

# Analysis: Child Care Takes Center Stage in 2026

## State of the State Addresses as Governors Focus on Affordability and Economic Stability



### Overview

The First Five Years Fund annual review of governors who delivered State of the State addresses before February 17, 2026, revealed a striking consensus: 72% used their remarks to address child care, early learning, or policies supporting new parents and infants. This aligns with the growing “affordability anxiety” which is especially acute for parents of young children, as child care is one of the most significant and unavoidable household expenses. These concerns also underscore the importance of stable federal investments, with programs like CCDBG and Head Start serving as a key foundation for family economic stability and workforce participation.

### Topline Takeaways

- **Bipartisan agreement:** Of the governors who specifically raised child care, pre-K, or early childhood as a priority, roughly 40 percent were Republicans and 60 percent were Democrats.
- **As FFYF's Sarah Rittling put it:** “Child care has become one of the most pressing affordability challenges facing working families, and governors across party lines are responding. They understand that lowering the cost of care isn’t just about helping parents, it’s about strengthening the workforce and supporting economic growth.”

### Key Themes

- **Lowering costs / affordability:** 54% focused on the high price of child care and the need to reduce the financial burden on families.
- **Tax relief:** 42% proposed or highlighted tax credits and related policies to help offset child care and family costs.
- **Workforce participation & the economy:** Over one-third emphasized that expanding access to child care is one of the most effective ways to help parents enter or return to the workforce and strengthen the economy.
- **Expanding access and supply:** About one in five (21%) discussed increasing the number of child care slots so more families can find care.
- **Supporting the workforce:** Nearly one in five (17%) focused on strengthening the child care workforce.

### Important Pull Quotes

#### Affordability

- South Carolina Gov. Henry McMaster (R) emphasized the broader cost pressures families are facing, noting that “childcare costs more. Groceries cost more. Even school supplies cost more, and families nationwide are feeling that pressure.”
- Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear (D) similarly tied early learning to affordability and workforce participation, saying, “So many of our neighbors want to work but simply can’t find or afford child care. At a time when things cost too much, pre-K saves parents thousands of dollars every year.”

#### Tax Credits

- Hawaii Gov. Josh Green (D) highlighted recent tax changes, saying the state increased the child and dependent care credit and other supports, “saving Hawai’i families about \$88 million per year in taxes and making our state a little more affordable.”
- New Hampshire Gov. Kelly Ayotte (R) proposed a tax credit for businesses investing in child care for employees to help address workforce needs.

## Helping Parents Take Control of their Careers

- Alaska Gov. Mike Dunleavy (R) connected child care to workforce development, saying the state is preparing for a building boom and has introduced legislation to provide “both the job training, and the child care that’s required to go along with it.”
- New York Gov. Kathy Hochul (D) reflected on her own experience balancing work and family, noting that early in her career, “child care was one of our greatest obstacles... I had to give that career up simply because we could not find affordable child care.”

## Polling

Public opinion data reinforces why this message is resonating. In FFYF’s January 2026 national poll, voters ranked affordability as the top issue facing the country, ahead of jobs and the economy.

- **Affordability is the dominant issue for voters.** When asked which issues were most important, affordability ranked first at 37%, ahead of jobs and the economy at 30%.
- **Child care is widely viewed as an affordability issue.** Eighty percent of voters say the ability of working parents to find and afford child care is in a “state of crisis” or a “major problem,” including 65% of Republicans, 81% of Independents, and 94% of Democrats.
- **Voters see federal child care funding as a clear solution to rising costs.** An overwhelming 82% say federal funding for child care programs will help lower costs for working families, including 69% of Republicans, 84% of Independents, and 94% of Democrats. Seven in ten voters (70%) also say federal investment in child care programs will improve the economy, including 54% of Republicans, 68% of Independents, and 87% of Democrats.
- **This translates into strong overall support for federal child care funding.** Nearly three out of four voters (74%) say this funding is an important priority and a good use of tax dollars, including 53% of Republicans, 77% of Independents, and 93% of Democrats.

**Governors from the following states highlighted child care, early learning, and policies that help new parents and babies:** Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Hawaii, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Maine, Missouri, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, New Hampshire, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Vermont, Virginia, Washington, Massachusetts.

## About First Five Years Fund

The first five years last forever. At First Five Years Fund, we work to protect, prioritize, and build bipartisan support for quality child care and early learning programs at the federal level. Reliable, affordable, and high-quality early learning and child care can be transformative, not only enhancing a child’s prospects for a brighter future but also bolstering working parents and fostering economic stability nationwide. Join us at [www.ffyf.org](http://www.ffyf.org).



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