

VOICE of the CHIEFTAIN

Child care recovery solutions

Rural Oregon is facing a difficult post-COVID economic recovery. The \$1.9 trillion federal coronavirus relief package will undoubtedly help, but without addressing some long-standing barriers to economic development, we will not grow and thrive.

The lack of child care is one of those barriers. We live in a child care desert, where the number of available slots is a fraction of the need.

Without adequate and affordable child care options for children younger than age 5, a laundry list of problems arises:

- Parents (women, mostly) who want to work or attend school may need to drop out of the workforce or college, harming their family's long-term economic future.
- Employers trying to recruit and retain employees have limited options, as potential workers are not available.
- A "brain drain" ensues, as professionals leave rural Oregon to pursue their careers in areas with more child care options.
- Rural school districts suffer from diminishing student enrollment year after year, as young families move away.
- When there are few preschool options, many 5-year-olds are not ready to learn when they start kindergarten, which undermines their chances of future academic success.

A strong child care system is needed to solve these problems.

The Ford Family Foundation's recent report, "Child Care in Rural Oregon," charts a path to improve the quantity and quality of child care. Their five recommendations should be quickly enacted.

Their first recommendation is for the Oregon Department of Human Services to use data from surveys of child care providers across the state to accurately model the actual costs of providing child care, to calculate reimbursement rates that are fair across the state and don't put rural areas at a disadvantage.

Second, do away with the state's current system of paying more for child care in urban areas than is paid in rural areas, and permanently waive or significantly lower the copayments for low-income families who receive child-care assistance.

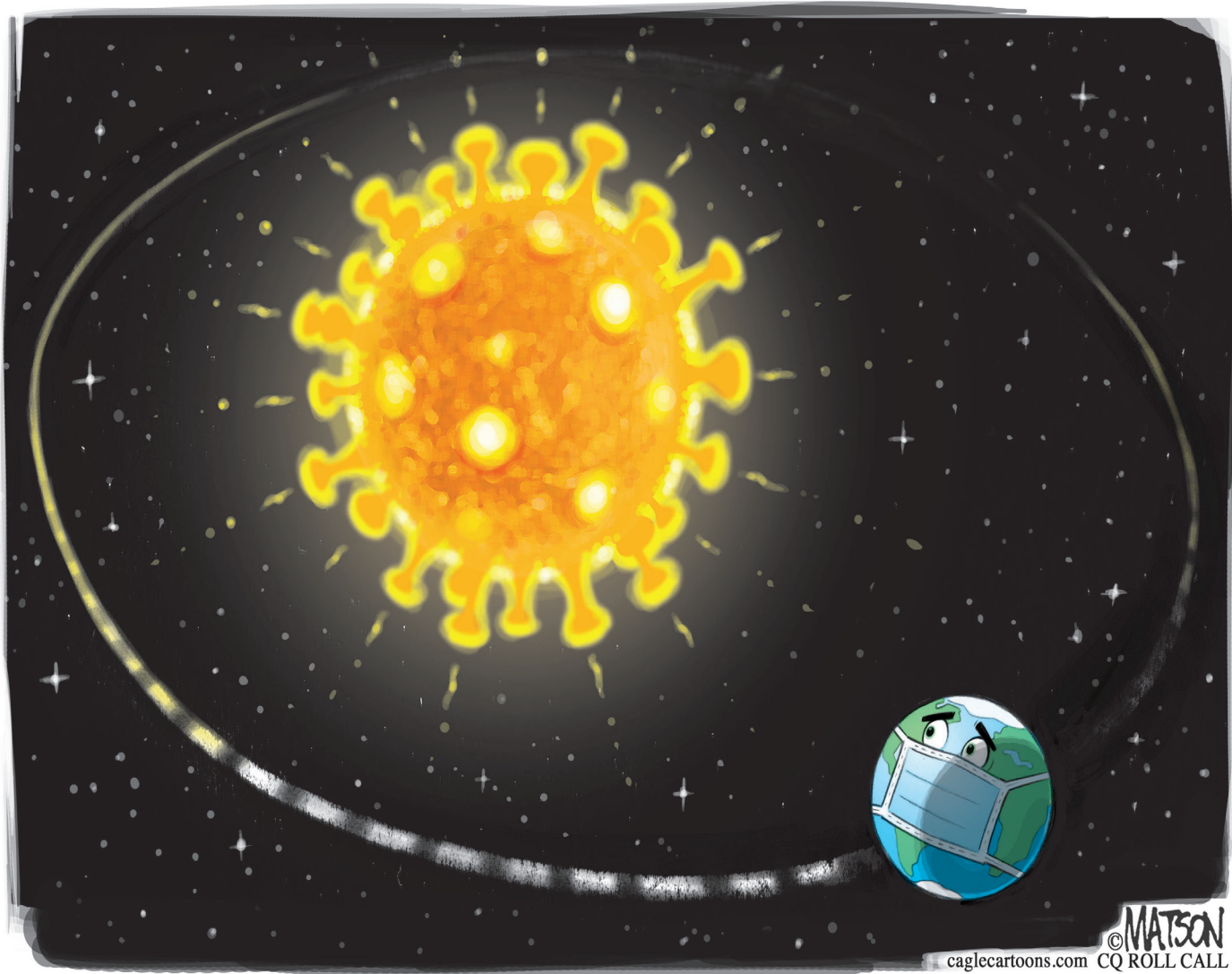
Third, recognize that both home-based child care providers and child care centers need consistent and reliable funding. They need to receive payments based on a child's enrollment rather than their daily attendance.

Fourth, launch a statewide system to link child care provider networks so that administrative services such as bookkeeping and payroll can be shared by home-based child care and child-care centers across the state, lowering costs for all.

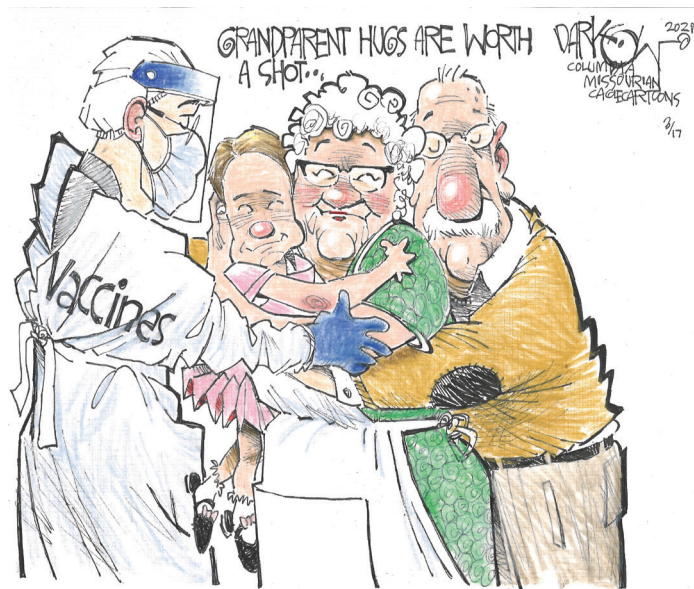
Fifth, make changes in Oregon's child care regulations to allow small child care centers to be located in nonresidential settings, so they can be licensed as "Certified Family Child Care." This would allow for mixed-age groups of up to 16 children in "microcenters" located in schools and other existing buildings.

These steps don't solve the underlying problem causing the shortage of child care: This care is expensive to provide because of the high caregiver-to-child ratios needed for the safety of very young children, and is not subsidized by the government except for very low-income families. The brunt of the cost of child care is primarily borne by families. For many families, child care costs more than their mortgage, and can be as high as college tuition.

Ultimately, we as a nation need to face the fact that a child's education does not start in kindergarten. It starts at birth, so the more tax dollars we spend on high-quality child care and education, the less we will spend on remedial services and social welfare systems, and the better off we will be in the long run.



FIRST LAP



LETTERS to the EDITOR

Understanding legislation takes effort

Maybe you say, "The government is making too many regulations that interfere with running my business the way I want." But really, who makes those decisions?

First, we voters vote for the politicians who we believe will work for us. We contribute to their campaign funds and write to the winners. At the same time, corporations and organizations also contribute campaign funds; however, with their money, they can hire lobbyists to influence legislation for their benefit. (This is what "Citizens United" is about.)

Much of the time, the lobbyists construct bills and hand them to the legislators who submit them for the decision process. Do you think the lobbyists are promoting and writing legislation that benefits everyone? No, they propose and write legislation to benefit their employers. Do these employers and lobbyists stop to think about the effect their legislation will have on others? Who will benefit if their bill is put into law? Who will be hurt?

What about the bureaucrats, those who work for the government and do the "grunt work" to enable the decisions made by the politicians? Do they make too many decisions? For whom do they make decisions? My experience as a former state bureaucrat is that my job was to

do what the politicians assigned me to do. Almost every assignment was unpopular with various segments of the population because people have differing needs and expectations.

My advice to anyone who is unhappy with a regulation is to find out who influenced the passing of the bill that included the problem regulation, who it benefits, and why was the regulation included in the implementation of the legislation. What is your representative's position? Did you follow the legislation, and did you inform your representative of your point of view? And why did you vote for or against that representative, and did you vote? So you see, it all circles back to the responsible parties — the voters.

Being a responsible citizen is not easy.
**Evelyn Swart
Joseph**

Leave partisan politics out of redistricting

In 2019, Sen. Michael Dembrow made the following remarks about the GOP walkout protesting cap and trade: "We know that the voters want us to be creating this program. Every legislator that was in a contested race in 2018 ran on this issue. The governor ran on this issue. We picked up seats in both chambers in part over this issue."

In 2018, Democrats won 38 House seats and 11 Senate seats. In 40 House seats, Democrats had a voter-registration advantage over Republicans at an average of 9,357.13, while Republicans had a voter registration advantage in just 20 House seats at an average of 5,160.5. Fourteen House seats had a Democratic voter registration advantage greater than 10,000, versus just one House District with a Republican voter registration advantage that size. House District 43 had a Democratic advantage of 31,000.

Decades of partisan redistricting created a system where the majority party picks and chooses voters. Oregon House Speaker Tina Kotek and Senate President Peter Courtney have used the power of their office to deny nonpartisan redistricting proposals. Oregonians deserve a system that allows voters, not parties, to choose the candidates who best represent their communities.

While the authority to draw district maps remains with the Legislature, legislators must look beyond their electoral interests and ensure all possible districts are equally divided between Republicans, Democrats and Independents. Voter registration advantages should be in the dozens, not tens of thousands. This is the only road forward to unity and honest policymaking.

**Alex McHaddad
La Grande**

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