

Education

Teachers, Just Like Other Working Parents, Are In A Bind Over Lack Of Child Care

Many child care centers have shuttered, delayed reopening or increased tuition due to the pandemic. That leaves many teachers who need to return to their classrooms with few options for their kids.



By Suevon Lee    / June 10, 2020

 Reading time: 9 minutes.



Ivie Cornwell, a middle school teacher in Kailua, supports the reopening of schools come fall with proper protocols for sanitation and social distancing.

As she explained in recent written testimony to the state Board of Education amid [a flood of letters](#) from other teachers and parents, “classroom instruction is the best modality for learning, especially for high risk students.”

But as a parent to two children who will be entering pre-kindergarten and kindergarten this coming school year, Cornwell is also concerned about child care if she’s required to return to the classroom five days a week but her kids’ programs are condensed — or worse, out of space.

Ivie Cornwell, with her children, Olivia and Aiden, worries about finding child care when she has to report back to the classroom full time starting in August.

“We might be in a really big bind,” Cornwell said, referring to her and her husband, a small business owner. “We would either have to pay somebody to come to the house and watch the kids or send the kids somewhere.

“Or I could just stay home. I’d have to take leave, and I don’t want to do that. Economically, we’re in a (more) difficult situation than we thought we’d be in.”

Cornwell joins scores of other working families across the state in a deep quandary as places of business gradually reopen after several months of lockdown due to COVID-19. They may be required to report back to work full

time but with many child care facilities still closed or limited in seats due to new safety protocols, how can they juggle work with child care?

Many child care facilities are not reopening until the end of the month, or later — maybe ever. Some are hiking tuition by several hundreds dollars a month and creating new waitlists as they're forced to cut back the number of seats due to state Department of Human Services [child care guidelines](#) as of May 19, which specified nine kids per staff member.

As of Tuesday, however, DHS, which licenses child care facilities, [posted new guidelines](#) on its website that omits the physical distance numerical rule, replacing it with language to reinstate group sizes and staff-to-child ratios based on the children's ages and allowing the maximum capacity on a facility's license for the maximum number of children and corresponding number of staff.

"Families are being called back to work. That's a bit of a problem right now because there are very few options for kids," said Deborah Zysman, executive director of [Hawaii Children's Action Network](#).

The dilemma is not limited to the teacher workforce, but their concern was prominently highlighted in 150-plus pages of testimony sent by teachers to the state education board last week to help shape broader guidance to the Department of Education as it contemplates reopening for the 2020-21 school year, which begins Aug. 4.

"I've already been informed, they expect teachers to return full time," said Patricia Lukzen, a special education resource teacher, referring to the area to which she's assigned, Honokaa on north Hawaii island, in an interview.

"If there is any time my children are not in school, I won't be able to go back to work," she said.

Lukzen has four children, ages 3, 4, 8 and 17. Given how rural and remote the Honokaa coast is, it's hard enough to find child care options.

Relying on her teenage son to watch his younger siblings if they attend school in staggered waves — at school half the time and home half the time — is out of the question, she said.

“That’s a lot to ask — and to expect the house to still be standing when I get home.”

A Squeeze On Working Families

During the crest of the pandemic in Hawaii, child care facilities were deemed essential businesses and [many stayed open](#), if limiting seats to the children of essential workers like health care or emergency personnel.

But others chose to indefinitely suspend operations.

In early May, Gov. David Ige announced that licensed child care operators [could reopen](#) as more and more retailers were allowed to resume. That didn’t lead to overnight openings, as many child care facilities that had closed in mid-March still had to clean and sanitize and prepare their spaces for smaller classroom sizes.

While the transition is still gradual — KCAA Preschools of Hawaii, one of the state’s largest preschool centers, for instance, will be closed [through June 30](#) — many workers received orders to physically return to work at the start of June.

KCAA Preschools of Hawaii typically serves 900 children per year. Closed since March, it plans to reopen June 30.

The DOE is one of those employers. In a [recent memo to staff](#), the DOE said employees who had been allowed to telework since late March would be required to return to the workplace starting June 1. It is also allowing workers to arrange remote work with their supervisors through July 28.

The confluence of factors right now is putting a squeeze on working families, according to Zysman of Hawaii Children's Action Network.

"If your place of employment is open now, and you choose not to go, you're no longer qualified for unemployment, that's the problem," she explained, of

the Catch-22 that ensues.

“We had fairly poor numbers of accessing child care going into this. This has just made it worse.”

Staggered Schedules A Big Worry

Teachers who are also parents contend with the possibility that when the new school year starts, the DOE may stagger in-person classroom instruction, with different groups of students attending at different times but teachers reporting to school as usual.

The DOE has [not yet announced a formal reopening plan](#).

One educator, Stephanie Flora, who said she was a DOE teacher and parent without specifying where, wrote to the board of education last week that should the DOE revert to a staggered schedule, it would be “catastrophic for working families of school age children.”

She said she spent \$2,000 a month in child care last year for three of her four kids, the limit of what she could afford to pay.

“I love my job and I can’t imagine not being there, but the logistics of child care if the previously mentioned scenario were to occur keeps me up at night with worry,” her testimony read.

Lukzen, the Honokaa resource teacher, said she got a taste of what it was like working from home this past spring while also helping her own children with distance learning.

She worked twice as many hours, often until late at night. She said it was difficult to do her job as a teacher and also help her children with their own remote learning, presenting her with a tough choice.

“As an educator it was extremely sad to say, ‘We can’t do school anymore because mommy has to do school for others.’”

Limited Pre-K Spots

The barriers to child care in this environment are more than just economic.

A recent survey by HCAN and [Hawaii Afterschool Alliance](#) of 681 parents in Hawaii with kids under 18, found three-quarters of parents surveyed said they had health-related concerns about sending their kids to child care or summer school due to COVID-19. About 37% had economic concerns and 12% had transportation concerns.

What's more, the backup option for many families in Hawaii — relying on grandparents or older relatives to watch after young children or infants when parents are at work, according to Zysman — is now riskier since the elderly and those with underlying medical conditions are more susceptible to the virus.

Pre-pandemic, there were approximately 36,000 total seats in private child care facilities for infants up to age 5, according to HCAN. With many centers having to limit capacity, it's unclear what the numbers are today.

The state's public pre-kindergarten program for 4-year-olds, run through the [Executive Office on Early Learning](#), is also looking at decreased capacity. Before the spread of COVID-19, the program had a total capacity of 880 seats, offered in 44 classrooms across 36 schools at both DOE and public charter schools.

While 10 new pre-K classrooms are on track to open this year, EOEL executive director Lauren Moriguchi said classrooms will also have to adhere to DOH and DHS guidelines and limit student-teacher ratios to 8-to-2. Previously, a typical early learning classroom could handle 20 students per two staff members.

Correction: A previous version of this story said the EOEL will limit class sizes to eight students per one staff member. It will assign two staff members per class of eight students.

What's more, seven DOE pre-K classrooms may have to be canceled since the state Legislature said they may not fund those positions that had been vacant, according to Moriguchi.

Suevon Lee

A pre-kindergarten classroom of this size, seen at Linapuni Elementary in 2017, may no longer be possible with new DHS guidelines that recommend physical distancing with limited class sizes.

Child care facilities that are economically strapped are eligible to apply for a portion of \$11.9 million in CARES Act funding appropriated to Hawaii under the Child Care and Development fund. Less than 90 applications have so far been received, with the deadline being July 31, said DHS spokeswoman Amanda Stevens.

Other centers have applied for a Paycheck Protection Program loan to stay afloat.

Cornwell, the Kailua teacher and parent, said she had secured a spot for her preschool-age daughter at KCAA Atherton pre-pandemic, but isn't sure if her spot is still guaranteed. With the office closed through the end of the month, she has had a hard time getting through to administrators.

"We were pretty much all set, but haven't gotten a final, 'yes, she's in' email," she said.

Neither Cornwell, who moved here in 2007, nor her husband are originally from Hawaii and don't have family they can turn to for child care help. Finding a babysitter had always been extremely challenging, she said.

They had to call on friends, or her husband would have to stop work at his business to be able to watch the kids, if she had to spend a late night at school.

"Because we have family on the mainland, those are definitely options we have been looking at but we're hoping we don't have to do that," Cornwell said of moving out of state. "Economically, if this just doesn't make sense, we're going to have to go to be closer to family."

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