one-day "summit" organized by Parent Voices to push for "quality child care affordable for all families."

■ A statewide postcard campaign, initiated by the San Francisco Family Child Care Association and Coleman Advocates for Children and Youth, aims

to show widespread support for increasing, not decreasing, child care funding.

**Child care providers'** organizations have countered the AR's alternatives with suggestions for other changes, such as creating a "tiered system" that pays more for higher-quality care and/or less for unlicensed care. Some provider groups also go along with some AR options, such as lowering the maximum age from 13 to 12.

**Think tanks** including the Child Care Law Center (CCLC) and the California Budget Project (CBP) have written detailed comments on the options outlined in the Administrative Review and suggested principles to guide reform.

Noting current school-readiness efforts, CCLC Director Nancy Strohl says, "We can't reduce opportunities for quality child care, then pretend that we are providing equitable opportunities for all children to be ready for school." ■

## OVERVIEWS OF CALIFORNIA'S CHILD CARE SYSTEM

- *Broadening the Context: Background for Discussion of California Child Care Policy Options*, Child Care Law Center, 415-495-5498, [www.childcarelaw.org](http://www.childcarelaw.org)
- *Lasting Returns: Strengthening California's Child Care and Development System*, California Budget Project, 916-444-0500, [www.cbpp.org](http://www.cbpp.org)



Child care math: it doesn't add up

- Since the start of welfare reform, California has increased spending on subsidized child care by \$2.1 billion. Still, almost 300,000 eligible children, can't get subsidies because funds are limited.
- The California Budget Project estimates that with another \$1.7 billion, California could fund subsidies for all who need them.
- The per-child reimbursement the state pays child care providers has failed to keep up with inflation. Some school districts have been unable to continue operating child care centers, turning them over to nonprofit organizations with lower pay scales.
- Low salaries (averaging \$16,000 to \$20,000 a year) contribute to a worsening child care staffing crisis and increase turnover, undermining the quality of care.
- The cost of quality child care is beyond reach for many families. The average cost of center-based care for a child under two is about \$550 a month, more than half of the income of a parent working full time at a minimum wage job.

Sources: Child Care Law Center, California Budget Project

## What YOU can do

- **Send postcards** to your legislators and Governor Davis, expressing your views on subsidized child care
- **Invite political leaders** to spend a day at a child care center and meet with providers and parents
- **Discuss child care issues** with your union, community group, or religious organization
- **Write letters** to your local newspapers
- **Call** your local child care resource and referral agency (for the number, call 800-543-7793)
- **Contact** a child care advocacy group: ACORN, 213-747-4211; SF Family Child Care Assoc., 415-587-5111; Coleman Advocates for Children and Youth, 415-239-0161; Parent Voices, 415-882-0234