

STRIB VOICES

CHILD CARE

Up north, parents wait for years for child care they can barely afford



AARON BROWN
Columnist

How early should families reserve a child care slot at Iron Range Tykes Learning Center? According to Shawntel Gruba, who founded the Mountain Iron, Minn., facility eight years ago, the answer is “a year before they even try to conceive.”

Gruba said her waitlist topped three years this spring. That means that today’s newborns are too late, and people moving into the area are out of luck.

“It’s not just my facility; it’s all facilities, all in-home providers,” said Gruba of the region’s child care crunch. “There are no slots.”

That’s a big problem for a place that desperately needs to fill vacant jobs and revive a local economy that’s been on the rocks for 40 years. It also signals a broken child care system that affects the whole state. In many places, child care is too expensive for an average family to afford. The statewide average for infant care is \$20,500 a year, according to Child Care Aware. In northern Minnesota, however, that’s only the second problem.

“Right now, the cost doesn’t even matter because we don’t even have slots if people had the money,” said Staci Gilpin of the research firm Rural Pathways.

Gilpin recently shared compelling new research on behalf of the Iron Range Child Care Task Force about the economic impact of the local child care shortage. The resulting report, “Child Care as Workforce Infrastructure,” lays out the problem and potential solutions.

Compiled from state labor statistics and case data, Gilpin’s policy brief shows that reviving the Range economy requires activating a workforce idled by lack of child care. While the report centers on the Taconite Assistance Area, every corner of Minnesota could benefit from the report’s suggestions.

The median age of the Iron Range runs 10 years older than the state median. The unemployment rate remains low, but the number of vacant jobs is high. Workforce participation in this region lags 10 points behind the state average.

The report estimates almost 800 working-age adults already live in the region who could enter the labor force if they had child care. That would lead to more than \$53 million in new economic activity, and protect the almost \$469 million in local activity generated by working parents currently using child care services.

Gruba follows online parent groups and sees what this situation looks like on the ground.

“It’s heartbreaking to see what they are posting,” said Gruba. “They are on Facebook groups asking and begging one another, will you watch my child, complete strangers. Because they so desperately want to work.”

Gilpin identifies three “levers” that can be deployed to address separate causes of the child care shortages.

The first calls on employers to invest in recruiting and retention by contributing to pooled funds that guarantee child care slots for their employees. Existing federal tax credits can defray up to half these costs. Local governments or nonprofits can cover more, if able.

In one case study, a small child care center in Tamarack, Minn., became viable because a new local employer, Talon Metals, subsidized slots for its

employees.

“Employers sometimes think they’re the most removed from this, but when you really start to look at the data, the employers are impacted the most,” said Gilpin.

Lack of child care costs productivity, sick time and an endless cycle of hiring and training. An employer-driven solution supports child care where it’s needed.

The second level focuses on staff pay. Despite their importance, child care providers remain among the nation’s lowest paid trained professionals.

The Iron Range child care study examines a model used in Cook County, where the county partially subsidizes teacher pay to a minimum of \$17 an hour. This addresses one of the industry’s biggest problems: hiring and retaining qualified teachers.

My own mother was a career infant care provider until her recent retirement, never making more than \$25,000 a year. This made her eligible for some benefits, like state health care, but little else. A \$17 an hour wage would have given her a 40% raise.

The third lever relates to the core problem in places like the Iron Range: a lack of providers. Instead of dumping philanthropic contributions and grants on operating costs, they could be used to help new centers and home-based child care get started. This funding could also help centers facing catastrophic repairs, a factor that has closed facilities with tight operating budgets.

“We have to build a supply first and we have to sustain our existing providers,” said Gilpin.

These three levers, if implemented together, would meaningfully address challenges that providers like Gruba face every day.

“There needs to be a systems change,” said Gruba. “No more Band-Aids.”

State and federal funding to defray child care costs exists but remains volatile due to budget cuts and political volatility. Gilpin said a regional, employer-centric solution is the best place to start.

“It’s going to be really hard to ever have a statewide solution,” said Gilpin. “I think some people are holding out for that. I always say, well, if we ever do want a statewide solution, we need to have employer buy-in. Because the money is going to come from employers one way or another.”

The fate of working-class families predicts our entire economy, and that fate rests on solving the child care crisis. We don’t have time to wait for the next election and won’t need to if employers and communities take the lead.

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LEILA NAVIDI • The Minnesota Star Tribune
Children, including then-10-month-old Maverick Meyer, center, and then-1-year-old Layla Benson, bottom left, play at Jade’s Family Child-care in Morris, Minn., on Sept. 19, 2024.

READERS WRITE



ELIZABETH FLORES • The Minnesota Star Tribune

Hennepin County jail deputy Matthew Durette speaks with someone behind bars at the jail in Minneapolis in April 2025.

JUSTICE SYSTEM

Leniency is not the issue here

Sadly, the Minnesota Star Tribune resorted to tabloid-style reporting online on May 1, stoking readers’ outrage rather than informing them. The first article, “A defendant jumped bail in an \$11 million fraud case. Did the courts make a mistake?” asked if the courts screwed up in setting bail when the defendant absconded, and the second, “Light sentence for stranger rape of teenage girl sparks parents’ outrage in Minnesota court,” contained a lamentation that a sex offender got a “light sentence.” Both encouraged and, predictably, generated, reader comments that amount to, “Lock ’em up!” Anyone who read the Star Tribune would be justified in believing that the problem with crime in Minnesota is that people are not incarcerated often enough or long enough.

And, yet, the U.S. has about 4% of the world’s population and about 23% of its prisoners. While various European countries incarcerate about 100 people per 100,000, we incarcerate almost 700 people per 100,000. But we also have higher rates of crime and violent crime. Minnesota’s statistics are slightly worse than average.

Maybe rather than rallying the mobs, a reporter could investigate the institution of bail in Minnesota, comparing the bill to eliminate cash bail currently in front of the Legislature with the Illinois law that did so. Or the effects of mass incarceration on Minnesota families. Or report on the number of people who pay outrageous bonds (amounting to a fine of tens of thousands of dollars) but are never convicted. Or the months of jail time innocent people serve before being acquitted at trial. These stories are out there, too, along with alternatives to incarceration and the effects of mass incarceration on generational poverty. Diversion, restorative justice, treatment courts. It’s all waiting for front-page coverage. But the Star Tribune chose to go with fearmongering.

BARRY S. EDWARDS, Minneapolis

The writer is a criminal defense lawyer.

MINING NEAR THE BWCA

If we’re that smart, we’ll do something else

Last week the Minnesota Star Tribune had a letter to the editor from a gentleman who thought that if we could send astronauts around the moon, well then, we certainly could use science to find a clean way of mining for copper and nickel without polluting the waters of the lakes comprising the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (“Give human ingenuity a chance,” Readers Write, May 3). I’m thinking if science could do that, then why not use science to come up with a way to recycle the copper we are already putting in landfills? Or come up with an alternative to copper, so that we can have the copper and nickel we need without destroying a wilderness like the Boundary Waters for all generations to come? Our great-grandchildren will be very appreciative.

Let’s not forfeit the rights of future generations to have a wilderness like the BWCA. Let’s leave that up to them.

ALAN BRIESEMEISTER, Delano

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Minnesota’s Republican members of Congress – Reps. Pete Stauber, Brad Finstad, Michelle Fischbach and Tom Emmer – supported H.J. Res. 140, overturning protections for over 234,000 acres bordering the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness in Minnesota, thereby opening the door to potential copper-nickel sulfide mining in the BWCA watershed. As a registered Republican I am disgusted by their choice to support a foreign mining company rather than to protect Minnesota’s most pristine natural environment.

Supporters for mining near the BWCA say it will address economic challenges in northeastern Minnesota. This is shortsighted. Since the 1980s, the Minnesota mining economy has experienced multiple boom/bust swings; every protracted recovery has been undermined by the next global impact.

Furthermore, the company seeking to exploit Minnesota – Antofagasta PLC – is from Chile. Why would MAGA Republicans support a foreign mining company extracting from Minnesota an estimated \$1.2 billion in annual revenue?

Sulfide-ore mining carries a long record of acid mine drainage. There are serious hydrological concerns for the BWCA. In a study published in the Journal of Hydrology, Tom Myers notes contamination concerns from tailings piles and mining chemicals and a risk that contamination may not be obvious until after the mine closes.

The Boundary Waters receives over 140,000 visitors annually from across the country. These visitors care about our natural world. They visit to adventure, as essential stress-relief break from the “rat-race,” to strengthen existing relationships or grow new ones or to simply go someplace beautiful and peaceful to catch a fish or read a book. I myself am preparing for my 25th BWCA trip, on which I will eclipse 600 miles traveled and 100 unique lakes visited.

The value of this area is not in economics – especially for such a short term. The true value of the BWCA is the accessible gift it makes of itself to every citizen of America. Its value is no less than the Grand Canyon, the Great Smoky Mountains, the Oregon coastline or your favorite state/local park.

The BWCA should be protected from foreign mining companies. Congressional Republicans have failed to do that. It’s time for Minnesota citizens to act.

ROGER SCHROEDER, Marshall, Minn.

Advocates for copper/nickel mining near the BWCA like to talk about the jobs it will create. What they do not talk about is the current and future use of robots doing the labor. Robots do not get workers’ compensation, health insurance and unemployment compensation. In addition, driverless vehicles are currently operating on transportation areas that could include getting to, delivering from and operating inside mines.

The touted financial benefits are magical thinking. The current economic tourist benefits are documented and would be jeopardized by the mining, probably severely.

JEANNE REIERSON, North Oaks

ENERGY

Keep HERC open for the heat, too

Among the many, sometimes heated, letters about the Hennepin Energy Recovery Center (HERC), the garbage burner, to date I have not seen anyone point out HERC’s substantial energy efficiency and economic benefits to downtown. More than three decades ago I read detailed comparison of energy efficiency in Europe versus the U.S., and Europe’s singular advantage stood out: urban district heating. In Europe it is common to host energy plants inside cities and use the enormous waste heat to efficiently heat and cool city buildings instead of wasting it in enormous cooling towers. HERC serves downtown Minneapolis with steam, serving Target Field plus feeding excess steam into the city’s district energy system, supporting over 100 downtown buildings and reducing pollution and operating costs. This is yet another reason HERC should stay where it is.

JAMES P. LENFESTEY, Minneapolis

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As I read the May 6 article outlining China’s surging dominance in worldwide wind turbine production (“As oil price stays high, China goes big on wind”), I was reminded that our country is moving in the opposite direction. According to the article, President Donald Trump is doing everything he can to sabotage the development of wind power in order to promote the use of fossil fuels. How shortsighted! Just think how much energy could be produced by harnessing the endless stream of hot air that blows from the White House!

ALAN BRAY, St. Peter, Minn.

MOTHERS

A bittersweet Mother’s Day to all

Today is Mother’s Day, a chance to show your appreciation for someone who has cherished you since birth. But it’s also a sad day for so many people, including me, who have lost their own mother.

Mother once told me that she got some thoughtful advice from a stranger years ago, while shopping for flowers. Said the store owner: “Treat yourself. Buy some nice red and white carnations, in honor and memory of your own mother.”

Maybe some nice advice for many this Sunday. Something that I read last year: “Your mother taught you much in your life. But what she didn’t teach you was how to live without her.” So true.

Cherish your mother, while you still can.

NEIL F. ANDERSON, Richfield

YOUR VIEWS?

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