Policy Matters Ohio

POLICY BRIEF

September 15, 2026

WIN Act is an opportunity to support childcare providers

Legislation is ready for a vote

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Ohio needs more early childhood educators, but providers' budgets are too tight to offer competitive wages. Ohio legislators can help recruit and retain qualified educators with a new bill, the Workforce Investment Now (WIN) Act , which would pilot a program to provide publicly funded childcare for childcare workers. A similar program in Kentucky has expanded access to childcare statewide by increasing the number of available seats in childcare facilities. Ohio legislators can pass the WIN Act by the end of 2026.

Childcare work is crucial, but provider budgets are tight. Early childhood educators keep Ohio children safe, fed, clean, and learning—whether that be changing diapers or potty training, reading, playing make-believe, or helping a child regulate after a squabble with another child. That work requires an extraordinary amount of attention and energy, and no small amount of skill. This is labor-intensive work — and staff-to-children ratios are rightly set by licensing[1] — so the amount of revenue providers can generate is relatively fixed, even as they face the same rising prices as other small businesses.

These factors — plus repeated failures by Ohio legislators to increase investment in the sector— create tighter and tighter budgets for childcare providers, forcing them to choose between raising rates or running a deficit, neither of which allows for wages that truly reflect the value of childcare work.

Ohio's childcare workforce is too small — and it's getting smaller. Since 2019, the number of childcare workers in Ohio has decreased by nearly 40%.[2] Low pay is a significant factor: The typical wage for a childcare worker in Ohio is only $14.27 per hour,[3] far too low to attract and retain qualified early childhood educators.

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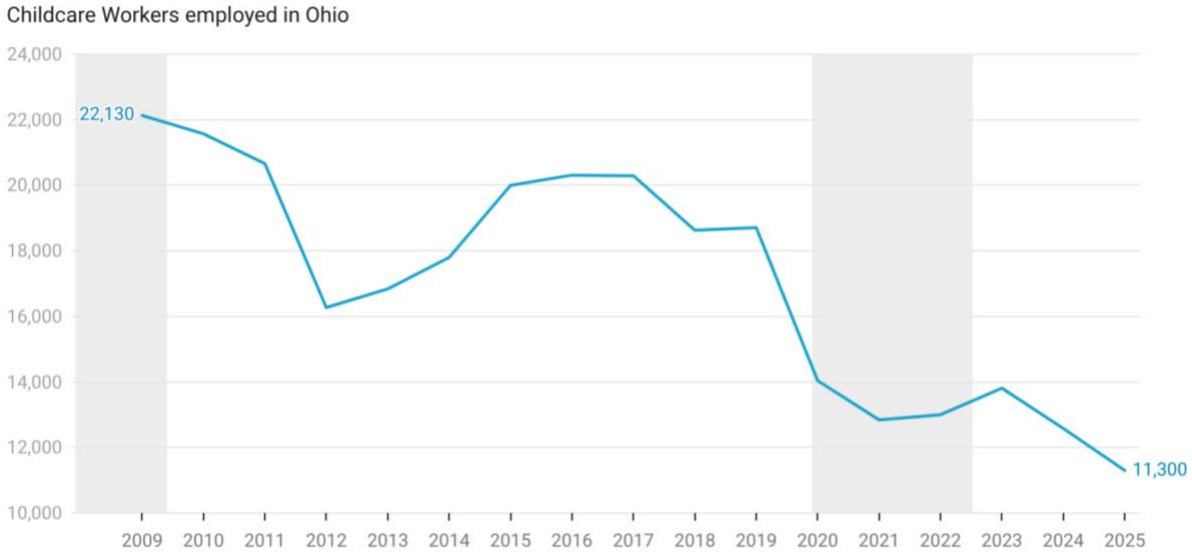
[1] Staff-to-child ratios are a critical tool for ensuring each child under a provider's care gets the attention they need. Increasing the staff-to-child ratio is not a suitable solution to increasing access, since each additional child under a single provider's care is another life to keep safe, engaged, and learning with limited resources. Why Is Childcare Expensive?. Ryan Bourne. *Cato Institute.* September 14, 2023.

[2] Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics. United States Bureau of Labor Statistics. Accessed June 10, 2026.

[3] Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics. United States Bureau of Labor Statistics. Accessed June 10, 2026.

Figure 1 shows how the childcare workforce in Ohio has fared in the last 15 years. While the workforce partially rebounded after the Great Recession, Ohio has not seen the same recovery post-pandemic. After two years of meager gains, the childcare workforce is on the decline once again, the lowest it's been in recent decades.

Figure 1
The child care sector is shrinking



Gray areas indicate recessions.
Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics, May 2009 through May 2025, Childcare Workers occupational code 39-9011
Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics • Created with Datawrapper

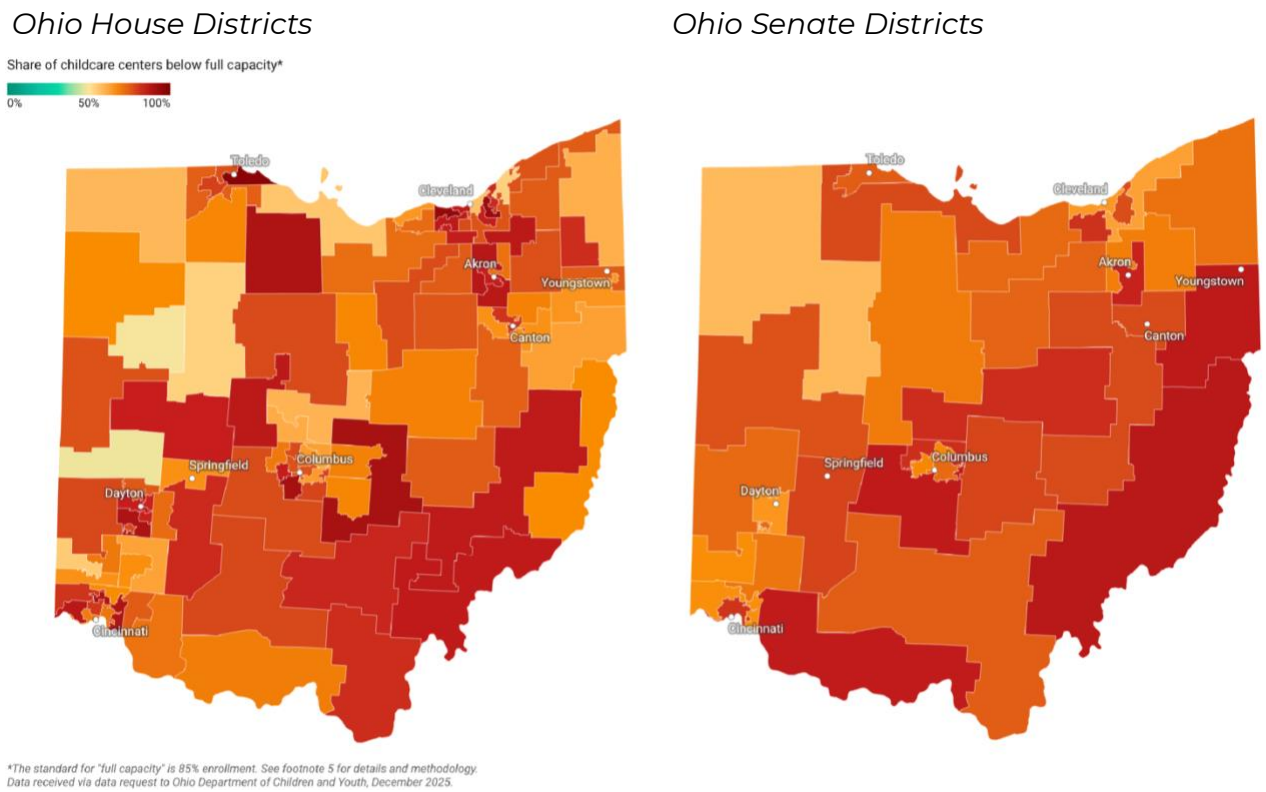
Workforce shortages make it difficult for childcare providers to keep their doors open, which in turn makes it difficult for families to find reliable, high-quality childcare. Nearly 1 in 3 (32.5%) Ohioans live in a childcare desert.[4] Even where childcare centers are easy to access, many are operating at less than their full capacity because of this workforce shortage.

Childcare centers have space for more kids, but not enough staff. Three-quarters of Ohio's 4,257 childcare centers are below full capacity.[5] That gap represents 124,876 childcare slots and between 8,920 and 17,839 new jobs.

[4] As defined by the Center for American Progress (CAP), childcare deserts are "census tracts with at least 30 children age 5 or younger and either no licensed child care providers or a ratio of more than three children under age 5 for every licensed slot." America's Licensed Child Care Deserts, Table 1. Hailey Gibbs and Casey Peeks. *CAP.* April 29, 2026.
[5] To account for typical fluctuations in enrollment, the federal Provider Cost of Quality Calculator uses 85% enrollment as its standard for "full capacity." Source: Provider Cost of Quality Calculator. *U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration of Children and Families.* Accessed August 24, 2026. METHODOLOGY: Using data provided by the Ohio Department of Children and Youth via data request in December 2025, we calculated the share of centers in the state that have total enrollment above and below the 85% threshold. Centers noted as "Closed," "Inactive," or "Suspended" were excluded from the count, in addition to any centers that had "0" approved total capacity.

Figure 2 shows the share of childcare centers that are considered under full capacity in each of the state's legislative districts. We created factsheets for every district, available here. (Find your districts here.)

Figure 2
In every Ohio legislative district, most childcare centers are under capacity



To address the childcare crisis, state lawmakers must increase support for providers. Legislators have an immediate opportunity to step up for childcare. The Workforce Investment Now (WIN) Act would provide free childcare (through the Publicly Funded Child Care program) to any childcare worker who can demonstrate they work at least 20 hours per week in a licensed childcare facility.

Passing this legislation would not only provide current childcare workers with necessary financial relief — the average cost of childcare in Ohio now tops $10,000 a year[6] — it would also draw more workers to the sector. More workers equals more childcare slots open for families.

Piloting the WIN Act is a no-brainer: Funding was already allocated to the Department of Children and Youth last budget cycle for improvements[7] no longer

[6] 2024 Annual Report. *Ohio Child Care Resource & Referral Association*. N.d.

[7] "Ohio to delay child care payment changes until 2028 as Trump reviews Biden plan," Laura Hancock. *Cleveland.com.* December 15, 2025.

required by the federal government.[8] The state should reallocate those dollars toward this pilot.

The WIN Act would be a major step forward, but it won't be enough to solve Ohio's childcare crisis. To attract and retain as many early childhood educators as Ohio needs, legislators must also increase provider payment rates for the Publicly Funded Child Care program. Ohio pays providers as little as possible within federal guidelines.[9] Raising the PFCC payment rate would allow childcare programs to balance their books and increase the industry's typical wage over time.

Ohio legislators have allowed the state's childcare crisis to fester for too long; they have a lot of catching up to do. The WIN Act is a good start. The state's coming budget negotiations are an even bigger opportunity to invest in the workforce behind the workforce.

[8] Public Comment on Proposed Federal Rule "Restoring Flexibility in the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF)." Heather Smith. *Policy Matters Ohio*. January 16, 2026. A Statement from Child Care Aware® of America on the Federal Administration's Final Rule on CCDF Flexibility. *ChildCare Aware of America*. May 29, 2026.

[9] Ohio's childcare crisis, 2025. K. Poe, A. Smith, H. Smith. *Policy Matters Ohio*. April 15, 2025.