SOUTHERN EDUCATION FOUNDATION

Examining Child Care in the Rural South: Perspectives for Policy and Practice

A research report from the Southern Education Foundation

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About the Southern Education Foundation

The Southern Education Foundation is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization supported by partners and donors committed to advancing equitable education policies and practices for low-income students and students of color in the Southern states. We develop and disseminate research-based solutions for policymakers, and we grow the capacity of education leaders and influencers to create systemic change.

We believe education equity is essential to achieve quality and fairness in the public education system. We envision a world in which every student, regardless of background, enjoys an education that propels them toward the opportunity-rich life they deserve.

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The Southern Early Childhood Education Justice (SECEJ) Network unites more than 30 state policy organizations and advocates to focus on improving and expanding early learning opportunities for young children across the South. The SECEJ network advocates for systemic and transformative early childhood policy improvements in the South, focusing especially on historically underserved children of color and those in low-income families.

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Purpose

This empirical study provides an in-depth examination of child care access and challenges across 12 rural communities in three Southern states, exploring how participants experience, navigate, and understand their child care systems. By centering the voices of families, child care directors, early educators, and business and state leaders, the study will illuminate both the day-to-day realities of securing care and the broader, systemic challenges affecting the child care sector.

Focus areas of this investigation include the structural and practical barriers that limit access to child care; how families in these communities approach and make decisions about child care arrangements; how stakeholders define and assess "quality" within a rural context; the extent to which cost influences initial access and the ability to sustain enrollment over time; and the distinctive strengths and assets of rural child care systems. By pairing an analysis of persistent challenges with a careful exploration of community strengths, the research aims to generate actionable recommendations that reflect both the constraints and the opportunities present in rural child care. These grounded, community-based insights will help inform more strategic, responsive, and equitable policymaking at the state and federal levels.

Introduction

Access to high-quality child care[1] in rural areas is shaped by obstacles that differ from those in more densely populated communities,[2] often exacerbated by infrastructure and geographic challenges. Nationally focused studies have demonstrated well-established links between child care access and positive developmental outcomes, parents' ability to join and remain in the workforce, and thriving local economies. Rural areas have particularly high child care gaps, defined as "the number of children who potentially need care but whose families cannot reasonably access formal care."[3] Among the 17 Southern states, as defined by the Southern Education Foundation, 13 have higher child care gaps in their rural areas than in their urban areas. In fact, some Southern states have gaps in rural areas that exceed 50%.[4] States with the largest rural child care gaps bear higher economic consequences due to lost productivity and diminished workforce participation.[5] Beyond these gaps, relatively little is understood about how rural families, providers, and community members perceive and experience child care ecosystems within their communities. These perspectives are of particular relevance to state and federal decisionmakers considering how to address ongoing policy challenges and to the Southern region of the U.S., where a significant portion of young children live in rural areas — including many experiencing poverty.

1 Throughout this report, "child care" and "early childhood programs" are often used interchangeably and refer to care or education services provided in a group setting in centers, family child care homes, local school systems (e.g., publicly funded pre-K), and Head Start programs. Similarly, "educators" and "teachers" are used interchangeably to describe those with direct caregiving and teaching responsibilities in early learning settings.

2 Anderson, S., & Mikesell, M. (2019). Child care type, access, and quality in rural areas of the United States: A review. *Early Child Development and Care, 189*(11), 1812–1826. https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2017.1412959

3 Child Trust (n.d.). Definitions/Notes. *https://childcaregap.org/Definitions.pdf*

4 Ibid.

5 Wolters, B., Bagley, A., Jerrett, D., & Smith, L. (2021). *The economic impact of America's child care gap*. Bipartisan Policy Center. https://bipartisanpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/BPC-Economic-Impact-Report_R01-1.pdf

The existing child care literature often lacks a focus on rural communities. Furthermore, early childhood topics addressed in policy-focused reports are often underrepresented in empirical analyses.[6] Such literature gaps may underestimate attempts to convey the magnitude of need in rural communities, perpetuating cycles of underfunding and under-resourcing.[7]

Recent publications from the Bipartisan Policy Center (BPC) have shed some light on the rural child care landscape, including its analysis of gaps in child care supply,[8] *Rural Child Care Policy Framework*,[9] and survey of rural parents' child care needs.[10] Several themes that are consistent across the center's research include:

- *Multiple barriers create child care gaps that tend to be larger in rural areas than in urban areas.*[11]
- Costs tend to influence rural families' child care decision-making more than quality;[12] and
- *Availability and awareness of child care supports shape child care affordability.*[13]

Though BPC's *Child Care in Rural America* studies were pivotal, pandemic-related constraints prevented data collection in all 50 states, including some states in the South, which differs from other rural regions across the U.S. in its distinctive demographic and economic patterns. Paschall et al. suggest that state- and county-level data may provide the most helpful insights on child care supply and demand within and across rural areas.[14] Accordingly, the goal of the present study is to examine child care in the rural South to better understand how families, educators, and program leaders perceive and experience access, quality, and affordability in their communities.

6 Duer, J. K., & Jenkins, J. (2023). Paying for preschool: who blends funding in early childhood education? *Educational Policy (Los Altos, Calif.)*, *37*(7), 1857–1885. https://doi.org/10.1177/08959048221103804

7 Maher, E. J., Frestedt, B., & Grace, C. (2008). Differences in Child Care Quality in Rural and Nonrural Areas. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, *23*(4), 1–13. http://www.jrre.psu.edu/articles/23-4

8 Smith, L. K., Bagley, A., & Wolters, B. (2021). *Child care in 35 states: What we know and don't know*. Bipartisan Policy Center. https://bipartisanpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/BPC_Working-Family-Solutions_V7.pdf

9 Bipartisan Policy Center. (2023). *Rural child care policy framework*. Retrieved from June 2, 2024, from https://bipartisanpolicy.org/report/rural-child-care-policy-framework/

10 Bipartisan Policy Center, & Morning Consult. (2021). *Understanding rural parents child care needs*. [PowerPoint slides]. https://bipartisanpolicy.org/download/?file=/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/BPC-Rural-Parents-Analysis-9.14-Additional-Analysis-min.pdf

11 Henning-Smith, C., & Kozhimannil, K. B. (2016). Availability of child care in rural communities: Implications for workforce recruitment and retention. *Journal of Community Health*, *41*(3), 488–493. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10900-015-0120-3; Paschall, K., Halle, T., & Maxwell, K. (2020). *Early care and education in rural communities*. OPRE Report #2020-62. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED606705

12 Bipartisan Policy Center, & Morning Consult. (2021). *Understanding rural parents child care needs*. [PowerPoint slides]. https://bipartisanpolicy.org/download/?file=/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/BPC-Rural-Parents-Analysis-9.14-Additional-Analysis-min.pdf; Bipartisan Policy Center. (2023). *Rural child care policy framework*. Retrieved from June 2, 2024, from https://bipartisanpolicy.org/report/rural-child-care-policy-framework/

13 Child Care Aware of America. (2019). *The US and the high price of child care: An examination of a broken system*. https://info.childcareaware.org/hubfs/2019%20Price%20of%20Care%20State%20Sheets/Final-TheUSandtheHighPriceofChildCare-AnExaminationofaBrokenSystem.pdf

14 Paschall, K., Halle, T., & Maxwell, K. (2020). *Early care and education in rural communities*. OPRE Report #2020-62. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED606705

Rural Child Care Access

Limited Availability for Younger Children

Care for infants and toddlers is often more expensive and difficult for families to secure than care for older children, a challenge exacerbated in rural communities facing economic hardship and other barriers to access. In fact, child care providers in rural communities command a smaller share of the market[15] and may find it less financially advantageous to care for younger children because of the licensing requirements for smaller teacher-to-child ratios and, by extension, the need for more staff.

Distance and Infrastructure

Working parents often need to drive farther distances to access child care in rural vs. nonrural communities, as they may live in what's known as a "child care desert," where there are few to no child care programs.[16] One reason may be a lack of infrastructure required to sustain early childhood programs.[17] Some rural communities may face scarcity of public infrastructure investments due to geographic isolation, high building costs, and distressed local tax revenues.[18] Policymakers have taken note: The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural Development (USDA-RD) mission area and the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) published a joint resource guide in 2021 to help those in rural and Tribal communities increase child care access, quality, and affordability through direct loans, loan guarantees, and grants to develop or improve essential public services and facilities.[19] Relatedly, the American Farm Bureau Federation (2024) expressed its support for increased access to child care in rural communities.

Stability of the Child Care Workforce

As a group, the child care workforce earns less than 98 percent of the U.S. working population.[20] For many child care business owners, managing operating costs, tuition, subsidies, and payroll results in meager profits or deficits that threaten their ability to keep the doors open.[21] In addition, child care providers in rural communities may experience greater challenges securing regular teaching staff as a result of geographic isolation and fewer training opportunities. Members of the child care workforce may also experience high levels of stress, which can have spill-over effects on children's outcomes.[22]

Affordability and Financing

According to the Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) affordability standard, child care should cost no more than 7 percent of a family's income. Rural families spend more on child care than their counterparts in metropolitan areas, representing an average of 12.2% of their total income.[23] Child age, type of care, family income, eligibility for subsidies, and immigration status are just a few determinants of child care affordability for families. For example, data from the *Cost of Child Care* database[24] indicates that infant care is unaffordable

15 Paschall, K., Halle, T., & Maxwell, K. (2020). *Early care and education in rural communities*. OPRE Report #2020-62. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED606705

16 Prusinski, E., Mahler, P. P., Collins, M., & Couch, H. (2023). Strengthening early childhood education and care in a "childcare desert." *Early Childhood Education Journal, 51*(7), 1317–1333. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-022-01375-6

17 Bipartisan Policy Center, & Morning Consult. (2021). *Understanding rural parents child care needs*. [PowerPoint slides]. https://bipartisanpolicy.org/download/?file=/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/BPC-Rural-Parents-Analysis-9.14-Additional-Analysis-min.pdf; Smith, L. K., Bagley, A., & Wolters, B. (2021). *Child care in 35 states: What we know and don't know*. Bipartisan Policy Center. https://bipartisanpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/BPC_Working-Family-Solutions_V7.pdf

18 Coffey, M. (2022, May 17). *Rural communities need federal child care investments*. Center for American Progress. https://www.americanprogress.org/article/rural-communities-need-federal-child-care-investments/

19 U.S. Department of Agriculture, Rural Development, & U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. (2021). Joint resource guide to strengthen and expand child care facilities in rural communities. RD Report #20003. https://www.rd.usda.gov/sites/default/files/rd_hhs-acf_jointchildcareresourceguide.pdf

20 U.S. Department of the Treasury. (2021). *The economics of child care supply in the United States*. https://home.treasury.gov/system/files/136/The-Economics-of-Childcare-Supply-09-14-final.pdf

21 Maher, E. J., Frestedt, B., & Grace, C. (2008). Differences in Child Care Quality in Rural and Nonrural Areas. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, *23*(4), 1–13. http://www.jrre.psu.edu/articles/23-4; U.S. Department of the Treasury. (2021). *The economics of child care supply in the United States*. https://home.treasury.gov/system/files/136/The-Economics-of-Childcare-Supply-09-14-final.pdf

22 Miller, E. B., Ku, S., & Blair, C. B. (2023). Association between teacher depressive symptoms and rural children's cognitive outcomes: Indirect relations with early care and education quality. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, *51*(6).1-12. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-023-01561-0

23 Coffey, M. (2022, May 17). *Rural communities need federal child care investments*. Center for American Progress.

24 Economic Policy Institute (2025). *Child care costs in the United States:* https://www.epi.org/child-care-costs-in-the-united-states/

for most families in the United States. Intersections of race and poverty have also been shown to play a role in early learning access.[25] For example, states with greater racial and ethnic diversity in rural areas provide less access to public preschool for children living in such communities.[26]

Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) subsidies help offset the cost of child care for some eligible families in a variety of settings across the country, including in the rural South. Yet, current funding levels allow only a fraction of potentially income-eligible children to access such subsidies. Furthermore, states receive varying grant amounts from the federal government and set their own eligibility and reimbursement criteria, which can lead to inconsistencies within and across states. As Prusinski et al. assert, subsidy funds often do not reach the children and families they are designed to help.[27] For example, some families' immigration status can present a myriad of challenges in accessing child care subsidies even when eligible for such support, while others may struggle with complex eligibility requirements related to income, hours working, or attending school.

Head Start

Federally funded and locally implemented Head Start programs play a critical role in the provision of comprehensive services to isolated and low-resource families. In some rural areas, Head Start programs are the only formal provider of child care services. Head Start (for children ages 3 to 5) and Early Head Start (for children from birth to age 3) services are generally limited to families whose incomes are at or below the federal poverty level, excluding some children in rural areas who may just barely exceed income eligibility requirements. Given the crucial role Head Start plays in many rural communities, potential reductions in funding would disproportionately affect families in these areas, who often have no alternative providers.[28]

2020 Census Undercounts

In April 2024, the U.S. Census Bureau released information about 2020 Census undercounts of children ages 0 to 4, which were larger than undercounts for any other age group.[29] Census undercounts can short-change rural, remote, and other hard-to-count communities by limiting their access to government funds for health, education, and nutrition programs and other needed services.[30] Although the U.S. Census Bureau proposed improvements to future protocols, census undercounts currently pose barriers for rural families to access needed child care resources.

25 Miller, E. B., Ku, S., & Blair, C. B. (2023). Association between teacher depressive symptoms and rural children's cognitive outcomes: Indirect relations with early care and education quality. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, *51*(6).1-12. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-023-01561-0

26 Showalter, D., Hartman, S.L., Eppley, K., Johnson, J., & Klein, R. (2023). *Why rural matters 2023: Centering equity and opportunity*. National Rural Education Association. Retrieved from https://nrea.net/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/10-26WRMReport2023_DIGITALFINAL.pdf

27 Prusinski, E., Mahler, P. P., Collins, M., & Couch, H. (2023). Strengthening early childhood education and care in a "childcare desert." *Early Childhood Education Journal, 51*(7), 1317–1333. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-022-01375-6

28 First Five Years Fund (2025). *New Resource Outlines Crucial Role of Head Start for Rural Communities and Children with Disabilities.* https://www.ffyf.org/resources/2025/06/new-resource-outlines-crucial-role-of-head-start-for-rural-communities-and-children-with-disabilities/

29 Jensen, E., &, Hayward, G. M. (2024, April 11). *Most counties had an undercount of young children in the 2020 Census*. U.S. Census Bureau. https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2024/04/children-undercount.html

30 Boals Gilbert, B., & Grace, C. (2020). *Growing up rural: Inequity for young children and child care providers*. Mid-Atlantic Equity Consortium. https://maec.org/resource/growing-up-rural; Emig, C. (2020, August 7). *Child Trends opposes decision to end census count prematurely*. Child Trends [Research brief]. https://www.childtrends.org/publications/child-trends-opposes-decision-to-end-census-count-prematurely; Sullivan, T.A. (2020). Who's missing? Undercounting and underreporting. In: *Census 2020*. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-40578-6_3

Rural Child Care Decision Making

Cost is often a driving influence in rural families' child care decisions,[31] although other factors, including setting type (e.g., center-based vs. home-based provider), location, and hours of operation may play a role, as well. For example, families in rural communities may encounter unique employment challenges (e.g., nontraditional work hours, shift work) that determine their selection of child care. These families may have shifted their preferences towards center-based care over family child care homes, potentially due to lower availability of childhood programs in rural areas.[32]

Personal relationships and referrals may also shape families' care decisions in rural areas. The literature reveals a major strength of rural child care in that it is common for families to have deep personal connections with their child care providers, who may maintain intergenerational connections to other families within their community.[33]

Child Care and Early Education Program Types

Although licensing regulations and categories vary by state, the primary types of early childhood programs are described below

- Licensed child care **centers** typically operate in nonresidential facilities where children are often grouped in classrooms by age with a dedicated director and staff members.
- Licensed **family child care homes** provide care for small groups of children of varying ages in a professional caregiver's home for pay. ***Families in rural areas are more likely to use family child care homes as opposed to other program types.***[34]
- Publicly funded **pre-kindergarten programs** serve some 4-year-olds and sometimes 3-year-olds. Depending on the state and funding model, these programs may be provided by a local school system or in mixed-delivery systems that also include private child care providers.
- **Head Start and Early Head Start** are federally funded programs that almost exclusively serve families whose incomes are at or below the poverty line. Head Start serves children ages 3 to 5, while Early Head Start serves pregnant women and children from birth to age 3.
- **Family, friend, and neighbor** (FFN or "kith and kin") care is a type of home-based child care in which a relative, friend, neighbor, babysitter, or nanny provides care with or without pay.

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31 Bipartisan Policy Center, & Morning Consult. (2021). *Understanding rural parents child care needs*. [PowerPoint slides]. https://bipartisanpolicy.org/download/?file=/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/BPC-Rural-Parents-Analysis-9.14-Additional-Analysis-min.pdf; Bipartisan Policy Center. (2023). *Rural child care policy framework*. Retrieved from June 2, 2024, from https://bipartisanpolicy.org/report/rural-child-care-policy-framework/

32 Smith, L. K., Bagley, A., & Wolters, B. (2021). *Child care in 35 states: What we know and don't know*. Bipartisan Policy Center. https://bipartisanpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/BPC_Working-Family-Solutions_V7.pdf

33 Paschall, K., Halle, T., & Maxwell, K. (2020). *Early care and education in rural communities*. OPRE Report #2020-62. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED606705; Prusinski, E., Mahler, P. P., Collins, M., & Couch, H. (2023). Strengthening early childhood education and care in a "childcare desert." *Early Childhood Education Journal, 51*(7), 1317–1333. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-022-01375-6

34 Coffey, M. (2022, May 17). *Rural communities need federal child care investments*. Center for American Progress.

Methods

Participants

All numerical data in this section were gathered from American Community Survey data presented in the Geographic Information System.[35]

Participants were recruited from 12 rural counties (defined as having a population of 30,000 or less) across three member states (Georgia, Mississippi, and Missouri) in the Southern Education Foundation network with aims of capturing a diverse demographic and geographic profile. Counties were assessed for population size (including number of children), geographic location, types of industry, poverty level, and median income. Additionally, each county had at least three regulated child care centers.

Targeted participants included families (parents and guardians of children from birth to age 8), child care providers (center directors and family child care home owners), early childhood teachers, state child care administrators, and local employers. We targeted a broad range of participants to increase the potential for capturing a comprehensive view of the child care ecosystem in each rural community, and to amplify the perspectives of those directly impacted by rural child care policies and practices.

County Characteristics

The four Georgia counties ranged in size from 8,360 to 26,056 residents, with the proportion of children under 18 representing between 15% and 25% of the population. Between 17% and 55% of children in the four counties were living in poverty. The counties differed significantly in their racial and ethnic make-up, with the first relatively evenly split between Black (48%) and White (41%) residents, with a smaller Hispanic (8%) population; the second predominantly White (93%); the third majority Black (71%); and the fourth split among White (56%), Black (29%), and Hispanic (13%).

Mississippi's selected communities varied in size from 12,363 to 28,927 residents, with children under age 18 representing between 18% and 27% of the total population. Between 24% and 45% of children in the four counties were living in poverty. The racial and ethnic composition of the four counties varied widely. The first was majority White (85%), with smaller Black (8%) and Hispanic (3%) populations. The second was majority Black (62%), with a moderately sized White (36%) population. The third was 58% White, 21% Black, 16% American Indian, and 3% multiracial. The fourth was split fairly evenly between White (49%) and Black (44%) and included a modest Hispanic (5%) population.

In Missouri, the population size of the four selected counties ranged from 9,822 to 28,547, with children under 18 representing between 17% and 27% of the total population. Between 13% and 25% of children in these four counties were living in poverty. All counties were majority White (94-98%).

Table 1: County characteristics

	Georgia	Mississippi	Missouri
County size (range)	8,360-26,056	12,363-28,927	9,822-28,547
Proportion of children under 18 (range)	15%-25%	18%-27%	17%-27%
Proportion of children living in poverty	17%-55%	24%-45%	13%-25%
Racial makeup (counties)	Two majority White (93% and 56%) One majority Black (71%) One no majority (48% Black, 41% White, 8% Hispanic)	Two majority White (85% and 58%) One majority Black (62%) One no majority (49% White, 44% Black, 5% Hispanic)	Four majority White (94%-98%)

Procedure

Participants were invited to take part in surveys, semi-structured interviews, and/or focus groups designed to explore their experiences and perceptions of child care in their rural communities, including affordability, availability, quality, and relevant state and federal programs. In particular, directors and early educators were asked about staffing, compensation, structural and process quality, career development, business operations, work-related stress, and their perceptions of families' needs and experiences. Families were specifically asked about care preferences, cost, transportation, and employment, among other applicable topics.

Surveys were distributed electronically or, upon request, in hard copy form.

Surveys, focus groups, and interviews were conducted in late

35 Esri. (2025). ACS Population Status Variables. https://www.arcgis.com/home/item.html?id=0e468b75bca545ee8dc4b039cbb5aff6; Esri. (2025). ACS Poverty Status Variables. https://www.arcgis.com/home/item.html?id=0e468b75bca545ee8dc4b039cbb5aff6

2024 through mid-2025. With permission, all interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed verbatim by the research team.

Table 2. Participants surveyed and interviewed

	Surveys	Focus group and interview participants
Directors	70	41
Early childhood teachers	113	25
Families	272	12
Business leaders	n/a	12
State leaders	n/a	5

Surveys were not provided to business and state leaders.

Transcripts were imported into MAXQDA, a qualitative data analysis software program. Two rounds of coding were conducted for each focus group/interview. First, a grounded theory open coding approach[36] was applied to the data. Examples of codes developed through open coding include "transportation," "subsidy issues," and "under 2s."

Data were then coded again using focused codes, which were informed by the open/initial codes but identified more specific analytical themes. Examples of focused codes included: "attitudes towards poverty," "state level supports," and "strong local communities." These codes were organized into different broad categories and identified themes within each category.

Findings

Primary analysis focused on the survey, focus group, and interview data from three main groups: early childhood program directors, early childhood teachers, and families. Additional analysis of data from business leaders and state and local early learning leaders from the focus groups follows.

Primary data were synthesized across participant groups and organized into four overarching categories: Financial Strain and Systemic Underfunding; Availability of Early Childhood Programs and Related Resources; Program Quality; and Community Supports and Partnerships. In the case of directors and early childhood educators, additional categories emerged: Administrative Burden, and Teacher Emotional Health and Mental Well-Being, respectively. Below we discuss each of the primary groups — program directors, teachers, and families — separately based on these categories.

Early Childhood Program Directors

Across the rural South, directors of early childhood programs discussed a common thread: a deep, enduring love for children and a profound commitment to their communities. Many have spent decades in the field, some nearing retirement, while others found their way into early childhood as a second career. Regardless of their path, directors spoke with passion about the joy and meaning they found in nurturing young lives. As one director shared, "I've always worked with children the majority of my career. It's a great place to see the impact that you have on children's lives … and it's one of the most beautiful, rewarding things you could ever do."

Directors often described working long hours alone, sometimes due to staffing shortages so severe they've had to scale back services or operate solo. One director recounted how she had to reduce her center to after-school care only, unable to sustain full-day programming without additional assistance. Others spoke of physical strain, including health issues exacerbated by the demands of the job, and financial burdens that threatened to close their doors.

Despite these challenges, rural directors remain resilient. They subsidize costs out of their own pockets, offer flexible arrangements to families, and even waive fees for parents in crisis. Their stories reveal a quiet heroism — professionals who persist not for profit but for the children they love and the communities they serve.

Financial Strain and Systemic Underfunding

Directors experience extreme financial challenges affecting their ability to fully and efficiently operate their programs

Many directors provided a one-word answer when asked about the greatest challenge they faced: "finances." Directors consistently described operating under severe financial

36 E.g., Charmaz, K. (2006). Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis. London: Sage Publications.

constraints, with 57% of those surveyed indicating that resources were scarce or stretched. Rising costs for food, supplies, and staffing — combined with unreliable or insufficient government subsidies — have made it increasingly difficult to sustain their programs. Most directors reported using personal funds to keep their centers open, while others had to reduce services or enrollment due to lack of resources. Subsidy programs were frequently cited as a source of frustration due to delayed payments, confusing parent fee structures, and eligibility thresholds that excluded working poor families.

As one director explained, the one thing she really needed was financial support from the state, comparing this to how public schools are financed:

> *"Financing … would make everything so much easier, to teach, to provide, to do everything for the kids. It's all in the finances, because we have none. I think we're completely overlooked. The schools struggle enough, and they're public schools who get financing. I know that we're even on the lower end. We don't get anything."*

Directors serving low-income communities face a persistent tension between rising operational costs and families' limited ability to afford higher tuition and fees

Directors frequently acknowledged the financial challenges their parents faced, and many described attempting to help families meet their needs within a context of community-wide poverty in some rural areas. In particular, directors indicated that parents struggled to afford higher child care fees, limiting their ability to increase rates even as operational costs rise. One director explained the tension between financial necessity and family affordability:

"I was told [by a technical assistance provider] I wasn't even charging my parents enough. And I'm just so afraid that I'm charging too much. But she was like, 'No, ma'am. You're not charging your parents enough.' So maybe I'm my own problem. I don't know. But some people complain about what they're paying."

On the other hand, some directors said they had no choice but to increase rates: "I just went up on my rates because it's killing me. … Groceries, and these children like to eat when they find something that they like. My Lord, have mercy."

Child care licensing requirements can lead to additional financial burdens

Some directors expressed concern that states are providing less support over time and passing expenses they previously covered back to the early childhood programs themselves. These challenges were compounded by increasing demands related to licensure:

"Every time licensure comes, it's something different we gotta do. We gotta do our license every year. We have to pay for that. We have to do our CPR. We have to pay for that. We have to pay for our background checks. We have to pay for everything. They used to pay for our background checks, but not anymore. We have to pay everything out of money we get for the kids."

Directors also discussed their perceptions of unfair standards and inconsistency with licensing. For example, some described having visits from licensure officials in which they received conflicting messages about items like dryers or mats for naptime, costing them valuable time and resources. Directors also expressed frustration with unlicensed care providers in their communities who were perceived as skirting these costly requirements.

Challenges with child care subsidy often undermine access and participation among rural programs

Directors lamented the increasing expense of running an early childhood program, the rising cost of living, parents' inability to afford child care, and what they viewed as a need to expand the child care subsidy program so that more families could benefit. They identified several pain points with child care subsidies, including: slow or delayed reimbursement from the state; complicated paperwork to be completed by parents and program staff; stringent eligibility requirements that prevented families from accessing financial support; and confusion among parents regarding payment amounts, including for children in foster care, which sometimes led to strain between directors and parents:

"It is very confusing paperwork, like with subsidy, their parent fee. [The family is] like, 'Well, how much do I pay?' And I'm like, I don't even know. Let me do the math.' It is very hard, because [the state] was paying a hundred percent [due to temporary relief funding], and now [families] feel like they are owed a hundred percent . . . it's confusing. And they're just not paying it."

Another director described the challenge of collecting the family fee: "That's the hardest thing because we are getting some of the money, but to get their parent fee, it's constant that I have to ask. … I feel bad because I know they can't afford it."

Several directors shared that they stopped participating in the subsidy program altogether because of its complications and constraints:

"[We have had] massive amounts of problems since the new system came in. I'm still waiting on payments from last year. … That was one reason why we quit, one reason why I got rid of subsidies because it was awful. I was fighting on the phone with them all the time. . . . It wasn't worth it for us to keep doing that."

Other directors were fearful that subsidy amounts may be cut or lowered, so they decided to serve fewer children who received such support: "[The] majority of my kids are on subsidy. If they decide to discontinue or change subsidy, my parents, as well as myself, [are] gonna be in a fix. So I'm trying to get kids now that are not on subsidy."

Employee benefits remain out of reach for most programs

There is a clear distinction between which early childhood programs offered benefits to staff and which did not: public (e.g., local school districts, Head Start) vs. private (e.g., child care centers, family child care homes). Most directors believed that offering their staff benefits was very important but something that few could afford to do. Some expressed a desire to provide benefits to their staff members but said they could not afford to do so because the added cost would lead to higher tuition rates that parents would be unable to pay. As one director explained, "[If] I raise my tuition to pay my girls their insurance, to pay my girls a decent salary, I lose because [parents] can't afford it and they don't meet subsidy standards."

In contrast, some staff, such as those in Head Start settings, received a full benefits package. As one Head Start director explained:

> *"[Benefits are] required. Because how can you ask people to take care of others when they can't be taking care of themselves? That's an opportunity to live a fruitful life because the staff can't be effective unless we [have] a whole health wellness mindset. It's essential."*

Directors routinely extend compassion and financial resources to support struggling families

As noted above, directors were acutely aware of the affordability challenges parents faced and often worked to support families in need. As one director stated, "My heart is for the parents." This sense of empathy and understanding led some to "give grace" or make personal sacrifices of income to help cover costs:

"I had one family that expressed some concerns about being able to pay due to some issues that they had going on — vehicle breaking down and just going through some things. When that happens, I don't believe in turning the child away because of someone going through issues, you know?"

In another state, a director said:

> *"I have single parents, and if they're struggling, they know they can talk to me because I'm not gonna not watch their kid. Because they are getting up and going to work, and they're trying, you know? … If they can't pay me, then I don't take the money. I don't charge them, just like I had a family that has the dad dying with brain cancer. She had two small kids, and when she was struggling, going through all she did, I didn't charge her. I can't honestly do that to a family that is struggling."*

Administrative Burden

Directors hold contrasting views on quality rating and improvement systems, citing both administrative burden and programmatic benefit

Early childhood program directors expressed mixed views on the effectiveness and efficiency of Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS). Some indicated the program created additional administrative burdens, increasing costs, making it more difficult to hire qualified staff, and imposing unwanted training requirements on existing staff. Furthermore, some family child care providers indicated the program felt invasive in their home-based settings. Some directors noted that the system complicated subsidy fee structures and offered diminished incentives over time. "When we first got into [QRIS], you had a lot of incentives," explained one director. "Now, there's no incentives. … I've always maintained my rating level. … Now it's not worth it. Everything has been watered down so much."

Conversely, other directors acknowledged the system's demands but appreciated its impact. They highlighted improvements in classroom environments and reductions in behavioral issues, attributing these outcomes to the support and guidance received during the rating process. As one director shared, "We went through the rating system and it was a lot of work, but in the end I feel like having the people … come out and help us put centers together and come up with ideas helped the children a lot because we had less behavior issues."

The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) provides essential resources but also creates additional administrative burden

The food program emerged as a focal point of concern among directors, many of whom articulated a strong desire for policy reform and structural improvements to CACFP. While participation in the program was perceived by some as burdensome — citing administrative complexity and operational inefficiencies — others regarded it as an indispensable resource to ensure young children in their rural communities received nutritious food.

Key challenges included inconsistent reimbursement schedules, which complicated financial planning and exacerbated budgetary pressures, along with food waste resulting from rigid program requirements that did not align with actual consumption patterns. The bureaucratic demands and monitoring obligations associated with the

program further strained limited administrative capacities. One director reported that she did not participate in the food program because "It's just too much paperwork-wise. If I have somebody out, I have to be in the classroom, so I just don't have the manpower right now to do it."

Of particular concern to directors was the static nature of reimbursement rates, which had not kept pace with escalating food costs and contributed to staff stress. As one director stated:

"[If I could ask policymakers to change something,] it would be the food program. We just opt out of the food program. It was a hassle trying to keep up with how much milk to buy. We may start with five students, and then two of them may drop, and then we over-purchase milk we don't get reimbursed for, or vice versa. That did not work for our program."

Most directors remain committed to continuing or expanding early childhood programming despite administrative challenges

Despite the numerous concerns articulated by directors, these administrative challenges do not appear to significantly deter their commitment to continued operation. When queried about their strategic intentions over the next three to five years, 44% of directors indicated plans to expand or renovate their facilities, 39% reported an intention to maintain current operational levels, 10% anticipated closure, and the remaining respondents were undecided regarding their future course of action.

Availability of Early Childhood Programs and Related Resources

Directors across the three states described significant challenges related to the supply of child care in their rural communities. Of those directors surveyed, 87% reported they had waitlists with children they were unable to serve. Directors cited a range of reasons for availability-related challenges, including a mismatch between family needs and program offerings, the increased cost of providing care, and a lack of related resources, such as transportation and relevant staff training.

Families often require nontraditional-hour, part-time, or infant care that is limited or unavailable in many rural communities

Directors surfaced several accessibility challenges experienced by families, both those they served and those in their broader communities. A recurring concern was the insufficient availability of infant slots in rural areas, with many directors indicating they did not offer care for children under 12 months of age. Directors also indicated that many parents expressed a need for flexible child care arrangements, including part-time care or a hybrid of part-time and full-time services, which were often difficult to secure. Parents employed in shift-based occupations, such as factories, correctional facilities, and other large-scale employers, encountered specific challenges in securing child care that aligned with their work schedules. Many of these families required late evening or weekend care, which directors acknowledged was extremely limited in many of their rural communities. Sixty-six percent of directors surveyed indicated there was a need for care during these nontraditional hours.

Financial constraints limit the number of children directors can serve

For many directors, funding challenges have only grown worse in recent years as the overall cost of living has increased. These challenges affect directors' ability to run their programs and hire staff, but also parents' ability to afford child care, leading to decreased enrollment in some cases. "I think one of the reasons being is the economy," said one director. "We had a lot of children drop out of the program because people [were] laid off and they just started keeping the kids instead of having them go to day care and pay for it."

Some directors, and particularly those working at Head Start sites, expressed concern about families in their rural communities whose incomes just barely exceeded eligibility requirements for Head Start or child care subsidy. As one director shared:

"We are income-based and have to take those with the greatest need. With a lot of businesses increasing their salaries over the last couple of years, especially since COVID, to retain employees, it has hurt us in being able to find the income-eligible families because the one thing we don't have any control over is the Federal Poverty Level. … What the federal government considers poverty and what I consider poverty [are] just two different things."

Compounding these financial difficulties, directors said, was the challenge of hiring qualified staff. "If all my classrooms were open, we'd have 85 children," explained one director. "Right now, we're about 65 because of staff shortages." Some programs had to cut back on serving families whose children receive child care subsidy, or close their programs altogether, because of challenges with child care subsidy, including late payments from the state. "I am [still] waiting on payments from last year. It just wasn't worth it for us to keep doing that," shared one director. Furthermore, some directors believed rural communities had lower and less equitable reimbursement rates compared to those in more urban areas.

Directors acknowledge a lack of related resources in rural communities, particularly compared to urban and suburban areas, that further exacerbates supply challenges

Despite acknowledging many strengths of their rural communities, directors felt that programs and families generally experience limited access to critical resources, including transportation and education training opportunities. For example, one director described the arduous task of scheduling observations for the Child Development Associate (CDA) process in their rural location.

In some cases, families in rural areas may be willing to travel longer distances to access child care. For example, one provider explained:

> *"Ours is the only center at this time [in our area]. I have 10 infants and 10 [toddler/preschool] children that are on my waiting list. Some of them come from . . . a good 30, 35 miles away."*

But not all families are able to travel such long distances, and with limited public transit in many rural communities, directors expressed concern that transportation obstacles prevent some children from accessing care.

Quality of Programs

Many rural programs rely on self-made curricula

The majority of directors, both from child care centers and family child care homes, did not use a state-approved curriculum. Many stated that they created their own curricula, citing varied reasons including high costs for standardized programs and materials and limited training opportunities. In one state, for example, many directors were not aware that a free curriculum for 4-year-olds was available on the state education agency's website. "I don't use a specific curriculum," said one director. "I look at the standards and go in and build my own and work with the teachers."

Access to professional development and training opportunities is limited in rural communities

Rural communities have unique challenges when it comes to accessing required training and professional development, particularly if staff are unable to travel to centralized training locations. While many states have developed online training materials, staff often prefer face-to-face opportunities. As one director shared, "For trainings, a lot of my girls don't like to do the online stuff." Some specifically mentioned the need for local access to CPR training and other required trainings that are more conducive to in-person delivery.

Directors also lamented that trainings were often repetitive and dated, disconnected from their programs' real needs. One director said:

> *"It's the same old stuff. If I don't know how to take care of a kid [after] the last 46 years, a two-hour class is not going to teach me a dang thing. . . . You go [just] to get the hours. It's awful."*

Challenges finding and retaining qualified staff can undermine programs' attempts to improve program quality

Directors spoke at length about their need for more qualified staff with relevant training, education, experience, and passion for early childhood. Specifically, directors underscored how challenging it is to find individuals with these characteristics who were also willing to accept generally low pay. Directors recounted staff leaving for lunch breaks and never returning, employees who were intimidated by going back to school or completing the necessary trainings to be certified, or teachers with strong credentials leaving for higher-paying employment opportunities in public schools. Without more dedicated funding for the early childhood workforce, directors explained, they cannot pay staff well, offer benefit packages, and ultimately retain quality employees.

Directors often reported hiring underqualified staff out of desperation, which subsequently strained the resources of the program and directors, as these employees required more supervision and professional development than their peers with more experience and training. Directors also reported that such hires were more likely to quit or simply not show up for work. As one shared: "The problem we have had is there is a mentality out there that if [they] don't want to come in, [they] don't call in. [They] just don't show up — we've had some incidents with that." Another director stated: "I was hiring. They [new hires] wouldn't show up. I was being left alone with a center full of 16 kids, and some of them were infants. And I was like, 'I can't do this by myself.'"

Directors consistently offered solutions to retention and recruitment barriers, such as an identified need not only for higher pay for early childhood program staff but also tailored support for working with young children with varying needs. "My turnover problem is the pay *plus* the kids," explained one director. "A lot of people can't do it for long. … They say the kids make them overwhelmed, so they just quit." Others agreed, citing a need for improved professional development and supports. As one director explained, "Retaining is the issue, and also quality staff, because a lot of people say that they want to come into child care, and then once they get in there, that's another issue."

Ultimately, directors attributed persistent retention challenges to inadequate compensation and limited training resources but most pointedly to a lack of long-term commitment required for a career in the early childhood field: "There was just a lot of people who didn't want to put in the time and the effort to get the training. They weren't in it for a life career. They were in it just to have somewhere to work."

Community Supports and Partnerships

Directors value community partnerships and see a need for greater local investments in young children and families

Many directors underscored the important role the broader community plays in supporting their children and families. One director explained:

> *"With our program, community is really important. We attend a monthly meeting here in town that is a lot of nonprofits getting together … so when we are working with our families, we know where to refer them. We want the family as a whole to be successful."*

Positive relationships, both with other child care programs as well as community-based organizations and faith providers, allowed directors to better serve their young children. "As far as the community here, I do have the support. If I ask, if I need anything from the community, have that support over here," shared one provider. In particular, directors at Head Start programs were grateful for the wraparound resources the program provides: "The awesome thing about working for Head Start is that we don't only help the kids … we're strengthening the parents."

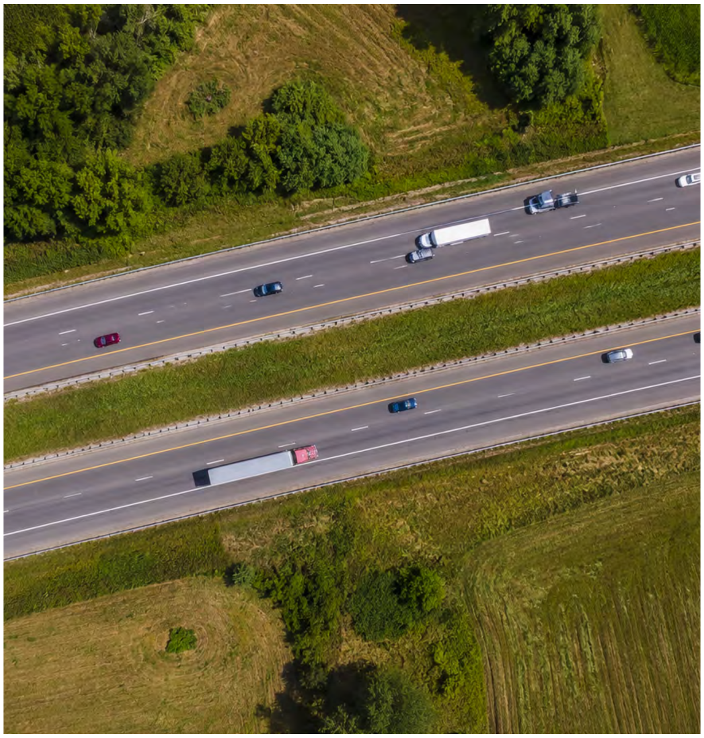
However, a number of directors felt that their communities did not place sufficient value on early childhood education and expressed a desire for greater local investment in young children. One stated: "Overall, exposure and understanding of the importance of early childhood is needed. I feel like we're in the area of good old boys that state, 'I didn't go to school until I was 6 years old and, by golly, and that's what my kid's gonna do!'" Some expressed a desire for more extracurricular activities geared towards younger children, including sports, outdoor, and STEAM programs. As one director shared:

> *"An issue in this area … is activities. [There's] nothing for the children to do, for this community to do. You have to drive to different towns to find something."*

Others cited a need for greater community investment in parents' education and family resources:

> *"If we had classes provided for the parents … that would help us. Some way to help us help them."*

Whether support to "educate parents about healthy food choices" or "get jobs, get job skills," directors routinely expressed a desire to improve access to family resources in their rural communities. Many recognized the role that early childhood programs play in connecting the private sphere of family life to the generally public sphere of education, viewing this intersection as a strategic way to identify and provide support to families in need.



Transportation challenges in rural areas create barriers for both families and programs

Directors spoke in specific terms about transportation challenges and opportunities within their local communities. Some pointed to the lack of transportation for public pre-K or transportation funding cuts in Head Start, while others underscored general commuting challenges in rural areas for both families and program staff. The decentralized nature of rural areas typically meant long commutes, and directors often described families driving long distances so their children could attend early childhood programs. It was not only distance but also a lack of predictable and reliable transportation that created challenges for some families, from car trouble to relying on friends or relatives to provide transportation for their young children. In some communities with high levels of poverty, a broken-down car presented significant challenges and led to ripple effects for families:

> *"If something happens to our parents' vehicles … they're not going to work. It totally affects them. We have churches and programs up here that are helping to fix the car or to get a new car."*

Similar to parents and early childhood staff, directors encountered numerous transportation-related barriers. A number of directors reported that they did not live in the communities in which their programs were located. One director described a multi-state commute lasting well over an hour. Another recounted spending the night at her child care center when the roads were not plowed following a winter storm. Not surprisingly, directors often pointed to potential policy solutions centered on transportation. When asked what policymakers could do to improve early childhood programs in rural areas, multiple directors responded with "provide transportation." As one elaborated: "We have people that can't get to where they need to go because they don't have a car, and they don't have money for gas. So transporting kids would save a lot. It would help out a lot of families."

Other directors offered their own creative solution to transportation challenges in their communities. "Our agency has chosen not to have transportation," explained one. "So I'm gonna try to reach out within the community and see if there are options for getting the kiddos here if their families don't have transportation." Another director shared her plan to purchase a vehicle for program use, allowing her to serve more families: "I'm gonna try to purchase a little van. … I think I can have 17 more children."

Barriers to resources in rural communities extend beyond child care and include economic, nutrition, and housing needs

Beyond transportation, directors expressed the need for more state and federal support for the economically marginalized families and communities they serve. Child care affordability challenges were acknowledged within the broader context of limited availability of child care subsidy, low-wage employment, and burdensome work and income requirements associated with the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. Directors also highlighted the need for stable and affordable housing, nutrition support, and educational opportunities for parents and children in their communities. For example, one director stated:

> *"One thing is housing, having availability of somewhere safe to stay, and another barrier would be providing food and clothing. A lot of my parents don't have the money to buy diapers or even wipes, formula… Their jobs don't pay them enough to where they can keep their household going."*

Numerous program directors expressed the view that children residing in rural areas are not receiving adequate resources and services — including wraparound supports — from the state, especially in comparison to their counterparts in urban settings. One provider described this struggle in more detail:

> *"We're paying someone to come all the way from [a large city] to complete vision testing for our children… Whereas one child in [a large city] can get the referral within 48 hours, ours may be a month going through the referral process… It is a hindrance when they get to K through 12 and still not getting the service they need."*

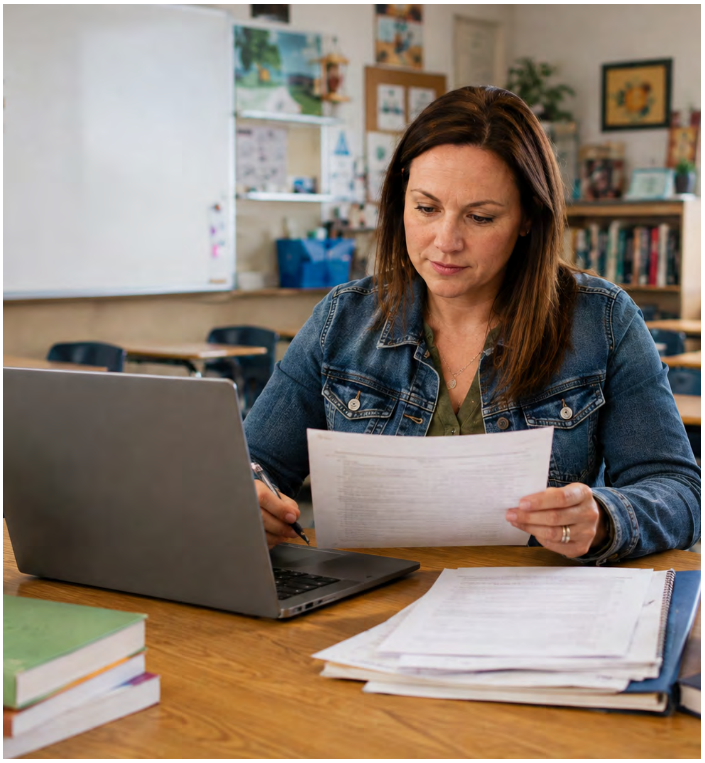
Early Childhood Teachers

High-quality early childhood education is foundational to children's learning, development, and long-term well-being, yet the workforce responsible for educating young children during this critical period continues to face profound and systemic challenges. Early educators across the rural South described a range of structural barriers that undermine program quality, threaten workforce stability, and limit families' access to early childhood programs.

Early educators consistently described a profession marked by financial strain. Despite the demanding nature of the work, early educator wages remain low, particularly compared to their K-12 counterparts, and benefits are often inaccessible (e.g., McLean et al., 2024). Many early educators believed state and federal funding mechanisms held the potential to remedy some of the field's inequities but required significant investment and reform.

Beyond compensation, early educators identified persistent shortages in instructional materials, professional development opportunities, and mental health supports. Early educators also believed that lower child-teacher ratios were a defining feature of quality programs and that smaller class sizes, along with environmental classroom supports such as materials and scheduling, would lead to improved instructional quality and workplace conditions.

Early educators' low compensation and challenging working conditions contributed to their moderate to high levels of stress, further intensified by a perceived undervaluation of the profession among families and the public. Despite these challenges, teachers expressed deep pride in their communities and a steadfast commitment to the children and families they serve. Their experiences reveal an urgent call to strengthen systemic supports for a workforce that is essential not only to children's development but also to the economic vitality and long-term well-being of families and communities.



Financial Strain and Systemic Underfunding

Low wages and lack of benefits contribute to programmatic and personal challenges for early educators

Early educators voiced widespread dissatisfaction with what they viewed as inadequate compensation in the field. Teachers often pointed to pay disparities between early educators and those in the K-12 system. As one early educator explained:

> *"We have the future in our hands … just like the teachers in [K-12] schools. We create the doctors, the astronauts, the lawyers, but we don't get paid like we are creating those professions."*

Even early educators with advanced degrees were not exempt from near-minimum wages as they grappled with non-standardized pay scales. One early educator described the discrepancy: "Don't get me wrong, I knew when I came into this field that I was not going to be making millions. But … I have a four-year college degree and [make] minimum wage." Most early educators connected inadequate pay to negative perceptions of the profession despite the demanding nature of the work. "It's harder than most jobs I've done," one stated.

Although early educators expressed a need for higher pay, they understood the financial restraints that early childhood programs face as they consider raising staff wages when tuition rates are tied to economic conditions. One early educator explained: "[Director's name] has to just kind of go by the rise of price and everything, unfortunately, and she tries her best to not raise the daily rate every year and hasn't until last year."

Ultimately, early educators acknowledged that pay and benefits are typically not high enough to attract, recruit, and retain employees consistently. Early educators provided several reasons for high turnover rates, such as stress, inadequate resources, and insufficient support, but generally agreed with one participant who commented that "It has nothing to really do with the children. [It's] more of [the] income."

> **Early educators also described inadequate benefit offerings, with only 35% of those surveyed reporting access to health insurance.**

An early educator who transferred from another sector discussed the predicament: "I came out of the factory with 401(k)s, and we don't have any benefits to stay [at our early childhood program]." Many early educators reported spending most of their careers without access to employer-sponsored benefits that would improve their quality of life.

One teacher explained: "We are taking care of people's children so they can go provide for their family when we have no health insurance. ... There are teachers here that live on their own, are single, and have no health insurance, no life insurance, or retirement. … I've been in this field for 19 years … and some days it just doesn't seem like it's necessarily worth it."

Many early educators would like to see adjustments to state and federal funding mechanisms

Early educators across all three states acknowledged the need for increased funding for early childhood programs, particularly in small, rural communities that may be under-resourced. One early educator asserted: "I've never lived in a real big city, but I've lived in small towns that don't have the money. But they have great teachers, and they have people who are willing to be there. … I know that's the biggest thing for every state department [to consider] is [that] we need more money."

Some, but not all, were familiar with child care subsidy and its potential impact on families and early childhood programs alike. Without subsidized care, educators explained, some parents would be unable to access early childhood programs because of the sheer cost of tuition. Additionally, some educators themselves relied on subsidy to afford their own children's care and believed this support helped keep programs staffed. One teacher explained, "If my child was not on the state program, and I had to pay $280 a week for both my children, I wouldn't be able to send them. I'd have to go home."

Some teachers discussed their belief that child care subsidies designed to help eligible families afford child care are not equitable between urban and rural communities. The general perception was that urban communities and federally funded programs such as Head Start receive more funding, while rural communities often have greater needs and fewer resources. Relatedly, one teacher stated:

"I feel like, especially [in] smaller towns, people don't really look at them and think they need more funding. We kind of just get skipped over compared to bigger towns like [name of city]. Getting more funding, especially for the children and activities that they can do, [could] help prosper their learning experience as well as the teachers."

Availability of Early Childhood Programs and Related Resources

Early educators need developmentally appropriate curricula and materials to maintain high-quality classrooms

When asked to rate various components of program quality, 98% of early educators indicated that developmentally appropriate materials and resources, including specific activities, tools, and curricula, were either "important" or "very important." Some mentioned classroom resources such as art supplies and books, while others cited playground equipment and technology.

Appropriate classroom supplies and materials were deemed essential by educators, prompting many to personally finance resources to ensure students had the necessary tools for growth and development. As one teacher described: "Resources would help. Currently, I spend a nice chunk of my paycheck buying things for the babies, newer toys, or those little backpack things that protect the back of the head when they're learning how to sit."

Professional development supports early educators' capacity to foster robust learning experiences for all young children

Many early educators cited professional development as a key component of maintaining high-quality classroom environments and strengthening their skillsets.

> *"It's about furthering yourself in your professional development … and enhancing the knowledge of what it takes to be a qualified teacher. … We think because they're just little people, they're going to listen to what we say. But they are some big people in those little bodies, and it takes more than what you already know to be able to walk in that door every day and give your best … You want to have … that urge to know and do better. And it's ongoing professional development [that helps you do that]."*

Ninety percent of surveyed teachers identified support for managing challenging behaviors as their top professional development need. While some teachers reported having specialists integrated into their classrooms, others were left to identify strategies on their own. One early educator explained that "a lot of the teachers are taking upon themselves to do their own research."

Similarly, early educators did not feel equipped to meet the needs of children with disabilities even if it was a priority for them personally. "You don't want to isolate or exclude them. You want to make them feel included in the group," shared one teacher. In fact, 67% of early educators requested professional development tailored to children with disabilities or developmental delays. One teacher explained that observing a specialist working with a child who had visual impairments helped her adopt effective strategies. "We have had some kids that were … blind, [and] we had the school for the blind … come down twice a week and work with that child." The early educator proceeded to describe how this training changed her teaching practice: "She was in the infant room, and they told us to use black and white visuals. Everything was black and white that we … [used to interact] with her."

While numerous early educators emphasized the value of additional personnel — such as counselors, mental health professionals, and special education teachers — others highlighted the importance of implementing classroom strategies that prioritize behavioral health. One early educator explained: "Having training available to staff is of the utmost importance at this point. … There are persons that come in [as] qualified mental health professionals who deal with that. But you know you really need that piece in the classroom as well."

Substitute shortages affect early educators' ability to maintain instructional quality and manage their stress effectively

Teachers frequently articulated the necessity of substitute teachers and additional support personnel to uphold program quality but also recognized that financial constraints significantly hinder programs' ability to secure these resources. "You can't afford to have extra people here," said one teacher. "But if one of us is gone, it totally throws a wrench in the [day]. It's a big deal when one of us is gone."

The lack of additional staff often led to high levels of stress for teachers who did not want to let down their colleagues:

"Several of us deal with anxiety. … [I] feel guilty taking a day off because we don't have a sub that you can call and [say], 'Hey, I need you to come in. I need a break.' Our boss is amazing and works well with us, but you still feel that guilt because … when a full-time employee's gone, you're all scrambling."

Quality of Programs

Lower teacher-to-child ratios promote improved instructional quality and teacher satisfaction

Among the components of quality that early educators found critical to their programs were family engagement, cultural responsiveness, health and safety, teacher-child interactions, staff credentials, and teacher-to-child ratios. Notably, nearly 100% of teachers surveyed identified teacher-to-child ratios as a determining factor in maintaining quality instruction and care.

Early childhood educators demonstrated a strong commitment to fostering nurturing environments and cultivating trusting relationships with the children in their care. Educators described relational benefits when they had the capacity to spend time with individual children — a possibility enhanced by lower ratios. One teacher described the impact of smaller class or group sizes: "I think the one-on-one time really enhances their quality and makes them feel like they're important and like they have a place within the day care."

In addition to serving children more effectively, lower ratios created opportunities for teachers to take breaks throughout the day, preserving their stamina to manage complex situations. One teacher outlined the importance of such breaks in the context of supporting children with 'challenging behaviors: "If we have less than 15 kids, and I'm feeling … overwhelmed, I like to take a step out of the classroom. We always have two teachers at a time, so I get the [other] teacher to watch over the kids, and I go just take a couple of breaths."

Early educators prioritized environmental supports when centering quality

Nearly all surveyed educators rated environmental supports (i.e., structure, routines, and schedules) as an "important" or "very important" component of program quality. One educator put it succinctly: "I think high quality is having a routine with my babies, so that they know what they're doing."

Structure and predictable schedules created opportunities for teachers to introduce developmentally appropriate activities to aid children's growth and create regular routines that promote stability. One early educator described how routines create learning-rich environments:

"To me, structure is key for children. They need that structure to be able to move throughout their day and have a routine. [I am] … able to provide that and ... learning activities. You can provide learning activities anywhere from 6 weeks all the way up to preschool-aged children, and I think sometimes people don't necessarily think of it that way."

Community Supports and Partnerships

Educators believe transportation challenges impede access to early childhood programs for families and staff

Early educators noted that families often travel long distances to bring their children to early childhood programs and lamented that transportation challenges often affected children's attendance. "Transportation is number one," asserted one teacher. "We don't have transportation, and a lot of families lose out … because they can't get their kids to the program. The more kids we can get, the more kids we can help, and transportation is what does that."

The spatial dispersion of rural communities presents unique challenges, particularly when adverse weather conditions can disrupt transportation systems and impede access to essential services. As one teacher elaborated: "We're right near a national forest — it is all around us. … [Flooding] causes our schools to close down quite often. … If the buses can't get the kids, then there's no school for the day."

Some transportation challenges specifically stemmed from budget cuts within Head Start that resulted in reduced funding for personnel who operated buses. One Head Start teacher explained the impact of such cuts:

"I'm sure there's kids that are missing out on Head Start because we don't have the transportation, even though we have two buses. … I mean, you would have to pay someone to go and go out earlier. I'm sure children are missing out because their parents don't have that extra car that they can take them in."

Moreover, the absence of transportation services prevented teachers from offering enrichment activities or organizing field trips that may be more readily accessible to children in larger urban areas:

"We're right outside of town, and I want to take my kids on field trips. How can I get my kids to the library if I don't have a bus, and how can I use the bus if I don't have a CDL (commercial driver's license)? The CDL is really expensive to get. … We're very isolated and I don't know how without [transportation]."

A lack of community services and specialized supports perpetuates inequities in rural areas

Early educators voiced concern over the lack of access to community resources, particularly health services, in some rural areas. Some teachers identified a need for specialized doctors that could diagnose children with disabilities. As one early educator put it: "In the rural areas there's not a whole lot of access to testing for autism or for other stuff like that. We usually send them to … larger cities."

Additionally, teachers were concerned about the overall health and well-being of families, including their access to food and nutrition supports. One teacher shared:

"I know a lot of them are on food stamps, so I feel like maybe helping them out with that kind of thing, because obviously you don't want to go home and be hungry. I know all the parents care a lot for their children, and many of the ones [who receive subsidy] work at least two jobs."

Another early educator pointed to budget cuts to programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) and wondered how changes would affect her own ability to buy food and feed her family: "We have WIC, but still … that [only] helps me with a couple of gallons of milk, some fruit, my kids' snacks."

Teacher Emotional Health and Mental Well-being

Early educators experience moderate to high levels of work-related and personal stress

One in four teachers reported that they were either "stressed" or "extremely stressed" when surveyed. Teachers described a variety of work-related stressors, including large class sizes. One early educator reflected: "Today, I had a more stressful day. We had 20 kids. It was full." Another teacher described higher levels of stress at the beginning of the year when attempting to build relationships with students: "I'm getting used to a whole new group of kids, and they're getting used to me, so I probably bounce between [stress levels], but that'll go down once I get to know the kids a little bit better."

Early educators desired additional support that specifically addressed work-related stress. One teacher shared:

> *"Any kind of training on … how to manage stress. I stress very, very much. Patience is always needed, so something to how we can stay neutral instead of angry and upset."*

Other teachers indicated that additional staffing support or improved teamwork among existing colleagues would alleviate workplace stress.

While teachers were passionate about their work with young children, many also reported challenges juggling their professional and personal lives. "When you're trying to deal with your own trauma and trying to perform in your environment as well, it becomes stressful," explained one teacher. Another shared: "I have too many things to do once I get home. I have a disabled husband, so I have another job when I get home."

Educators require collaboration with parents and community members to support young children

Many early educators described challenges navigating relationships with parents, particularly when addressing individual children's growth and development. One educator shared: "It's just kind of like they blame us. … It's nobody's fault. Each child learns at their own rate, and all we can do is work with them."

Some early educators made instructional changes to accommodate parents' needs but ultimately felt unheard. "I wish that they would be more supportive [and] respect our time and our patience," one teacher said of parents. Early educators described themselves as professionals with deep knowledge of their field and hoped parents appreciated their commitment and expertise: "They don't understand that every year we have to do all these classes, and we have to do all this stuff, that we're not just here [babysitting]."

One educator underscored the importance of collaboration between teachers and parents: "Having support from parents and support from community stakeholders, just all of us coming to the table to help make sure that the experience that our young learners are receiving is top notch, having access to resources."

Families

Families living in rural communities reported facing significant challenges accessing affordable, high-quality early childhood programs. From steep costs and restrictive child care subsidy requirements to limited availability and staffing shortages, parents often found themselves navigating a system that strained their finances and, at times, their overall well-being.

The most prominent theme that emerged from family surveys and interviews was the high cost of early childhood programs.

Parents expressed frustrations with working full-time but still struggling to afford child care and other necessities of raising young children. These high costs often forced families to make difficult budgetary, career, and family planning decisions, such as leaving the workforce altogether or deciding not to have additional children despite wanting to grow their family.

Second, many parents described difficulty finding early childhood programs in their rural communities, especially if their children had disabilities, received state child care subsidy, were infants, or were in foster care. Many parents experienced long waitlists, and some ended up seeking care in other communities. Some parents also discussed the need for programming during nontraditional hours, including overnight, weekend, summer, and emergency or back-up care.

Parents expressed satisfaction with most of the early childhood programs in their communities, especially Head Start and Early Head Start. They particularly appreciated the supportive teachers and staff they encountered in their programs. However, families wished for more high-quality classroom resources and expressed frustration with interruptions that often resulted from insufficient staffing.

These cost- and access-related challenges often led to personal and professional sacrifices, resulting in some parents experiencing increased stress and anxiety. Compounding this stress for some families was the perception that the government does not prioritize working families and young children.

Ultimately, most parents wished for greater support in their rural communities, emphasizing the need for increased funding and resources for early childhood programs. Families also shared suggestions for how local, state, and federal governments could strengthen the early care and learning landscape in rural communities. One parent described her vision for rural early childhood this way: "In a perfect world, I would propose that no child be turned away if parents can't afford it. That all children will be served quality food, excellent curriculum, excellent care, fully trained staff."

Financial Strain and Systemic Underfunding

The cost of early childhood programs is often insurmountable for rural families

Most families described the high cost of care as a significant challenge. As one parent explained:

> *"It is very hard to live comfortably on top of paying for child care."*

For many families — both those who received state child care subsidy and those who did not — child care costs led to incredibly tight household budgets, particularly as parents juggled other expenses related to raising young children.

> **In fact, 62% of parents surveyed indicated they had to cut back on other household essentials because of child care costs.**

One parent described the tension this way: "I can't cut back … because my car note and my light bill and water bill, those are mandatory." She continued to share that child care costs "cut into the stuff my kids need, like Pampers, wipes, clothes, and stuff like that." Some parents likened tuition to other significant expenses, with one mother stating, "I write my [tuition] check every week … it's just like making a car payment or a house payment." Another parent lamented:

> *"When I hand our tax guy our end-of-the-year day care total, I try not to even look at it. I don't wanna know."*

Despite the costs associated with child care, many families recognized the value of high-quality programs, both in allowing parents to meet professional and career demands and for the educational opportunity afforded their children. Describing her daughter's early childhood program, one mother said: "We're on [a] limited income. But she does amazing there, so it's worth it. It's definitely worth paying what I have to for her to go there." Other parents accepted the cost as a necessary reality, allowing early childhood programs to remain open and serve their communities. As one parent noted, "It stinks, but at the same time, I know that [the program director] has to keep her doors open, and we have to have somewhere to take our kids, so it's just kind of part of it."

For some families, the cost of outside care was prohibitively high, leading parents to leave or stay out of the workforce, either part-time or altogether. One parent summarized the challenge this way:

> *"You hear people [say], 'I can't afford day care so I have to stay home, but I can't afford to stay home.' You hear that a lot, especially in this tiny community, especially when the younger generations are having children."*

Another parent stated: "I don't know how I'm going to pay for it. And if I don't have anywhere for them to go, I can't work."

In some cases, state child care subsidy helped defray families' costs. "We need [state child care subsidy]. A lot of families need [subsidy], including mine. If I didn't have [subsidy], I don't know what I would do," shared one mother. Other parents found themselves just short of meeting eligibility requirements for financial support. As one parent explained, "I make too much for state help, but it's just right on the edge to the point where I make just a few dollars more than they would like." Still others described challenges navigating changes in subsidy eligibility and the subsequent budgetary impact. "They [were] telling me that my kids' vouchers would be up in October," shared one parent. "But I don't know how I am gonna pay for it. With both of them together, that's an extra $850 a month, and my income can't cover it."

In general, parents in rural areas acutely felt the impact of child care costs on their finances but also their overall stress and well-being. Some reported making the choice not to grow their families specifically because of child care costs. Others described persistent anxiety around making ends meet. One parent described the tension this way:

> *"I've been stressing because I know that I can't afford it with my income. I just can't. I have so much stuff, you know? The kids, every time you turn around, they always need something. It's just always something."*

Many families would like to see state child care subsidy expanded and reformed

Most, but not all, parents had some level of familiarity with their state's child care subsidy programs. Families often cited the importance of this support, not just for their own children but for the early childhood programs they attended. As one parent explained, "Our center, I would say all centers, need funding, especially from [state child care subsidy]. That's how they stay afloat."

Parents also saw opportunities to improve child care subsidy programs, both through expansion and reforming existing policies (which often varied from state to state). Some specifically indicated that they would like to see subsidy expanded to include families who made just above existing income eligibility thresholds. One parent observed, "[For] some, working paycheck to paycheck is still not enough. If there was some kind of a system or assistance for people to apply for so that those families had that option [to better afford care]."

Relatedly, some parents described a perceived "penalty" as they advanced in their careers and their child care subsidy benefits decreased. "I was working at a hospital and my pay was way less than what I'm making now," shared one mother. "The amount [I pay] jumped when I renewed [child care subsidy]. That could make someone not want to work. It's like, they're getting this high pay, but they can't get the help they need to keep it."

Others cited challenges related to the nature of the work requirements associated with child care subsidy programs. One parent described it this way: "People have to actually have a job to get approved for [child care subsidy]. I think that's very backwards because if a person is trying [to get a job], I think they should be able to get approved. I think they could kind of change some of the rules."

Across families, including those who received subsidy and those who did not, there was a sense that more could be done to address the cost of care, particularly in their rural communities. Some parents specifically indicated that state and federal governments can and should address this challenge, starting with expanding and reforming child care subsidy programs. "We don't think we ... have any [opportunities] here for child care. If we don't get any help from … the government or anyone else, then [we're] basically on our own with [our] kids."

Families believe federal and state funding should address educator pay

Parents valued consistent and qualified staffing in their early childhood programs yet acknowledged the associated challenges, with one parent noting, "It's just a very hard profession, so a lot of people don't do it." To ensure well-trained teachers can provide high-quality early learning in rural areas, families believed that educator pay must increase. Much like directors of early childhood programs, parents viewed higher pay as a means to improve the recruitment and retention of teachers and staff. Some parents cited the rural context as a challenge in finding qualified teachers. "I would lift up more funding for educators because that's a reason we don't have a lot of qualified people in our area," shared one parent.

Families also described a lack of available substitute teachers in rural areas, which compounded other staffing challenges. Parents sought solutions that would promote an adequate workforce supply and minimize child care disruptions. One parent explained:

> *"Our day care is small, it is challenging if somebody gets sick and they can't stay open that day. But that is part of being in a small area."*

Overall, parents indicated that they felt that early childhood programs needed access to more state and federal funding and resources, particularly so educators could receive more competitive wages. They believed higher pay would lead to more qualified teachers in smaller, rural communities and make it easier for early learning programs to remain open and allow parents to work. Furthermore, parents expressed that better compensated and qualified teachers would provide higher-quality learning experiences at early ages, something families also highly valued.

Parents are acutely aware of the threat budget cuts pose to existing supports like Head Start

Parents perceived that many programs in their rural communities were suffering amid changes in federal and state funding streams. "Funding, definitely, across the board, is a main issue with these types of programs," asserted one mother. For another parent, the closing of the local Head Start program was a big loss and brought her angst as she considered the impact to children in her community:

> *"With them closing, it's gonna hurt a lot of kids. It's gonna hurt a lot of families and parents, because where are their kids gonna go? The pre-K only takes so many kids. All the day cares are filled up. That's been the biggest thing that I've been thinking about: Where are they gonna go?"*

Beyond early education, many programs, such as Head Start, provide other services upon which families depend, such as nutrition supports and early intervention. Families lamented that potential funding-related closures could result in broader ripple effects, limiting access to crucial services and disrupting the already fragile early childhood education ecosystem in their small rural communities, ultimately making care even less accessible and affordable.

Availability of Early Childhood Programs and Related Resources

The sheer limit of available child care in rural areas presents challenges in accessing quality early learning

Most parents described an inadequate supply of child care in their rural communities. As one parent bemoaned:

> *"I have not had the luxury of being 'picky.' I want to know they are taken care of safely, and that's the only standard I have been able to have."*

Some families, such as those with low incomes, felt the impact of the limited supply more acutely, with one parent describing availability in her community this way:

"Honestly, we lack a lot of child care. There's one other day care, and there's a pre-K, which is harder to get accepted to, especially for low-income families. … A lot of people rely on family or friends to watch their children. It makes it really hard for parents to find jobs, and it's really hard for anyone to kind of do anything."

Parents reported making "forced" decisions as a result of this scarcity and compounding affordability challenges. One mother described her friend's solution to the lack of accessible, affordable options, saying, "[She] can't afford child care, so she just [has] everybody, you know, keeping her child. And I told her … everybody can't keep your baby because … you don't know [them]."

Parents emphasized that the challenge of finding high-quality early childhood programs was not due to lack of effort. Even when seats became available, they were quickly filled. One parent described the difficulty of navigating short-lived openings, stating:

> *"[The] majority of the places [fill] up, and it's hard. It is hard to get your child in because once the spots come open, they fill it so fast."*

When families were able to secure a spot in an early childhood program, they often attributed the success to a personal connection, the capacity to register their child as soon as the enrollment period started, or the ability to take advantage of child care programs near their work as opposed to the community in which they lived. As one parent shared, "I was very quick on the ball when they were doing enrollment, so we were very fortunate to get a spot, but I do know a lot of parents that want to put their child in, and they can't." While there may be a higher supply of child care programs closer to families' places of employment, the convenience did not come without transportation challenges and long commute times. Over half of families reported traveling between 11 and 40 minutes one way, with a few traveling over an hour to reach their early childhood program.

Parents often struggle to find options that meet their families' needs and schedules.

Families reported finding it difficult or even impossible to find child care options to address needs that extended beyond the traditional scope of local program offerings, such as care during extended hours in the evenings, early mornings, or weekends; over the summer; during emergencies or extenuating circumstances; and for special populations of children, such as those in foster care or with disabilities.

Many parents specifically emphasized the importance of expanded hours of operation — including evenings, overnights, and weekends — to accommodate diverse work schedules. In fact, more than 1 in 5 parents reported needing access to care outside of traditional hours. Additionally, several parents highlighted the need for "emergency" child care options to address unexpected circumstances, such as snow days, sick children, or other closures, that result in limited notice and disrupted care arrangements. One mother who described herself as an essential worker expanded on the challenges, stating, "Holidays and hours are a huge issue."

Some parents reported that summertime posed particular challenges, especially if children were enrolled in early childhood programs that did not provide year-round care. "... As a single mom, I do struggle during the summer," said one parent. "I cannot afford the one-day care that we do have here. And with public school pre-K, they have summer school to help the parents that need to work. But we don't have that for Head Start. So, if I could dream of something, I would dream of a summer program for the kids."

Some smaller programs worked to accommodate families' needs even if they could not officially extend their hours. For example, some parents reported that program directors would flex their hours without charging additional fees, noting that these small gestures of kindness contributed to the "family feel" they appreciated about early childhood programs in rural communities.

While most parents described a general lack of early learning programs in their rural communities, the task of securing a spot proved even more daunting for families receiving state child care subsidy, which not all programs accept. One parent reported using a personal connection to secure a highly coveted spot but noted that in the broader community, families found it challenging to locate programs that take child care subsidy. Another noted: "I may have just been able to get [my kids] in pretty quick because I knew the teacher that was teaching … but if it had not been for that, there is a wait period for limited spots."

Age can be a limiting factor as well, with some parents indicating that care for infants in their communities was either lacking or so competitive that most families couldn't secure spots. One parent expressed that she even made choices about growing her family based on the lack of infant care available: "I just don't know what we would do or where they would go while we worked because if I have another child, I will still have to work, and I don't have an option near me that I have found yet that is available for infants."

Finally, parents caring for children in foster care often experienced additional barriers locating appropriate settings. Foster parents noted significant challenges finding programs willing or able to accept children in state custody, who are often eligible for state child care subsidy. As one parent explained, "There's only one [program] that takes state pay for foster kids."

Similarly, parents of children with disabilities reported difficulty locating programs equipped to support their children's unique developmental or therapeutic needs. They emphasized the importance of trained staff who can provide individualized care and inclusive environments where all children are welcomed and supported. Underscoring the need for programs that are both accessible and inclusive for all families, one parent shared:

> *"Our child has special needs, and most centers will not meet his needs or even attempt to."*

Quality of Programs

Parents prioritize health and safety as well as personal relationships and trust in making decisions about early childhood programs

While parents identified a variety of priorities when making decisions about their children's early childhood care, they overwhelmingly emphasized safety; security; and organized, engaging environments with clear structure and caring staff. One parent described their desired environment as one that felt like a "second family."

Health and safety concerns often preceded those related to structural quality, such as staff credentials, with parents seeking safe, clean, and well-supervised settings where children were protected from harm or neglect. In fact, survey results suggest that nearly 1 in 5 parents found safety to be most important. One parent succinctly identified "safety" as their primary concern, adding, "Handing over a child is a scary thing." Parents also highlighted the importance of facilities that conduct background checks and maintain proper licensing requirements.

However, parents' feelings around licensing requirements were nuanced. Some families expressed concerns about constant shifts in licensing requirements contributing to directors and educators leaving the field. One parent described these inconsistencies: "I've seen [director] have auditors come in and she's changed her floor or her carpet pad six times because every time somebody else comes in, they tell her, 'Oh you can't have that,' when the last one told her that's what she needed."

In addition to the importance of safe and secure environments, families highlighted the critical role of early educators in establishing nurturing and supportive relationships with their children. They expressed a desire for educators who could effectively cultivate strong, trusting relationships while fostering each child's ongoing growth and development. As one parent noted, "I want to know the staff really care about the development of the child."

Families desire richer learning resources at the early childhood programs in their communities

In some cases, parents' emphasis on safe and secure environments was matched by their expectations for highly qualified educators who implemented structured curricula and adhered to evidence-based best practices. Many parents viewed early childhood programs as foundational to their children's future academic success, particularly in preparing them for the transition to kindergarten.

Among many parents, classrooms that employed developmentally appropriate practices and emphasized hands-on, experiential learning were viewed as indicators of high quality. Furthermore, parents frequently associated program quality with active learning experiences rather than passive supervision. When asked to define "high quality," one parent explained, "That my child learns her basics for upper grades — manners, sharing, making friends." Indeed, a number of parents emphasized the importance of fostering "empathy, kindness, and patience" alongside academic readiness.

However, some felt as though the early childhood programs in their communities were not equipped with the high-quality materials and resources needed to support children's learning. One parent described the struggle that some programs face: "I think getting supplies … for them to learn, because [the director] only gets so much … to be able to pay for new things, like coloring books and crayons, and even pencils. … If she does [have materials] you can tell that they've been there for a while. … So that would probably help a lot of these smaller communities, because most of them are either doing it on their own or just doing what they can. And there's not much help outward-wise."

Community Supports and Partnerships

Families want more community-level support and resources, particularly transportation, to improve access to early childhood programs

A number of parents described transportation-related challenges impeding their access to early childhood programs. Some specifically mentioned the loss of Head Start buses, which had previously addressed transportation gaps in some rural communities, while others lamented that some program-provided transportation required children to be at least 3 years old to participate. As one parent described: "I wanted to take my little girl to Early Head Start, but they can't ride the bus [at her age], so you have to drop them off and pick them up. When I'm at work, who's gonna pick her up?" Another parent expanded on this challenge, sharing, "We used to have a bus for Head Start, and they did away with it years ago. I don't know if [it's] … a lack of staff, but that is a huge downfall."

Parents also desired more reliable information and referral services for early childhood programs and other resources in their communities.

> **Many families were unsure of where to find trusted information, often consulting social media, because there was not a centralized system that included key details like available slots, whether the program accepted child care subsidy, and other programmatic features families might desire.**

In the absence of such a system, community members have been filling the gap, according to families. For example, one parent described an early childhood program director who used social media to let the broader community know of resources, including available child care slots, even if not at her program.

Supportive employers and family-friendly workplace practices can help parents juggle the demands of raising young children

Working families faced a variety of challenges as they balanced their career and family responsibilities, sometimes navigating unpredictable schedules and limited support. In fact, 70% of survey respondents answered that they or their spouse had to miss a shift or reduce their hours at work because of a child care challenge.

Many parents described work-related stress resulting from unexpected program closures, sick children, or other changes in routine. As one parent explained:

"They [the early childhood program] can't stay open that day, you've got to figure out either you're calling in to work, or you're [asking] one of the grandparents. … We just try to save days and cover each other, but that is hard."

Families indicated that such disruptions can pose a threat to working parents' employment stability and their overall stress and well-being and expressed a desire for increased employer support.

Some parents described supportive and flexible employers who recognized employees in the broader context of their families. "[My boss's] motto is, your job should fit your family, not your family fit your job," said one mother. Families described a range of family-friendly strategies employed in their workplaces, such as flexibility around paid time off. One parent who worked in health care explained: "My current boss, he's very big on family. Even if I don't have any time saved up, I always let him know, 'Hey, this is what I need to do,' and he's pretty fine with that." Others described employers accommodating working parents by allowing them to build flexible schedules around program hours and other caretaking demands. "We sat down and reworked my schedule, and he's been very accommodating," said one parent of their employer. One employer allowed a parent to bring her daughter to work for the first and last 30 minutes of her shift, which fell outside of her early learning program's hours.

However, not all parents described supportive and accommodating work environments, expressing a desire for family-friendly practices like flexible scheduling and sick leave policies.

> **One parent even suggested the use of an "employer sick note" that a parent might receive from a physician or early childhood program to document a child's illness to allow the parent to remain in good standing with their employer and also provide needed care for their child.**

Ultimately, parents believed that when employers adopted flexible and innovative family-centered policies, they not only supported their employees in managing caregiving responsibilities but also helped to safeguard their workforce's stability, productivity, and well-being.

Families acknowledge the value of holistic supports in rural communities, including not only early childhood programs, but also nutrition and health resources

Many parents cited the value of — and need for — comprehensive supports for children in their rural communities, underscoring the interconnected nature of early childhood education, health, transportation, and housing. Some parents were acutely aware of funding and policy shifts affecting programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) and worried such changes might compound child care affordability challenges. One parent shared her desire for "more programs for the working moms and families that are trying to pay for all this stuff but fall short when it comes to child care. … We can provide for them to do more things," she said.

In addition, parents desired better communication and information about available assistance programs, like SNAP and WIC, and how to navigate the application process. Some also sought resources to help them connect with other families in their communities:

> *"A parent support group would be nice, with day care and food provided so they could connect with each other and find out about other resources. If they got together they could say, 'Oh, I'm doing this, and maybe you could try that too.'"*

Some families described a lack of physical and mental health resources in their rural communities, often increasing the stress of caregiving. These challenges were particularly profound among families whose children had disabilities and required specialized services.

One mother described that, in addition to managing her own mental health under difficult circumstances, she faced ongoing challenges finding caregivers who could work effectively with her son and follow best practices tailored to his needs. The lack of specialized providers, respite care, and therapeutic resources in her rural community left her feeling isolated and overwhelmed. Another parent lamented the lack of Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA) therapy resources in her community to support her child with autism. Indeed, most parents whose children had disabilities expressed frustrations navigating the limited early childhood and health landscape in their rural communities and desired improved resources, like responsive parent support groups and accessible, qualified practitioners.

A central strength of rural child care is the sense of small-town community and educators who feel like "family"

> **Many families articulated how much they valued raising their children in small towns, emphasizing the sense of familiarity, connection, and trust that came from living in close-knit communities.**

Although several noted the limited number of activities for families and a lack of accessible health care or specialized services, most described rural life as offering a strong sense of belonging and mutual support. Parents frequently mentioned how their children's early childhood programs felt like extensions of their own families — places where educators knew them personally and offered flexibility when unexpected challenges arose.

While many acknowledged the financial strain created by child care costs, parents recognized that care was more affordable than in urban settings. One parent described the unique supportiveness of her community:

> *"I think the strength is that being [a] small town, they know you. So if I get stuck at work, all I have to do is call [program's name] and say, 'I'm stuck' and she'll say, 'It's okay. I'll go ahead and feed them. You get here when you get here. You be safe.' I've had times when my kids weren't supposed to be there, and we had a family emergency. I have friends that work in bigger cities, and they get charged like for every minute late that they are to pick their kids up. But she just knows everybody's trying to make ends meet."*

Other Voices from the Field

The following sections highlight perspectives from state early childhood leaders and business leaders, offering a broader systems-level and economic lens that complements and reinforces the findings shared by directors, early childhood teachers, and families. While earlier sections center on the lived experiences of those working directly with children and those raising them, these sections elevate insights from decision-makers and employers who shape policy, funding, workforce conditions, and community priorities.

State Early Childhood Leaders

State agency personnel and other statewide leaders, including those in Head Start Collaboration Offices and those overseeing child care licensing and state preschool programs, described a variety of assets and constraints of early care and learning in rural communities. Leaders recognized unique strengths of rural communities, reporting what one state leader called "tight and connected" relationships as a cornerstone of life in these areas. Child care programs and other community organizations worked tirelessly to provide resources to families, many state leaders said.

However, most state leaders also cited a limited supply of early childhood programs in many rural communities and the existence of child care deserts, particularly for infant and toddler care. One reason for the dearth of programs in rural areas was high start-up costs, according to some state leaders. Even if unused facilities are available in rural areas, they explained, these buildings often don't meet licensing requirements or are uninhabitable without costly renovations, obligating child care providers to front-load costs. A limited supply of quality staff presented further challenges.

One state leader expressed that there is a "lack of funding to invest in healthy, safe facilities," among other financial constraints. One state leader suggested:

> *"A universal early education system that more seamlessly blended state and federal funding streams would make it easier for local programs to serve children as opposed to piecing together a financing approach. If you could bring them all under one umbrella and fully fund high-quality preschool access to all young children, whether it was run by a school district or private child care or Head Start … that would be the ultimate."*

Leaders also echoed themes of resource shortages observed by directors, educators, and families, including those related to health, housing, transportation, and nutrition, in some rural areas of their states. Transportation emerged as one of the most significant obstacles to program access. It "is one of the most challenging aspects within rural communities," shared one state leader. For families, limited transportation, often exacerbated by long travel times, constrained their ability to access early learning programs and obtain necessary health services.

In rural communities, Head Start often played a critical role as both a service provider and a connector — linking families to health care, nutrition assistance, developmental support, and community resources that would otherwise be inaccessible. As one state leader noted:

> *"Head Start is the bridge to those services … that are scarce throughout our communities. … If it had not been … for Head Start, many children and families in rural areas would not be receiving these types of services and support."*

While acknowledging the important role Head Start plays in many rural areas, state leaders also expressed concern over budget cuts — often felt more acutely in rural vs. urban programs — that could limit its reach and impact.

Despite the many complexities rural early childhood programs face, state leaders described these communities as inventive and resilient. One state leader explained:

> *"There's a lot of programs, in rural communities in particular, that are really innovative about how [they] fill needs, and how they work with partners to do so."*

Others described early childhood programs partnering with university extension offices, public health agencies, school districts, and local businesses to fill gaps in services and to creatively support families. State leaders also underscored the importance of supplementary programs such as home visiting, which supports parents and children in their homes to ensure they have the resources they need.

Overall, state leaders described a rural early childhood system marked by structural constraints alongside a deep-rooted commitment to community. Limited child care supply, infrastructure gaps, and transportation challenges continue to shape families' access to early learning in rural communities.

Nevertheless, leaders emphasized the value of innovative collaboration and the stabilizing presence of well-established Head Start programs and public schools as key contributors to the resilience and effectiveness of rural early education efforts.

Rural Employers and Business/Organizational Leaders

A group of rural leaders and employers, including hospital administrators, school superintendents, and manufacturers, shared their views on their communities' child care challenges, the benefits they currently provide employees, and the community and policy solutions they believed would strengthen the current and future workforce.

Employers' offerings of family-friendly benefits varied widely, ranging from minimal or no targeted supports to fairly comprehensive packages. Common offerings included health, dental, and vision insurance; life insurance; short-term disability; and retirement plans. Several employers also described paid parental leave, paid sick leave for part-time staff, tuition scholarships, and flexible scheduling arrangements such as a four-day workweek, hybrid work, or shared sick days. Despite these provisions, very few employers have implemented policies or supports specific to child care, such as scholarships or onsite programs, generally noting either that they lack financial resources or space or that regulatory and administrative requirements make such programs difficult to establish.

Across all three states, child care instability emerged as a concrete operational challenge for businesses. Employers reported frequent lateness and absenteeism tied to failed child care arrangements, with these effects concentrated among hourly workers and employees on nonstandard shifts.

> **Several respondents estimated that a large share of their workforce — sometimes 40-60% — have children of child care age and described local arrangements that are often fragile: reliance on informal home-based providers, long waitlists for programs, and the prevalence of unlicensed care settings that may lack proper state oversight.**

Even those employers who generally employed individuals with older, school-age children and did not say they perceived significant impacts of child care challenges on their operations acknowledged the limited supply of regulated child care as a latent vulnerability for their broader communities.

Employers acknowledged that cost pressures intensified child care access challenges in their communities. Like the families themselves, some employers reported that the price of care approaches or exceeds earned wages for many local residents, often forcing difficult trade-offs: Some parents cannot afford formal early childhood programs and therefore cannot sustain continuous employment, and employers face hiring and retention barriers as a result.

> **This economic mismatch contributes to a cycle in which low wages and high care costs mutually constrain workforce participation and program viability.**

When asked to imagine ideal solutions, employers most commonly articulated support for some type of on-site child care, including arrangements that would accommodate evening and late-night shifts. As an alternative to this often costly provision, many employers expressed interest in collaborative or community-based strategies: cost-sharing models, partnerships with schools or community organizations, expansion of public programs such as Head Start or early childhood offerings in local school districts, and targeted scholarships for families with low incomes. Employers also recommended greater state and federal investment to lower family costs and expand capacity.

In sum, rural employers described a dual reality: Many offer standard employment benefits and may seek to offer more targeted family-friendly supports, but child care shortages and affordability problems impose persistent operational costs through absenteeism and turnover, especially among hourly and shift workers. Addressing these challenges requires collaboration among local employers, child care providers, and other community organizations as well as targeted public investment to make early childhood programs more affordable for families in rural areas.

Policy Recommendations for Local, State, and Federal Decisionmakers

This study reveals a rural child care ecosystem under strain — financially fragile, operationally stretched, and unevenly supported — yet deeply valued by the communities it serves. At the center of this strain is a shared financial reality experienced by families, educators, and program directors. Rural families face limited access to subsidies, long waitlists, transportation barriers, and gaps in infant and nontraditional-hour care — all of which constrain parents' ability to work and children's ability to access early learning. These challenges are amplified for families of children with disabilities, families in foster care systems, and those whose incomes fall just outside eligibility thresholds for public programs. At the same time, directors struggle to balance rising operational expenses with families' limited ability to pay. Administrative burdens tied to licensing, subsidy reimbursement, and federal programs compound this strain. Teachers — who are foundational to program quality — experience low wages, limited benefits, substitute shortages, and moderate-to-high stress levels, even as they demonstrate deep dedication to the children in their care. Workforce instability, driven largely by compensation inequities and limited professional supports, directly affects program availability and quality.

These interconnected pressures ripple outward.

Yet alongside these challenges, rural communities demonstrate clear strengths. There are often deep, trusting relationships between educators and families. Many providers extend flexibility and compassion to families experiencing hardship, absorbing financial losses in order to keep children enrolled. Publicly funded programs, especially Head Start, serve as essential anchors, offering comprehensive supports that extend beyond early education. These relational strengths form a critical foundation — but they cannot substitute for systemic investment.

The findings from this study highlight several opportunities to strengthen child care and early learning programs in Southern rural communities. Addressing the challenges outlined in this report requires policies responsive to the distinct geographic, economic, and demographic realities of the rural South. The following policy recommendations are organized into three categories of decisionmakers: **federal policymakers** (including an indication of which federal body or agency would carry out the recommendation); **state policymakers**; and **local government officials, business leaders, and other community leaders**.

Federal Policymakers

General/Administrative

- Streamline applications and reporting requirements across early childhood programs to reduce administrative burden for families and providers. (*U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, U.S. Department of Education*)

Child Care Subsidy (CCDBG)

- Increase federal investment in CCDBG to ensure equitable access to federal funding for rural areas. (*Congress*)
- Require states to issue subsidy payments prospectively and based on enrollment instead of attendance. (*U.S. Department of Health and Human Services*)
- Ensure that states set family copays that do not exceed 7% of household income. *(U.S. Department of Health and Human Services)*
- Clarify that TANF carryover funds can be utilized by states for families eligible for child care subsidy when additional funds are needed to prevent or reduce a waiting list. (*U.S. Department of Health and Human Services*)

Head Start

- Increase federal funding in Head Start to advance access in rural communities with special consideration for:
  - o Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships (*Congress*)
  - o Migrant and Seasonal Head Start and Tribal Head Start programs (*Congress*)
  - o Transportation to and from programs (*Congress*, *U.S. Department of Health and Human Services*)
- Develop a graduated salary scale based on education and experience. (*Congress, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services*)
- Create easier ways for family child care providers to access Head Start funding (e.g., contract with an intermediary organization). (*Congress, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services*)
- Offer technical assistance to prospective rural grantees to support the preparation of applications. (*Congress, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services*)

Wraparound Supports and Other Resources

- Increase funding and decrease paperwork for providers participating in federal nutrition programs, including CACFP and the Summer Food Service Program, to adequately cover the cost of meals and increase the number of children enrolled. (*Congress, U.S. Department of Agriculture*)

- Eliminate burdens for families enrolling in and maintaining SNAP and WIC benefits and Medicaid. (*Congress*, *U.S. Department of Agriculture, Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services*)
- Ensure that funding from rural-specific initiatives, such as the USDA Rural Business Development Grant program, can be used for child-care-related purposes (e.g., facility expansion or construction to increase child care slots for infants and toddlers) to promote supply in rural communities. (*Congress*, *U.S. Department of Agriculture*)

Employer-Provided Child Care Supports

- Provide enhancements to tax policies that support employer-sponsored child care for medium and small businesses, with special consideration for nontraditional work schedules and infant/toddler care. (*Congress*)
- Provide resources and support to ensure that employers can take advantage of federal tax credits. *(U.S. Department of the Treasury)*

State Policymakers

Child Care Subsidy

- Base subsidy payments on an accurate cost of care model to promote fair payments for rural providers.
- Simplify eligibility and redetermination applications to ensure access for rural families and remove administrative barriers (e.g., ensure renewal and application processes do not result in lost hours on the job; provide convenient enrollment locations for rural families with disabilities or without transportation).
- Use CCDBG quality dollars to expand provider support networks, including family child care networks, to increase collaborative opportunities that enhance their skillsets.
- Ensure that reimbursement rates for family child care providers reflect the true cost of care in those environments.
- Include rural child care leaders when writing state CCDF plans.

Child Care Licensing

- Consult with providers, including those in family child care, to ensure that licensing requirements support the health, safety, and development of children while minimizing administrative burdens on providers.
- Incorporate ongoing technical assistance to support child care providers in reducing noncompliance with licensing regulations.
- Ensure licensing professionals enforce rules reliably and consistently when monitoring programs.

Professional Development

- Provide a combination of virtual and in-person synchronous professional development opportunities, accounting for various experience levels of early childhood staff.
- Support regional hub models, incorporating child care resource and referral agencies, public schools, providers, and support agencies to promote coordination and resource-sharing among early childhood programs in rural areas.
- Provide pathways for unlicensed providers in rural areas to become licensed by the state and for FFN providers to receive appropriate resources to support young children's development.
- Require as part of state child care plans that all licensed providers receiving subsidy dollars implement a state-approved curriculum, with at least a portion of the funding coming from CCDBG quality dollars.
- Ensure directors have the resources to implement professional development at the site level that is tailored to staff needs (especially around challenging behaviors) and to provide mentoring at the classroom level that respects staff experience and areas for growth.

Other Opportunities for States to Prioritize Rural Communities

- Explore innovative ways (e.g., cost sharing models, tax credits, child care trust funds) to provide meaningful support for families' child care expenses.
- Dedicate funding streams for capital improvements and material resources to ensure programs can provide quality instructional environments.
- Prioritize funding to provide incentives to rural child care programs that serve infants and toddlers, children with disabilities, and dual language learners, as well as those who offer care during nontraditional hours.
- Explore creative approaches to increase wages for teachers.

Local Communities

Local Government/Business Leaders

- Raise awareness of available tax credits and other opportunities that support child care affordability for families and employers by engaging advocacy groups, employer organizations, and the philanthropic community.
- Review local regulatory and zoning ordinances to identify and, as appropriate, remove barriers for current and prospective child care providers, including home-based providers, such as limitations on land use.
- Include early childhood professionals in local planning efforts in collaboration with employers, chambers of commerce, and city or county government.
- Encourage employers to take advantage of recent enhancements to the Employer-Provided Child Care Credit by pooling resources to address shared child care needs.
- Understand, utilize, and communicate data related to child care supply and family well-being.

Collaborative Work in the Community

- Conduct local child care needs assessments with child care program administrators, business leaders, philanthropy, and nonprofits to identify resources that could expand child care supply.
- Promote partnerships between community child care providers and local school districts to strengthen early childhood programs through shared professional development, coordinated planning, data sharing, and resource exchange.
- Promote partnerships among local libraries, other community organizations (including the philanthropic sector), child care programs, and informal caregivers in providing resources.
- Create a local or regional early childhood support association that meets regularly to address challenges experienced by local programs, develop solutions, and bring in experts to address behavioral challenges in classrooms, early intervention services, etc.
- Check availability of cost-sharing and shared services opportunities in communities and states to allow for more affordable group insurance, liability insurance, or supply purchasing for child care providers.

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