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# OPINION

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OP-ED

## Child care industry at risk, but there is a solution

BY ROBIN COMEY

It's clearer more now than ever: The child care industry will need to fight for its life and require significant investments to overcome the non-ending COVID-19 pandemic. And fighting they are.

There are two things I've learned in my nearly two decades of advocacy for children as executive director of Branford Early Childhood Collaborative. One, teachers and other early child care professionals are passionate, caring, invaluable workers with little concern for how little they are paid. Two, their dedication to children increases in a crisis.

During these past 17 pandemic-focused weeks, I've participated in multiple weekly Zoom calls with nearly 300 of them, all working tirelessly to solve our countrywide child care crisis. Their fight — which is everyone's fight — is truly awe-inspiring. The stakes are very high. We must recognize that child care is the most important economic factor in the recovery of Connecticut and our nation. Pandemic or not, quality child care plays a crucial role in the future success of our families and of the economic success of our state. There is not an industry I can think of where fragmented systems and funding streams would be an acceptable way to run a business. These small, mostly women-owned and managed businesses are expected to work on shoestring budgets, piecing together dollars from a mix of state, federal and private dollars.

According to the Connecticut Office of Early Childhood, 18 programs in the state have already closed since COVID-19 hit. Almost all that are open — both center-based and family child care — are losing



HANNAH YOON/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Emily James with her daughters Natalie, left, and Alessandra at their beach home July 9 in Ocean City, New Jersey. When New York City decided to reopen its school system, on a part-time basis in September, it set off a new child care crisis that could seriously threaten its ability to restart the local economy and recover from the coronavirus outbreak.

money. Forty percent of child-care providers across the country believe they will have to close permanently if there is no additional public assistance.

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in programs barely surviving on a model of reduced student enrollment and increased staffing requirements leading to cash flow problems and difficulties meeting payroll. A two-week closure has extended to more than three months, and I've watched business owners struggle on whether to hold spots for kids and how to pay staff. With reopening, the struggles of health and safety concerns are compounded by the challenges of finding substitute teachers

and making plans for a worst-case scenario where programs would need to shut down again due to a COVID case in their program. As one local Branford director told me, there is so much unknown about what could happen next that she was hesitant to make business decisions and put in place policies that she will end up regretting later.

The federal government stepped up when the first COVID-19-related funding package passed by Congress allocated \$3.5 billion in supplemental emergency funding to states, which in Connecticut has helped front line and essential workers, including those not previously eligible, to access

child care. But these are band-aids on a situation that needs bold investments, and without action it is estimated that there could be a permanent loss of 4.5 million child care slots nationally, leaving parents without affordable options for child care and forcing some parents, mostly women, to leave the workforce.

We need to answer this national crisis by supporting the \$50 billion Child Care Stabilization Fund within the Child Care and Development Block Grant before Congress goes on recess. This bill, introduced by U.S. Rep. Rosa DeLauro and others, will provide support to families, child care providers and our state's economy. Our own Connecticut Office of Early Childhood's Commissioner Beth Bye a few days ago testified in front of the appropriations committee that they estimate needing state funding of \$85 million to \$100 million over six months to keep the industry afloat, in Connecticut alone.

It is time we collectively prioritize children and their caregivers in our society. As Connecticut employers begin expecting parents to return to the workforce, child care is going to play a key role in the recovery. If this industry fails, we will all be affected, and the economy will suffer beyond anyone's imagination.

The fight is on, for the health of our children, our families, our state and our nation. These uncharted times demand bold, decisive action, and none is as important — for all of us — as the decision to stabilize our child care industry.

*State Rep. Robin Comey, D-Branford, is executive director of the Branford Early Childcare Collaborative.*

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TRUMP: CHINA AGENCY



OP-ED

## Even with about-face on student visas, enrollment set to plummet

BY CATHERINE RAMPPELL

The Trump administration unexpectedly backed off a draconian new rule that would have affected international students — but other policy damage may not be easily undone.

In a federal hearing Tuesday, the government abruptly dropped its recent directive that international students whose classes go online-only because of the pandemic would be refused visas or subject to deportation. That's a good development.

Even so, thanks to other anti-immigrant policies, international student enrollment is still expected to plummet this fall to its lowest level in decades.

This will seed problems in the U.S. economy for years to come.

Enrollment of new international students at U.S. universities in the fall semester of the 2020-2021 academic year is projected to decline 63% to 98% from 2018-2019 levels, according to a National Foundation for American Policy analysis. That wide range of estimates reflects uncertainty about how other immigration measures will be implemented over the coming weeks.

The most pessimistic figure in that range would place enrollment of new foreign students at its lowest level since the end of World War II.

Two major U.S. policy decisions are expected to hold back enrollment.

First, U.S. embassies and consulates around the world suspended routine services amid pandemic closures; that includes processing of student visas. The State Department says visa services are being phased back in, but it hasn't given dates for when it will reopen which consulates. And even if consulates in countries that send the largest numbers of students, such as India, reopen soon, there's likely to be a big

backlog of applications to be processed.

Already, there may not be sufficient time to process and approve visas for the fall semester — which at many institutions begins in weeks.

Additionally, many countries are still subject to U.S. travel bans related to the pandemic. Even if consulates reopen, it's unclear whether students from these places can get U.S. visas. At least one consulate, in Vienna, has said students may qualify for "national interest exceptions" to the travel ban; but State Department higher-ups have not issued policy.

Countries subject to COVID-19-related travel bans — including China, Europe's Schengen zone and Britain — accounted for about 40% of international students in the United States in 2018-2019, according to the Institute of International Education.

"Someone from the Czech Republic would probably be more scared of coming to the U.S. than we should be going to Czech Republic," says Stuart Anderson, executive director of the National Foundation for American Policy. Even so, he says, the Trump administration may be loath to lift its travel ban for fear of tacitly acknowledging that other countries might be doing better than we are against COVID-19. So, perhaps national-interest exemptions could provide a "face-saving" way around the ban, if other consulates grant them, he said.

Workarounds that allow students to enter are not a guarantee that large numbers will actually arrive. Well before COVID-19, new international student enrollment had been declining for several years.

Colleges surveyed by the Institute of International Education said the top reasons their foreign student enrollment had been falling included visa application problems, the social and political environment

in the United States and U.S. tuition costs. Other countries, such as Canada and Australia, have taken advantage of such discontent and have recruited international students heavily.

Even though the administration dropped its controversial recent policy barring visas to all international students whose classes have gone online-only, the administration is reportedly considering another, narrower ban that could apply only to newly enrolled students.

Would you come to the United States under these conditions?

Trump might be unbothered by any reservations foreign students have about visiting a coronavirus-infested, anti-immigrant country doing its darnedest to keep them out. After all, he's merely keeping his promise to build the (figurative) wall against all forms of immigration — legal, illegal, skilled, unskilled, professional, working-class, researcher, student.

Others, of course, see such policies as inflicting needless cruelty, uncertainty and anxiety upon international students, many of whom have had their lives upended multiple times.

There are also selfish, "America First"-style reasons to oppose policies that drive away global student talent.

In fact, Trump and senior policy adviser Stephen Miller might pause to consider who and what else their plans to punish immigrants also hurt, perhaps irreparably: American students, American schools, American businesses, American workers and America's balance of trade.

International students enrich campuses figuratively (by bringing perspectives and customs from around the world) and literally (by paying more money). International students are more likely to pay full, undiscounted tuition. Schools — especially those in states where taxpayer funding for public

education has fallen — use this tuition to remain solvent and to subsidize their American students.

International students are also more likely to study STEM fields, providing a crucial pipeline of talent to the U.S. tech industry and to America's research and development infrastructure, among other sectors.

Among the data points I've noted before: Over the course of the past century, immigrant scientists helped revolutionize U.S. science and innovation, as documented in a study of patent records by economists Petra Moser, Alessandra Voena and Fabian Waldinger. Today, more than half of the most highly valued U.S. tech companies were founded by immigrants. Related research by economist Britta Glennon suggests that making the U.S. skilled-immigration system more restrictive ends up pushing jobs and innovation outside the United States.

And, finally, there's trade.

Education-related travel is one of America's most successful exports, valued at about \$44 billion last year, according to the Bureau of Economic Analysis. U.S. educational exports were roughly equal to our total exports in soybeans, coal and natural gas — combined.

And yet Trump, who has pledged to eliminate the trade deficit, is nuking this wildly successful educational export industry. Maybe because he prioritizes harming immigrants; maybe because he prioritizes harming colleges, a favorite target of many on the right; maybe because he genuinely doesn't understand how much economic damage his actions cause. Whatever the motivation, America will be paying the cost long after Trump has left office.

*Catherine Rampell is an opinion columnist at The Washington Post.*