



Economy hits Georgia child care hard; 600 centers forced to shut

By [Gracie Bonds Staples](#)
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For nearly a decade, after the economy forced her out of a corporate job, Carol Ann George-Roach took care of other people's children.

She took pride in shaping young minds and sending them off to kindergarten prepared to learn. But not even child care, George-Roach found, was exempt from Georgia's fragile economy.

As the recession deepened and parents' work hours were cut or they lost their jobs, the Decatur mother tried to adapt, cutting her fees and, in a few cases, providing free care.

"This would have been my 10th year," said George-Roach, 47, who was forced to shut down in May. "I held out for as long as possible but it wasn't working out for me."

It hasn't worked for a lot of Georgia child-care providers. Last year, the state lost 600 child-care centers and more than 1,800 family day-care homes such as George-Roach's, according to a new study by Quality Care for Children, a non-profit that works to improve quality and access to child care.

That was a 19-percent drop in child-care centers from 2008, said Pam Tatum, Quality Care for Children CEO. Family home-care facilities dropped 34 percent. It's a trickle-down effect: Parents lose jobs, day-care bills are placed at the bottom of the stack and the children are caught in the middle.

In Fulton County last year, four-child care centers and 52 family child-care homes closed.

"Vacancies have increased dramatically because parents can no longer afford child care," Tatum said. "Our fear is that they may be putting their children in situations that may not be safe and may not help their children's learning, and therefore may enter kindergarten unprepared."

By mid-December 2009, only 26,843 children out of 470,000 in Georgia child care could be served or received high-quality, nationally accredited child care in the state, Tatum said. The number of accredited centers has gone down more than 27 percent since 2007.

Nationally accredited centers have low teacher-student ratios, higher teacher qualifications and more explicit guidelines with regard to creating an environment that supports children's cognitive, social-emotional and physical development.

In addition to the programs that closed, Tatum said a survey of existing providers revealed that one of five centers and more than a quarter of family child-care providers expressed concern about having to close.

Child-care programs operate with small profit margins and depend on being full.

"We have centers that are 25- to 50-percent full," Tatum said. "So you can imagine how hard it is to keep afloat."

Linda Gibbs, owner of Just Kids Learning Centers, said enrollment at her four centers is down nearly 15 percent. "This is a bad time," Gibbs said. "We have fewer children but our bills haven't changed."

Lisa Priest, director of the Just Kids' Dallas center, was forced to lower weekly fees by \$25 last year for summer camp but had to increase her rates this summer. She gets new children each week, but simultaneously loses others.

"Most of our parents are teachers or work for the county," Priest said. "They just don't have the money, especially with them having to take furlough days, because they have to pay whether their kids are here or not."

From a business perspective, Tatum said it's hard to see how some centers can stay open.

"We encounter many child-care programs that are providing care for free," she said. "They are making all kinds of sacrifices to help families. In the long term you want to operate as a business but they are acting as a safety net for families."

Advocates fear in many cases that children are ending up in the wrong hands, handed over to an older sibling who typically should be in a summer program instead of caring for a brother or sister.

Although new licensing fees imposed on centers by the state Legislature are not particularly robust or out of the ordinary, this represents one more financial hit to already struggling centers.

Under the new legislation, child-care learning centers, group day-care homes and family day-care homes each must pay annual licensing fees by Dec. 31. The fees range from \$50 for fewer than 25 children to \$250 for more than 200 children. A \$250 late fee is imposed for those who fail to pay the annual cost within 30 days of the due date.

The state carries an increased burden because it has a higher rate of single moms who need subsidized care, making it imperative that child care be kept affordable, said Carolyn Salvador, Georgia Child Care Association executive director.

"Then you have the other underlying current that we have to increase quality, but quality costs money," Salvador said. "We would have loved to have seen money from the licensing fees go back to help early care and learning, but instead it will go to the general state budget."

State Rep. Kathy Ashe, (D-Atlanta), described the heavy loss of child-care centers and the corresponding lack of state funding as horrifying.

"If that many facilities have gone out of business, jobs are lost [and] income is lost, in addition to the inconvenience to the families that they serve," Ashe said. "So then the question is, where are these kids and where are their families, and where are the people who made a living by providing child care?"

George-Roach, the former child-care provider, has enrolled in school to earn a second degree in human services. She hopes to eventually return to work with children again, preferably troubled teens.

Tatum of Quality Care for Children said George-Roach is the kind of provider her agency hates to see leave the

industry.

"When the economy improves we won't have the supply to meet the return demand and its not easy to respond to increased demand quickly," Tatum said. "We've increased the standard which is good for quality but I don't think we'll be able to rely on the growth in family child-care homes to meet the immediate demand that will come.

"So the fear is what will parents do with their children, will they be safe and will they be learning?"

For free child-care referrals, parents can call 877-AIGAKIDS or log onto www.qualitycareforchildren.org

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