

Its a new day in child care as preschools and day cares cope with COVID

By Abigail Napp / Friday, August 21st, 2020 / No Comments

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Learning Den Administrator, Erika Ronchietto, and other employees, working with children, at the outdoor premises of the daycare center. (Nik Blaskovich photo)

At 7 a.m. in downtown Santa Paula, Grace Montejano, stands in the waiting area of the ABC Learning Preschool and Child Care Center.

As director of the school, Montejano greets parents and children, who range in age from 6 weeks to 6 years old. She takes temperatures, looks for any unusual skin marks and asks about contact with COVID-19.

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“Because of this pandemic, I have to check the children myself,” she said. “I have to be accountable.”

Montejano refers to this new procedure as a “house check.” When she is done “clearing” the kids, a teacher comes to escort them into the classroom—an area parents can no longer enter.

At first it was more work, Montejano said, but now it has become routine. She has grown to like the one-on-one time with families at the start of the school day. It’s one of many new changes and sanitary measures at the school, a private childcare center founded in 2014.

“The parents see the constant round-the-clock cleaning,” she said. “I think that makes them feel a little bit better, especially because they are essential workers, and the last thing they want is exposure.”

In March, ABC Learning was at full capacity with 80 children and a long waiting list. In compliance with health protocols, just 35 children now attend, and many staff members have been laid off. During the stay-at-home orders, the school remained open for a new batch of families, many of them doctors, nurses and police officers.

Primary and secondary school campuses, both public and private, are closed in the tri-counties and in most of the rest of California, and children are starting the school year with distance learning. But day care centers, preschools, day camps and other non-school options for child care can stay open, as long as they follow state and local protocols for distancing and cleanliness.

Those protocols typically require reductions in enrollment, and under those conditions, many child care providers in the region have not reopened. The demand for their services is sky high, though, as many parents must return to work while their children attend school remotely.

“What keeps the workforce and economy going is reliable childcare, so that people can go to work,” said Petra Puls, executive director of First 5 Ventura County, a state-funded program that helps prepare children for kindergarten. “Unfortunately, now, with childcare not available and schools switching to distance learning, we’re seeing that families are making the choice between staying employed and cutting back hours versus staying home to care for their kids.”

Long before COVID-19 hit, advocates of early childhood education were sounding the alarm about access, warning lawmakers and employers of the high price and limited availability of quality child care.

“We’ve had a childcare crisis before the pandemic hit,” Puls said. “We have not had enough high-quality licensed providers to meet the needs of our community. And when the pandemic made closures, it furthered the crisis. Now that the economy is opening up, I feel there’s a really big disconnect between schools, childcare programs, and summer camps.”

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In Santa Barbara, Erika Ronchietto, director of The Learningden Preschool, welcomed children back after a brief closure. Since founding the preschool 14 years ago, Ronchietto has had to contend with an underappreciation for the field, which she believes should be called “early education” not “child care.”

“It’s more important than child care, given the amount of planning, time and thought that goes into this by our instructors,” she said. “And it’s more than an education. We’re not ‘babysitting’ children.”

Prior to COVID-19, Ronchietto’s school ran at full capacity with a staff of 18 and since has shrunk in size. Like Montejano, she updated the drop-off policy, sign-in procedure, and of course, rolled out new sanitary measures. She offered families who kept children at home during the pandemic the option of paying a holding fee to keep their spot.

This fall, Ronchietto’s most immediate concern is the lack of child care options for her staff and their school-aged children, who need daily supervision while learning remotely at home on screens.

“Now that our schools are not opening, we still have an influx of parents that need to work,” she said. “Child care is going to have to take on school-aged care, which we’re not prepared for nor want to do.”

Shana Paulson, the children services manager at Child Care Resource Connection, a non-profit that matches low-income families with child care providers in San Luis Obispo County, speaks with parents and childcare providers on a daily basis about a system that does not meet their needs.

“Child care would consume 23 percent of a family budget. It’s too much for families,” Paulson said. “But the money child care providers are able to generate through this business isn’t enough to adequately keep staff. They can’t attract and retain them, and this means fewer spots for families. Now more than ever, childcare is a critical part of our economy.”

So far, state and county governments have helped by disbursing free personal protective equipment to child care centers and created new loans for small businesses. And many families have sought out alternatives that may not be their first choice, like leaving children with family members and neighbors.

Advocates at First 5 believe that if the current situation continues it will create a drag on the economy and families. The consequences could be traumatic on youngsters who need socialization and environments conducive to learning. And if parents have to forgo work because they can’t get child care, it could worsen poverty and reduce social mobility.

For now, advocates at First 5 are encouraging employers to adopt flexible policies that provide peace of mind for stressed parents.

“I think that it’s a really important step that doesn’t necessarily cost money and can go a long way in supporting the workforce now,” said Puls. “If half the workforce has to leave to take care of their kids, that won’t be good either.”

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