



2026 VOTER GUIDE

INTRODUCTION

The 2026 elections are a critical opportunity for voters to elect leaders at every level of government, including members of the U.S. House and Senate, governors, and state and local officials, who understand that child care is a necessity.

Right now, child care costs for families continue to climb. Providers are working to remain open and pay teachers a fair wage. The workforce shortage has deepened. And federal and state policy debates have put core child care programs on uncertain footing.

This is the moment for advocates, providers, and parents to make their voices heard. Use this election cycle to send a clear message to every candidate: we need leaders who are child care strong. Demand leaders who will champion families and providers, fight for sustained public investment, and build a child care system where every family can access affordable, high-quality care.

To help you engage effectively, this guide includes:

1. How to Learn More About Candidates & Ways to Engage
2. Questions to Ask Candidates

Let's get to work.



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HOW TO LEARN MORE ABOUT CANDIDATES & WAYS TO ENGAGE

Before you engage a candidate, do your homework.

Here's how:

- Review candidate's campaign website. Candidates post policy platforms, issue statements, and event schedules. Look for any mention of early childhood education, child care, or family economic security.
- Follow candidate's social media accounts. Look at what issues they're amplifying, which organizations they're aligned with, and how they're talking (or not talking) about families and working parents.
- Check candidate's voting record or prior public service record. For incumbents or candidates who have held office before, their votes and budget decisions speak louder than campaign promises.
- Read local news. Community newspapers, blogs, and neighborhood groups are often the best source for local and state candidate coverage, profiles, and upcoming forums.
- Attend candidate events. Town halls, forums, meet-and-greets, and campaign rallies are all opportunities to ask questions directly and on the record.
- Engage online. Candidates and their teams monitor social media. Tagging them in child care content, asking questions in comments, or sharing your own story as a provider or parent can generate real responses.



QUESTIONS TO ASK CANDIDATES

The following questions are designed to help you assess candidates' commitment to child care and make informed decisions at the ballot box. Use them at in-person events, virtual forums, and on social media. They are a starting point: adapt them to reflect what's most urgent in your state or community.

Question: What will you do to ensure stable, long-term public investment in child care?

Background: Child care is vital infrastructure. What the child care system needs now is robust, sustained investment from the federal government including full funding of the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) to ensure families can access affordable care and providers can afford to stay open. Additionally, states play a critical role in shaping the policies that influence child care access, affordability, quality, and long-term stability.

Question: Child care is unaffordable for many families. What specific policies will you support to lower costs for parents without cutting quality or provider pay?

Background: In most states, the cost of center-based infant care exceeds the cost of in-state college tuition. Child Care Aware® of America believes policymakers should prioritize long-term funding strategies that strengthen the child care system, including Congress fully funding CCDF to reach all eligible families, ensure child care is genuinely affordable, and resource the full cost of high-quality care, including fair compensation for the workforce.

Question: A strong workforce depends on reliable child care but that care has to actually fit how people work and where they live. What will you do to expand access to quality child care for all families, including those that are shift workers and live in rural areas?

Background: A sustainable child care system needs to be accessible and affordable for all families, and for many families, a reliable child care system allows them to live and work more confidently. But not every family needs the same type of child care. Many families in rural communities and those that work nights, weekends, and irregular shifts often struggle to access care that fits their lives. A sustainable child care system needs to work for all types of families. Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) agencies are a critical part of child care infrastructure, connecting families to available options and supporting providers across all settings. Robust, dedicated funding for CCR&R agencies ensures that workers in every corner of the state, regardless of the type of care needed, have support finding and accessing the care they need to stay in the workforce.

QUESTIONS TO ASK CANDIDATES - CONTINUED

Question: What will you do to ensure early childhood educators are paid fairly and can stay in the profession?

Background: Too often early childhood educators don't receive the wages they deserve despite the complexity and importance of their work. Because chronically low pay makes it difficult for educators to remain in the field, turnover rates are high in the early child care sector. High turnover rates destabilize programs and working parents' schedules. Raising compensation, providing benefits, and creating clear pathways for professional development all strengthen the child care workforce. Investing in educators is a critical component of ensuring we are child care strong.

Question: Employers across industries struggle to recruit and retain workers because their employees can't find reliable child care. What role do you see government playing in treating child care as the economic infrastructure it is?

Background: When families can't access the care they need, it doesn't just impact children. It affects employers, local economies, and workforce participation rates. States and communities that invest in child care infrastructure see returns in workforce stability, reduced absenteeism, and economic growth. Building a strong child care system requires a vision for child care as a public investment with broad economic returns, not just a private expense for individual families to manage on their own.



QUESTIONS TO ASK CANDIDATES - CONTINUED

Question: There has been a lot of conversation recently about program integrity in child care and how to address it, including proposals that would freeze or block funding for states, families, and providers. What do you see as the priority in this conversation, and what steps will you take to address it?

Background: Child Care Aware® of America centers the goal of strong program integrity in child care and takes seriously the importance of addressing real fraud where it exists. At the same time, any approach to program integrity should be targeted and accurate, not broad strokes that put access at risk for families and providers who have done nothing wrong.

The current system already includes meaningful oversight at both the federal and state level. States verify family eligibility, monitor attendance, track improper payments, and conduct regular and unannounced inspections of providers. Families, in turn, navigate substantial paperwork and documentation requirements to access and maintain their benefits.

Recent federal actions have included temporary holds on states' ability to draw down their CCDF funds, and proposed legislation that would condition states' continued access to funding on stricter fraud-related determinations. It's important to engage with this issue accurately: conflating improper payments (which often stem from administrative or documentation errors) with deliberate fraud can lead to policies that are mismatched to the actual problem and that fall hardest on the families and providers who depend on stable access to care.

CCAOA supports targeted program integrity measures that build on what states already do well, while rejecting approaches that block access to care, conflate improper payments with fraud, or impose burdens that ultimately make it harder for working families to get the care they need.



QUESTIONS TO ASK CANDIDATES - CONTINUED

Question: Child care doesn't exist in a vacuum. What is your approach to programs and services that allow families to provide healthcare, groceries and other staples for their children?

Background: Child care policy cannot exist in isolation. It must consider the entire community and the role child care plays within it. This requires pairing child care investments with complimentary services including:

- The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP);
- Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF);
- Medicaid and Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) coverage;
- Early Head Start/Head Start (EHS/HS);
- Paid Leave;
- Home Visiting (MIECHV), and more.

Question: What do you believe the child care system should look like in five years and what are you willing to do to get us there?

Background: We are at a defining moment. The question is not whether the child care system needs to change: it does. CCAoA envisions a future where early childhood educators are valued and compensated as the professionals they are, where every family has access to affordable, high-quality care, and where child care is treated as the public good it has always been.

These questions are a starting point. We encourage you to develop your own questions tailored to the child care landscape in your state or community.

**For more information, contact us at
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