

avenir analysis

Childcare: A Compass for Swiss Policymakers

New analysis on early childhood care in cantons and municipalities

The Swiss federal government is seeking a stronger role in childcare policy. A new analysis by Avenir Suisse suggests, however, that the real need for action lies with cantons and municipalities. There, financial support is often poorly targeted and regulation overly burdensome. The analysis outlines how local governments can improve the framework for early childhood care through their own initiatives.

Childcare policy in Switzerland pursues ambitious goals: encouraging female labor force participation and fostering early childhood development. But does achieving those objectives require greater involvement by the federal government? A new analysis by Avenir Suisse argues that responsibility should rest primarily with cantons and municipalities, which are better positioned to respond to the needs of families.

Blurred responsibilities obscure accountability

In their analysis, Patricia Schafer and Agustina Rodriguez Widmer examine how preschools are organized across Switzerland. Their diagnosis rests on three points:

- **Unclear allocation of responsibility:** In most cantons, early childhood care is a shared task between municipalities and cantonal authorities. A permanent federal role would further blur lines of accountability.
- **Excessive regulation:** A new index developed by Avenir Suisse shows that childcare structures are subject to particularly heavy regulation in the French-speaking regions, ranging from space requirements to staff regulation.
- **Inefficient support:** Aid is often provided through initial financing, deficit guarantees or direct subsidies to individual childcare structures. More targeted tools, such as childcare vouchers for families, are by far less common.

Strengthening proximity, diversity and precision

Based on this diagnosis, the authors set out three policy recommendations:

- **Anchor responsibility at the municipal level:** Municipalities are most familiar with their populations and local needs. Uniform, top-down regulations rarely reflect local realities.
- **Limit regulation to what truly matters:** Detailed requirements, such as specifications for flooring, increase costs and reduce the diversity of available childcare options.

- **Support families rather than institutions:** Providing childcare vouchers directly to families, instead of subsidizing providers, expands parental choice. Such instruments are particularly effective for children from disadvantaged households.

Together, these reforms would better align childcare provision with local demand, target public funds more effectively, and foster fair competition among providers. Patricia Schafer, author of the study, highlights: «If our proposals are implemented, Switzerland would have a childcare policy that uses public funds purposefully and delivers results where they are needed most: close to families.»

avenir analysis : «Der Kita-Kompass für die Schweizer Politik» (Childcare: A Compass for Swiss Policymakers), Patricia Schafer and Agustina Rodriguez Widmer, 20 pages, available online from Thursday, March 26, 2026 in German and French at www.avenir-suisse.ch/en/.

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