

Advocating for Childcare Access in Daviess County

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CENTER FOR
RURAL ENGAGEMENT



ADVOCATING FOR CHILDCARE ACCESS IN DAVIESS COUNTY

BRING ON TOMORROW

INDIANA UNIVERSITY BLOOMINGTON
POLITICAL AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT PROGRAM & CENTER FOR RURAL ENGAGEMENT
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An interdisciplinary, 22 credit hour undergraduate certificate program, PACE combines academic study with hands-on learning to give students unique preparation for political and civic engagement. PACE students gain the understanding, skills, and motivation needed to be successful in American public life. The PACE program links the two main components of public life in America—political and civic engagement. Students discover that effective civic engagement requires an understanding of politics and political skills, and effective political engagement requires knowing how American civil society works and how to navigate it. Students learn to: seek out various perspectives, and work with those who hold opposing views; to engage in constructive dialogue, and develop informed critiques of political and civic institutions; and to analyze the effectiveness of policies, and devise effective solutions to public problems.

Introduction and Background

Daviess County is a largely rural county in southwest Indiana, with a population of 33,381 people. One-third of the population lives in the city of Washington. The other two-thirds live in nine townships, several of which are predominantly Amish. Much of the county's relatively employment opportunities comes from the Naval Surface Warfare Center Crane in neighboring Perry Township, Martin County (Jones & Hardesty, 2025).

Like much of the state, Daviess County has a lack of access to quality childcare. It has one highest quality childcare center for its increasing population (Jones & Hardesty, 2025), which can take 104 children. According to the Transform Consulting Group, there are only 824 spots in early care and education (ECE) programs for the county's 1,320 "young children who need care" (2024). The county loses almost \$7 million annually due to turnovers or parents taking off work to care for their children (Transform Consulting Group, 2024).

Many of the issues impacting citizens of Daviess County mirror the issues facing every working parent in America. There are approximately three million children who are in need of better childcare in the U.S. (Beebe, 2024). This problem is so widespread due in large part to the challenges of maintaining the childcare industry. Childcare centers run at extremely high operating costs, compounded with high liability and thin margins. The problem is made more severe by a serious lack of childcare workers (Beebe, 2024). All of these factors lead to extremely high prices for parents, who are often forced to make a choice between their work and caring for their children. This creates an especially challenging dilemma for single parents, who have no choice but to provide for the family, and now must use a large portion of their income for childcare as well. In Daviess County, single parents with one child are spending about thirty percent of their income on child care (Transform Consulting Group, 2024). That is, for families who are able to actually find available childcare in their community.

Fifty one percent of children in Daviess County are in need of childcare (Transform Consulting Group, 2024). Of the 49 percent who can secure enrollement, the quality of care being received is inconsistent across programs. Of all the child care facilities in Daviess County, only two of them are rated high quality (Transform Consulting Group, 2024). Of the remaining lower quality facilities, there is only one center open full

time. There are no programs overnight, none that run over the weekend, and none that remain open after 7 p.m. (Transform Consulting Group, 2024). This means that the few available options in the county are effectively eliminated for parents working jobs outside of typical business hours. The few options are made even slimmer based on the parents line of work, which speaks to the way that a lack of child care access is a cumulative issue.

Limited access to childcare and the high cost creates a disproportionate impact for low income and minority families. The parent's level of education has a strong correlation with the likelihood that their child will be enrolled in early learning or childcare (Hall, n.d.). This pattern reinforces socioeconomic and racial lines, meaning that affluent white areas have the best access to early education, whereas poor or diverse areas have extremely limited access to facilities.

The situation in Daviess County speaks to the need for reform on a local, state, and federal level in the childcare industry. There are several potential solutions all levels of government can explore to reach a livable solution.



Create a Local and State Tri-Share Model

The high cost of childcare leaves a significant financial burden on many parents, particularly those of working and lower-class families. As a result, there has been a growing debate about how to make childcare more affordable. One potential solution is to increase funding through public means, such as reallocating existing resources or raising local taxes. In a smaller community like Daviess County, for example, a tax increase could theoretically be used to subsidize childcare costs. However, such a move would likely be met with resistance, since tax increases are rarely seen as popular or worthwhile. Nevertheless, utilizing multiple funding solutions, using a method such as the Tri-Share Model, could be used to ease the strain on families and invest in the future of the community.

In the Tri-Share Model, as seen implemented in Michigan, the cost of childcare is split three ways—between the parent, the employer, and the state. This shared responsibility model has shown positive results in Michigan (Bell, 2023), prompting interest from other states, such as North Carolina, which are exploring how they might implement similar programs. Indiana should consider following this example to alleviate the financial burden on parents, encourage businesses to attract and retain employees by contributing to childcare costs (including increased wages), and reduce the strain on state budgets by avoiding full responsibility for funding. A Tri-Share system offers a balanced and sustainable solution to a growing challenge for working families.

Implementing a Tri-Share system would require several steps. First, the state government should explore both the problem and potential solutions in an interim study committee, which would allow legislators to gain unique insights as to how this solution could lower costs for consumers. Following this, legislation beginning with a trial program should be passed before making it a large-scale goal of the General Assembly. If this trial program yields promising results, the state government can begin looking for support among large employers and businesses of the state for implementing this plan. Key players in this sequence include the leadership of the Indiana General Assembly, key business and professional leaders in the state, childcare experts, and working-class parents who could benefit the most from this policy. Getting feedback from these parties will be essential to the success of the program.

Legislators should work to engage their districts through listening sessions and constituent surveys to collect data on public opinion surrounding the Tri-Share Model. Similar communication with advocacy organizations such as the Indiana Chamber of Commerce will also be necessary to understand how employers will react to the implementation of this policy. Community feedback can occur while legislation moves through the Statehouse to implement the model on both a trial and permanent basis. Even so, this process will likely take several years before the plan can be fully implemented.

Daviess County stands to gain much from the use of the Tri-Share Model, as many of the large employers in the community are likely to be willing to participate in the program. According to the Transform Consulting Group (2024), Daviess County employers are losing nearly \$7 million annually to parents missing work to watch their children. Furthermore, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce wrote in 2024 that Indiana is missing out on \$1.17 billion in tax revenue due to childcare issues. Local stakeholders, such as the county government and state legislators should consider advocating for the use of this plan in their own communities.

Advocacy Overview

Key audiences: Local and state officials; business leaders.

Objectives: Implement a tri-share model childcare plan in Daviess County and advocate for state support of the initiative.

Key messages: An investment in childcare is an investment in today's workforce and tomorrow's leaders. A tri-share model supports working families, early childhood education, and business objectives for a stronger community.

Advocates: Business leaders and parents.

Resources: Funding commitments from prospective partners, particularly in the business sector, to encourage local and state government support.

Evaluation: Measure the launch of a tri-share program and its outcomes.

Develop Physical Infrastructure

One of the primary problems contributing to Daviess County's childcare crisis is the lack of physical infrastructure suitable for childcare. The existing childcare centers are not distributed equitably throughout the county, with most facilities located in Washington, the county seat. Seventeen out of the county's 21 licensed childcare providers are based in Washington (Transform Consulting Group, 2024), despite the city only accounting for 35.4% of the county's total population, according to data from the state of Indiana and U.S. Census Bureau Data (ArcGIS Online, 2023). An additional 792 spots would need to be added for every child who requires care to have access to a childcare program (Transform Consulting Group, 2024). It is important to note, however, that the actual number of children requiring childcare may be lower due to the high number of Amish households providing unlicensed childcare services (Jones & Hardesty, 2025).

The county needs more licensed childcare centers in more rural areas of the county, especially near NSA Crane, which is one of the largest employers in the region. Another complicated facet of this issue is finding spaces for childcare centers to occupy, especially ones that are outfitted to support childcare. Indiana childcare codes and regulations require specifications that childcare centers must abide by to maintain health and safety standards. These regulations cover everything from child-to-bathroom ratio requirements to lighting standards (Child Welfare Services, n.d.). However, building new facilities with these specifications or upgrading existing facilities to meet these codes can prove to be costly, offering a partial explanation for both the lack of physical childcare infrastructure in the county and the resistance legislators often exhibit for providing additional childcare funding. Furthermore, the state is arguably the only entity positioned to fund the upgrades needed for these facilities. Although local officials have more insight into their communities' needs and sway over local issues, they ultimately face budgetary constraints that may restrict action on these problems. The cooperation of local officials, state funders, childcare providers, and parents will be required to improve childcare infrastructure in the county.

The main solution to this issue is increasing the quantity of childcare facilities, especially in areas other than the city of Washington. Two prime candidates for these facilities are currently unused spaces. St. Peter's Catholic

Church in Montgomery owns a grade school building in Washington that, according to Montgomery Town Council President Mike Healy, has been vacant for approximately 4 years. (Rhoads & Healy, 2024) The school was constructed in 1961, suggesting it would require extensive renovations to be turned into a childcare center, but the size of the facility makes it a promising option (St. Peter's History, n.d.). As Washington Community Schools move to reorganize their facilities in the coming years, there are indications that there will be spaces available for re-utilization (Washington School Board, 2024). The transition of Washington Community Schools space to host a childcare facility could add a considerable number of childcare seats to the county, which could be especially helpful in the rural area of Daviess County south and southeast of Washington, where there are currently no licensed childcare facilities.

As previously mentioned, large employers within the county, such as NSA Crane, need their workers to have childcare access to ensure that they can properly balance the duties of employment and parenthood, for the benefit of both family and company. Though the full implementation of the CHIPS Act may be in question due to the recent change in presidential administration, employer-subsidized childcare is still a very practical solution and is widely applicable to all employers throughout the county. While programs exist to subsidize the cost of childcare, the potential construction of new childcare facilities near areas of work could be a lucrative incentive for locally based corporations to invest in. This could not only recoup the losses in productivity but also bring in more workers to the area where these corporations are located, as better infrastructure positively influences a family's decision to live in an area.

Another place where infrastructure could develop is the Indiana FSSA micro facility pilot program. This program was created by Indiana State Senate Bill 2 of the 2024 General Assembly Session, existing to expand access to childcare facilities in areas that are considered "childcare deserts" (Indiana General Assembly, 2024). These micro facilities will serve between three and 30 children and are being created to test potential future state-sponsored childcare infrastructure development. If Daviess County continues to show interest in childcare infrastructure development itself, it could be a perfect potential candidate for one of these micro facilities within the county. While the capacity of these facilities is relatively small, they are state-regulated, high-quality facilities that offer incentives for communities and serve as a

foundation for what the future may hold when it comes to the state government working to better childcare within more rural communities.

Advocacy Overview

Key audiences: Childcare providers, local officials, state officials, and parents.

Objective: Increase childcare capacity in Daviess County by 200 spots by the end of the decade, which would decrease current need by 25 percent.

Key messages: Daviess County needs expanded childcare facilities. The current facilities are not sufficient to handle the needs of the county. By increasing the capacity of existing facilities and building new facilities, the county can better support employers, who are losing money due to lost work, and parents, who are having to sacrifice parts of the salaries to either pay for childcare or stay home with their children.

Advocates: The key advocates for this issue are local officials and business leaders. They are best positioned to advocate their challenges to state leaders and corporate partners to gain financial support for their communities.

Resources: Monetary support will be needed in order to upgrade existing facilities and build new facilities that are up to Indiana code. Existing buildings and property can be leveraged for this goal.

Evaluation: Conduct a year-to-year assessment to determine whether childcare needs are decreasing and how the new projects are helping to alleviate the need.



Expand Workforce Solutions

Daviess County is facing a workforce shortage when it comes to early childcare. This problem interferes with the ability for childcare centers to offer high-quality care, and it impacts families in the form of childcare shortages. Childcare workers are an extremely important factor when it comes to combating the childcare crisis. There is reluctance to enter the childcare workforce due to low wages, limited training opportunities, and low retention rates. However, Indiana Enrolled Act 2 (SEA 2) could provide Daviess County with the tools and resources needed to bring people into the childcare workforce.

To be considered a high-quality childcare center, facilities must comply with additional staffing and certifications (Indiana FSSA, 2025). These requirements create significant barriers for childcare providers, especially in places like Daviess County, where facilities might struggle due to staffing shortages and budget constraints (Indiana FSSA, 2025). The issues with the workforce extend beyond Daviess County, with Indiana losing \$3.05 billion annually due to employee absences and turnover due to a lack of childcare access (U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, 2024). Furthermore, childcare facilities must limit enrollment when they have limited staff. Addressing workforce shortages is essential to creating a more accessible and reliable childcare system that would benefit this community greatly.

SB 2 provides multiple avenues for local officials to address many of the difficulties surrounding the childcare workforce. According to Indiana Senate Republicans, SB 2 would “allow children of childcare workers to qualify for assistance from On My Way Pre-K and the Childcare Development Fund” (Indiana Senate Republicans, 2024). One measurable goal is for Daviess County would be increasing the number of staff that benefit from the SB 2 subsidies by 20 percent in the next year and a half to increase retention. If workers are getting reduced or free childcare for their own children, they are more likely to continue working. Daviess County should aim to hire 30 percent more 18-20 year olds in the next year by using SB 2’s lowered age requirements, partnering with Vincennes University, and leveraging the career preparation programs at Washington Community Schools. This would provide the county with an ample number of qualified workers. The evaluation of SB 2’s implementation can be tracked by the amount of subsidies used through the Family and Social Services Administration (FSSA).

Childcare is a demanding job and the pay often does not reflect the effort required. A recent study found that 53 percent of childcare workers in Indiana rely on public assistance due to inadequate compensation (Early Learning Indiana, 2024). This reveals how the job’s financial instability can mean lower retention rates at childcare facilities. According to CareerExplorer, childcare workers in Indiana earn, on average, around \$11 an hour, which translates to an average annual salary of about \$23,000. To attract and retain skilled professionals, wages must increase. Better pay would make the field more competitive and help incentivize highly qualified childcare workers, ultimately improving the quality of care available to families.

With the childcare workforce being such an involved issue, there are many practical solutions to the problem. One that has already had some success in Daviess County is Washington Community’s implementation of a College and Career Development Program. This program has many career clusters that are intended to better prepare students for college and the workforce. One of these clusters is focused on early childhood education. Washington Community Schools has a dual-credit program with Vincennes University that gives students the opportunity to complete their major and become a teacher in three years rather than the typical four. With this program, not only are students better equipped and familiar with the responsibilities that come with childhood education, but Washington Community Schools is also helping to produce more education workers. They also hope to institute an early childhood education path in the program in the next year. Although the program was only put into practice three years ago, Washington Community Schools reports rising numbers in the participation of their education program since its implementation (Peterson, 2025).



Indiana's upcoming diploma changes will likely result in many high schools across the state following in Washington Community School's footsteps with similar trade-focused programs. Different schools have vastly different resources, so these initiatives are not a "one type fits all" scenario. For example, Lawrence North and Lawrence Central in Indianapolis, the two high schools in Lawrence Township, both utilize one facility that focuses specifically on trade programs. McKenzie Center for Innovation and Technology offers classes in cosmetology, auto mechanics, biomedical engineering, news media, and more (McKenzie Center for Innovation and Technology, 2024). Similarly, Carmel High School has a work-based learning program that pairs students with local businesses to get hands-on experience. This program has 27 career pathways including both education and early childhood education careers (Carmel Clay Schools, 2024).

As more high schools across the state implement similar programs, especially programs that include education and early education, more people will be prepared to enter the workforce and early childhood education field. If high school students across the state had opportunities to help at childcare centers, after school programs in elementary schools, and community programs like the YMCA, they could gain experience in childcare, propelling them to earn credentials and degrees more quickly and mitigate the childcare crisis on a more immediate level. In Daviess County, there is also an opportunity for the other high schools in the county managed to implement programs that help garner students' interest in the trades, including an early childhood education pathway.

Indiana's SEA 2 lowered the age of workers who count towards the child-to-worker ratio (Indiana FSSA, 2025). If students worked at childcare facilities, those facilities would be able to increase the number of children they could take. Even if it is just an after-school or before-school job, that could have a significant impact on covering the hours most needed by parents. Programs like this would help all those involved: students gain a job and experience, children receive the care they need, and parents can work the hours they need without worry about access to childcare.

Advocacy Overview

Key audiences: Local officials, childcare providers, high school students and parents, and education partners.

Objectives: Increase the number of staff that receiving SEA 2 subsidies by 20 percent in the next 18 months to increase retention. Aim to hire 30 percent more 16-20 year olds in the next year by using the SEA 2 lowered age restrictions, partnering with Vincennes University and local schools.

Key messages: Childcare workers are key to resolving the childcare crisis. Through SEA 2, the state has increased subsidies to support childcare workers in receiving care for their own children, and more students are now able to support our community's childcare needs. Early childhood education is an in-demand field, and partnerships with local schools, universities, and childcare organizations can help our next generation thrive.

Advocates: Local school officials and childcare providers who have adopted benefits from SEA 2 can describe the opportunities available to local students and their families and current and prospective childcare workers.

Resources: Time to communicate and recruit students as well as staff to support administrative processes for hiring, supervising, and submitting required documentation will be needed.

Evaluation: The evaluation of the SEA 2 benefits adoption can be tracked by the amount of subsidies used through the Family and Social Services Administration (FSSA). Childcare worker recruitment numbers and retention can be calculated on a quarterly basis with participating childcare organizations.

Revamp Quality Standards

The issue of childcare in Indiana, specifically Daviess County, should not be an argument of quantity over quality but should embrace the idea of providing both quality and quantity. Currently, in the state, the Paths to QUALITY program is one of the few avenues for childcare facilities to receive incentives for improving the quality of their care by adding stipends and cash rewards for every new level of quality reached. The program has four levels of quality, 1 being the lowest and 4 being the highest, with a set of standards and requirements needed to reach each level (FSSA, 2025). Only 52 percent of childcare facilities in Indiana have reached level 3 or 4 (ELA report, 2024). This can be tied to various factors including the cost of reaching levels 3 or 4 outweighing the benefit provided by the Paths program. For childcare centers, the incentive for reaching level 3 is a \$1,000 non-cash reward, which comes in the form of a gift card used for supplies, while reaching level 4 is a \$1,500 cash reward plus \$1,000 annually if the level is retained.

With no requirement for centers to follow the Paths program and a lack of incentive, the best plan moving forward would be to revamp the program with greater incentives. If opting into the Paths program were mandatory for facilities receiving state funding and were observed quarterly throughout the year to check quality level and progress towards improvement, quality and confidence would improve. This plan would make parents more confident in sending their children to childcare centers in the county as well as incentivize childcare providers to maintain higher quality for better pay and funding to their center.

This plan would require additional funding to offset the incentives in the program and observation of the centers, we believe that lawmakers could be persuaded due to the return on investment. By having higher quality centers, workers will have more upward mobility by obtaining higher paying jobs and positions in other educational fields, children will have more opportunities to develop social and educational skills that will help them in higher education, and parents will have more confidence in the childcare system.

The two solutions highlighted would expand tuition incentives to draw and keep qualified childcare providers and rework the Paths to QUALITY program to require participation and link increased funding to better results and accountability. More families will have access to early

childhood education that is affordable, dependable, and enriching if these reforms are implemented with clear steps, such as legislative advocacy, strategic funding, and outreach. Indiana can guarantee better futures for kids and more resilient communities throughout the state by funding the individuals and initiatives that create this system.

Advocacy Overview

Key audiences: State officials, Family and Social Services Administration

Objectives: Revamp the Paths to QUALITY program to encourage an increase in higher-quality childcare and an increase in trust from parents.

Key messages: Improving Paths to QUALITY requirements and incentives would yield a substantial return on investment in quality childcare. It would create upward mobility opportunities for workers in quality positions and students in quality care.

Advocates: Childcare professionals, local officials, statewide leaders who support improvements to the Paths to Quality program would all serve as effective advocates for this initiative.

Resources: Initially, this plan would require time to meet with Indiana's legislative and executive officials who impact the Paths to QUALITY program and to support policy updates. The state would need to increase the budget to the Paths to QUALITY program to support adoption, incentives, and evaluation.

Evaluation: The success of advocacy around this issue would be measured in positive changes to the Paths to QUALITY program in the form of structural expansion, greater adoption, greater numbers of providers moving up in quality levels, and more robust incentives. To show the return on investment, there would need to be a long-term study over a 5-10-year period showing the academic success of the children who came from quality centers as well as employment retention trends.

Implement Universal Pre-K

Universal Pre-K is a possible solution to resolving the childcare crisis in Daviess County. The state of Indiana currently administers the On My Way Pre-K program, which offers vouchers to low-income families for their 4-year-olds to attend any approved preschool (FSSA, 2025). Purdue's longitudinal study on the program's effectiveness found that children who participated in On My Way Pre-K performed better in school readiness skills, those of which include identifying shapes, colors, and numbers, as well as language and literacy skills. They also had higher ILEARN English/Language Arts test results. Parents have also reported feeling satisfied and more self-sufficient with their children in On My Way Pre-K (Finders, 2021). Overall, the program "is working as intended by providing a more enriching learning experience than low-income children may otherwise have access to," setting them up for more successful futures (Finders, 2021).

The benefits of this program show that requiring affordable, quality preschool programs all over the state of Indiana as a result of universal preschool implementation would benefit children by preparing them for the rest of their schooling. However, there are some potential drawbacks. According to "Exploring the Potential Pros and Cons of Universal Pre-K," some drawbacks to implementing universal preschool include securing sufficient funding. The U.S. spends much less per child on early childhood education programs than other countries. Universal Pre-K could apply more pressure on teachers to create high-quality learning environments and make them affordable, though they are already underpaid. Universal Pre-K also can also pose risks to traditional home childcare providers, due to shifts in the market and workforce with the introduction of additional pre-K offerings (Brooks, 2020).

Universal Pre-K would provide more children with access to high-quality education, as they would all be getting a chance to attend preschool without family finances getting in the way. Preschool regulations could be standardized across the country and provide all children with better quality education. Classrooms could become more diverse due to a wider accessibility range for all families. Parents could become more involved by seeing preschool as an educational preparation for the rest of their children's schooling years (Brooks, 2020).

The benefits largely outweigh the drawbacks, it would

help to provide more accessible, quality education as a form of childcare, especially in Daviess County and Indiana overall. Parents would feel more comfortable working more while their children are being taken care of in an accredited, licensed, quality, and safe facility. Children would develop important social and academic skills, further preparing them for kindergarten and the rest of their education, setting them up for success in their future careers and relationships.

Two school systems in Washington County currently offer On My Way Pre-K programming: Washington Community Schools and Washington Catholic Schools (Peterson, 2025). Two other systems in the county, North Daviess Community Schools and Barr-Reeve Community Schools, could add On My Way Pre-K programs, making it universally available in Daviess County. Daviess County residents also have the opportunity to advocate for statewide universal Pre-K and support Indiana joining the other 44 states in the U.S. already offering that program.

Advocacy Overview

Key audiences: Families and school board members, as well as state officials.

Objectives: Expand Daviess County On My Way Pre-K options and advocate for universal pre-K funding for Indiana to support the programs, employees, and an increase in affordable and accessible preschool programs for children.

Key messages: On My Way Pre-K successfully prepares preschoolers for kindergarten and their entire education. Indiana is one of only six states that does not offer universal pre-k programming.

Advocates: Local officials and school administrators, family participants, and FSSA.

Resources: Expanding pre-K in Daviess County would require increases in school budgets and may need other local revenue support. Statewide, universal pre-k would require state budget investments and allocations.

Evaluation: Success would be measured in number of new school systems adopting On My Way Pre-K in Daviess County, as well as statewide in support of universal pre-K.

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