mayors innovation project

FROM CRISIS TO COMMUNITY ASSET: BUILDING A SUPPORTIVE CHILDCARE ECOSYSTEM FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

WINTER 2026 POLICY MEETING
JANUARY 30-31 · WASHINGTON DC

Childcare expenses are crushing family budgets, pushing thousands below the poverty line. Meanwhile, the childcare workforce struggles with low pay and poor benefits. This panel examines the childcare crisis while showcasing how strategic municipal investments—in training for workers, reducing barriers to starting childcare facilities and worker compensation—are essential to creating social equity, driving workforce participation, and ensuring long-term local economic health.



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RESOURCES

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44	"How Cities Can Fill Federal Safety Net Gaps in Child Care and Early Learning," Lizzy Ferrara & Gabi Velasco, Urban Institute, Sep. 05, 2025.
47	Pages excerpted from "ACC Commission funds workforce support plan, approves housing developments," Chris Dowd, Athens Politics Nerd, Aug. 9, 2024.





THE HUNT INSTITUTE'S

EARLY CHILDHOOD LEADERSHIP SUMMIT

KEY CONCEPTS IN EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION

SEPTEMBER 2025



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INTRODUCTION

During the first five years of life, the brain develops more rapidly than at any other time, forming the neural connections that influence cognitive, social-emotional, and physical development. Early care and education (ECE) encompasses the structured support and learning experiences provided to children in these critical years. High-quality ECE programs aim to create safe, nurturing environments staffed with qualified early educators who engage children in learning experiences that are developmentally appropriate. Investing in high-quality ECE is a proven strategy for supporting optimal child development, parental participation in the workforce, and broader economic productivity. The four chapters of the brief explore the developmental, social, and economic importance of ECE, ECE governance models, types of ECE funding, and issues of access and affordability in ECE. The chapters include recent research and data, examples of promising initiatives, and policy considerations to guide action.

01. **The critical importance of high-quality early care and learning:** The first chapter explores early brain development, the effects of adverse childhood experiences, and the return on investing in high-quality ECE. It introduces the types of early care and education settings and highlights the importance of the early childhood workforce.
02. **Early childhood governance:** The second chapter discusses three models of early childhood governance and the benefits of unified governance. It compares centralized and decentralized governance and regulatory systems influencing ECE settings.
03. **Funding early care and education:** The third chapter maps federal, state, and local funding for ECE. It includes a discussion of braided funding, funding innovations, and private funding for ECE initiatives.
04. **Access to affordable early care and education:** The fourth chapter examines factors influencing ECE access, including the market-based business model and the true cost of care. It presents a snapshot of ECE affordability by comparing the price of child care across quality levels and age groups, and the share of child care in household budgets. The chapter highlights promising strategies for improving ECE access and affordability.



CORE CONCEPTS OF EARLY DEVELOPMENT

01. Human development is shaped by a dynamic and continuous interaction between biology and experience.
02. Culture influences every aspect of human development and is reflected in childrearing beliefs and practices designed to promote healthy adaptation.
03. The growth of self-regulation is a cornerstone of early childhood development that cuts across all domains of behavior.
04. Children are active participants in their own development, reflecting the intrinsic human drive to explore and master one's environment.
05. Human relationships, and the effects of relationships, are the building blocks of healthy development.
06. The broad range of individual differences among young children often makes it difficult to distinguish normal variations and maturational delays from transient disorders and persistent impairments.
07. The development of children unfolds along individual pathways whose trajectories are characterized by continuities and discontinuities, as well as by a series of significant transitions.
08. Human development is shaped by the ongoing interplay among sources of vulnerability and sources of resilience.
09. The timing of early experiences can matter, but, more often than not, the developing child remains vulnerable to risks and open to protective influences throughout the early years of life and into adulthood.
10. The course of development can be altered in early childhood by effective interventions that change the balance between risk and protection, thereby shifting the odds in favor of more adaptive outcomes.

Shonkoff & Phillips (2000)



I. THE CRITICAL IMPORTANCE OF EARLY CARE AND LEARNING

High-quality early care and education (ECE) ensures consistent exposure to language-rich environments that are essential for young children to develop robust networks of neural connectivity that undergird their academic and life success for decades to come. High-quality ECE is rooted in consistent, responsive interactions with skilled educators, a developmentally appropriate curriculum, and safe, stimulating spaces that encourage exploration and learning. Research shows that children enrolled in strong ECE programs demonstrate increased literacy, numeracy, and social-emotional skills upon kindergarten entry, which correlate with long-term success in school and beyond. These benefits extend beyond individual children. Parents and caregivers experience increased workforce participation and relatedly, economic stability, while the state ensures a productive future workforce. For children from marginalized or under-resourced communities, high-quality ECE serves as a critical equalizer, narrowing opportunity gaps that appear as early as nine months and widen significantly by age two.

High-Quality Early Care and Education

There are six broad factors that contribute to the quality of ECE environments, including the preparation and compensation of early educators, curriculum, staff-to-child ratios, safety, family engagement, and participation in quality improvement systems (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Factors Contributing to High-Quality Early Care and Education



Well-prepared and supported educators: Well-prepared educators guide age-appropriate activities that encourage exploration, creativity, and social interaction in children. High-quality programs employ educators who have specialized knowledge in early childhood development and who receive ongoing professional development to refine their practice. Supportive working conditions, including fair compensation, manageable workloads, and access to benefits are critical to retain and grow this workforce. Studies show that investing in the early childhood workforce is impactful in strengthening children's learning and development.

Developmentally appropriate curriculum and assessment: Effective early care and education programs use curricula that integrate play, exploration, and interaction, while integrating aspects of the cultural, linguistic, and familial backgrounds of each child. A high-quality curriculum supports whole-child development, including early literacy and numeracy. The curriculum should align with assessment practices that help early educators comprehensively evaluate and support children's learning and development.

Appropriate ratios and group sizes: Maintaining developmentally appropriate staff-to-child ratios and class sizes facilitates individualized attention, fosters stronger relationships between educators and children, ensures children's safety, and helps educators effectively address children's varying needs and interests. The Administration of Children and Families' Office of Child Care and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), provide guidelines for ratios and class sizes for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers.

Safe Learning Environments: High-quality programs offer safe, clean, and well-maintained spaces that are organized to encourage exploration, creativity, and independence. Such spaces are rich in developmentally appropriate materials, including books, toys and sensory materials that reflect diverse cultures and learning styles. Thoughtfully designed environments support not only academic skills but also self-regulation, confidence, and a sense of belonging.

Family Engagement: High-quality programs prioritize family engagement to ensure consistency between home and school environments. Programs engage families through regular communication, workshops and field trips, and connections to parenting and child development resources. Effective family engagement is inclusive of diverse family cultures and structures and promotes family involvement in children's learning.

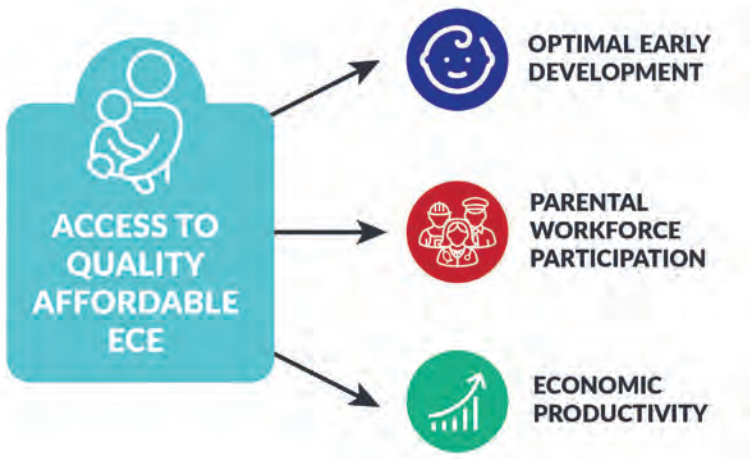


Quality Improvement Systems: A Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) is defined as, "a system that helps parents understand the level of quality in child care, preschool, and school-age care programs. QRIS was designed to help parents compare different programs by using the same set of standards. It also helps child care providers improve and communicate their quality to parents." Several states have adopted QRIS to provide families with information on the quality of ECE programs in their locality, as well as to support programs in attaining higher levels of program quality through a combination of funding and technical assistance.

The Long-Term Benefits of High-Quality ECE

Access to high-quality, affordable ECE positively influences children's early development, parental workforce participation, and the state's economic productivity (Figure 2).

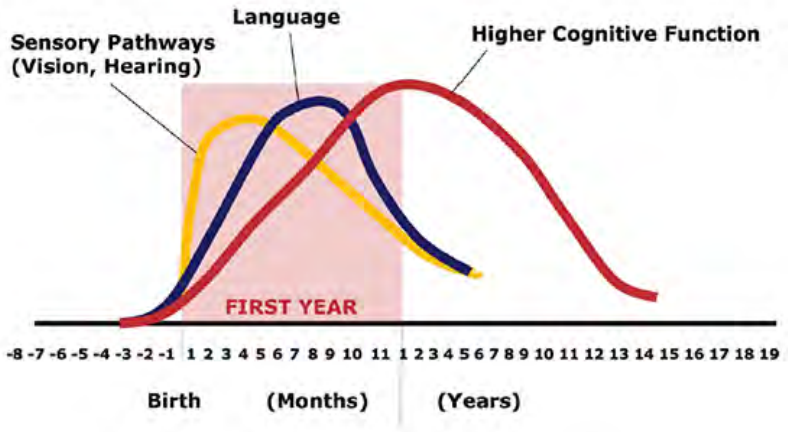
Figure 2: The Critical Importance of ECE



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Optimal Early Development: As discussed, the earliest years of life represent an unparalleled period of brain growth, forming the foundation for all future learning, behavior, and health. The quality of early relationships plays a central role in shaping healthy brain development. "Serve and return" interactions, where adults respond to a child's babbles, gestures, or cries, activate and strengthen brain circuits responsible for communication, emotional regulation, and problem-solving. During the first few years, over one million neural connections form each second, and by the age of three, a child's brain reaches approximately 80 percent of its adult volume. When adults consistently engage with young children through these reciprocal exchanges, they help build strong neural pathways that support lifelong learning and well-being. Conversely, when these interactions are absent or inconsistent, brain development can be delayed or disrupted, with long-term consequences for mental health and academic success. Figure 3 shows how vision, hearing, language and higher cognitive development occur sequentially, with 90 percent of brain development happening from birth to five.

Figure 3: Optimal Early Development



C.A. Nelson (2000)

Young children who experience extreme stress without supportive relationships can face severe developmental consequences. Toxic stress presents a major threat to early brain architecture. This form of stress, often caused by persistent poverty, abuse, neglect, or exposure to violence, can impair brain development, weaken immune and metabolic systems, and increase the risk of cognitive and emotional disorders later in life. Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), such as prolonged domestic instability or violence, are strongly associated with higher rates of chronic illness, learning challenges, and behavioral problems. Protective factors can mitigate the harmful effects of toxic stress and ACEs. Consistent, nurturing relationships with at least one adult, such as a parent, caregiver, or educator, can buffer children from their impact. Early intervention and trauma-informed practices, such as home visiting, Two-Generation (2Gen) approaches, and parent engagement can help mitigate ACEs and promote healthy development.

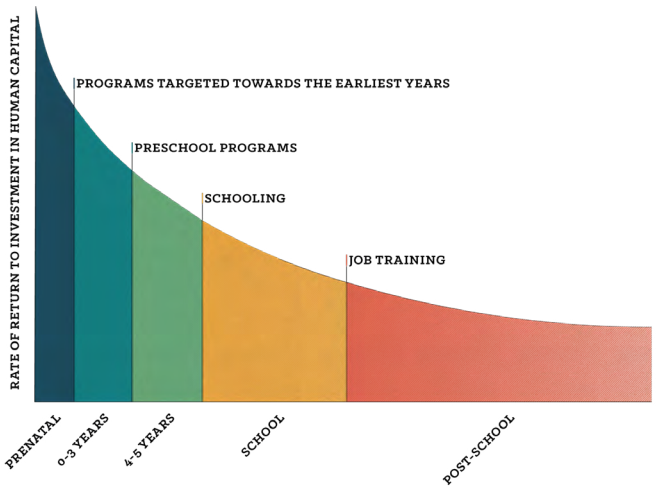
Parental Workforce Participation: Access to reliable ECE enables parents to stay in the workforce. In the United States, 65 percent of children age five and under live in households where all available parents are working. Without dependable child care, parents face significant barriers to work, education, or job training, leading to income instability and reduced lifetime earnings. Research estimates that child care shortages lead mothers to lose 15 percent of their earnings, which costs them $295,000 in lost wages and related retirement income over their lifetimes, while exacerbating the gender wage gap. Child care shortages can strain family finances, decrease tax paying ability, and increase the need for public support.

Economic Productivity: The U.S Chamber of Commerce considers the child care sector "critical to the American economy. Not only does childcare generate its own economic output, but since it ensures working parents can go to work, childcare also supports every other industry." Lack of access to child care costs the U.S. economy 1.4 percent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), or approximately $122 billion annually. Employers lose billions, while public systems bear the costs of increased social service use, higher health care needs, and lower tax revenues. Reliable access to ECE increases labor force participation, reduces dependency on public assistance, and strengthens the tax base.

RETURN ON INVESTMENT OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

The Heckman curve shows that programs supporting early development have the highest return on investment (Figure 3). The Perry Preschool, an example of high-quality program for 3–5-year olds, showed a return on investment between $7 and $12 for each dollar invested in preschool education. Recent studies show that savings from investing early are reaped across education and social service systems in the form of reduction in grade retention, special education, social supports and incarceration as well as increases in employment and taxpaying ability. The lifelong gains of high-quality early education include reduced opportunity gaps and improved graduation rates, economic stability, and health outcomes.

Figure 4: Heckman Equation



Heckman Equation

Types of ECE Programs

Early care and education occur in a variety of settings, including licensed and unlicensed programs. Mixed delivery programs enable public and private programs to be co-located, reaping cost savings and expanding access for families. Typical program types include the following:

- **Family, Friend, and Neighbor (FFN)** care occurs in the provider's home and is typically unlicensed. This setting offers flexibility in hours, is less expensive, and relies on individuals' social networks (relatives, friends, or neighbors) to provide care.
- **Family Child Care (FCC)**, also called Home-Based Child Care (HBCC), occurs in homes in which one or two early educators support a small group of mixed-age children. These settings are usually registered. They are likely to reflect families' linguistic backgrounds and offer care at non-traditional hours.
- **Child Care Centers** operate out of commercial buildings and usually enroll a larger number of children. Centers typically group children by age, providing classroom environments. These programs are often subject to higher regulatory standards.
- **Early Head Start** and **Head Start** are federally funded, regulated, community-based programs serving infants, toddlers, and preschool-aged children from low-income families and/or children who experience other risk factors.
- Preschool programs are typically regulated and increasingly offered via mixed-delivery models involving school districts, private, community, and faith-based programs, which may also provide child care for infants and toddlers in the same location.

Each type of program offers different strengths. FFN and FCC settings tend to be more culturally aligned and flexible, while center-based and school-affiliated programs are likely to offer structured learning and professional oversight. Head Start and Early Head Start uniquely serve low-income families and children experiencing risk factors such as homelessness or disabilities, and offer integrated health, nutrition, and family support services.

MIXED DELIVERY PROGRAMS

"Mixed delivery ECE is the coordinated effort to support ECE services across a range of quality settings, building on the strengths and capacity of all provider types, to help meet the varied needs of children and families. In a mixed delivery ECE system, families have their choice of access to affordable, high-quality ECE services across a range of settings, including center-based child care, schools, family child care homes, and Head Start funded programs. Effective mixed delivery ECE systems have the potential to offer more choices to serve additional families; reduce the cost of care for families by leveraging public funding; improve the reach and efficiency of state and federal public ECE investments; and offer more seamless, higher quality care to meet comprehensive child development and family work support needs."

Administration for Children and Families



The ECE Workforce

An estimated one million early educators are employed in the ECE sector, serving as the "workforce behind the workforce" (Figure 5). The ECE workforce allows parents to stay in the workforce, even as it supports the early development of the future workforce. However, early educators are paid about $14.60 per hour on average as compared to the lowest state average living wage (for an individual) of $19.43. Policies that help attract early educators to the field and keep them engaged through supplementing wages and providing benefits are needed to address widespread burnout and attrition in the sector. Recent data on nationwide attrition rates for early educators are not available, but data from 2022 indicate an attrition rate of 14.9 percent, which jeopardizes the consistency of care for young children and the ability of their parents to stay in the workforce.

Figure 5: The Workforce Behind the Workforce



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Power to the Profession, a national taskforce, established a framework for professionalizing the ECE sector. Their authoritative report, released in 2020, outlines "career pathways, preparation, competencies, responsibilities, and compensation" that ensure fairness and job satisfaction for early educators and optimal learning conditions for young children. Table I illustrates standard roles and qualifications within the ECE profession that the report recommends.

Table I: Recommended Roles and Qualifications of Early Childhood Professionals

Role	Definition	Qualifications
ECE I	ECE I is a member of the early childhood education teaching team in a supportive role in birth to Grade 3 settings.	Professional preparation program that meets a minimum of 120 hours
ECE II	ECE II can be responsible for the learning environment, play a lead role in birth through age 5 settings, and play a supportive rather than a lead role in K-Grade 3 settings. Guides practice of ECE I.	ECE Associate's degree
ECE III	ECE III can be responsible for the learning environment, play a lead role, and guide practice of ECE I and II in birth to Grade 3 settings.	ECE Bachelor's degree or Master's degree

To ensure fair compensation for ECE professionals, the report recommends that early educators with similar qualifications, experience, and job responsibilities receive comparable compensation. To achieve pay parity, compensation must be comparable across child age, race of educator, education setting, skill, competency, and qualifications. Compensation should increase as educators gain competency and experience, moving up levels. Further, compensation should include an adequate benefits package. Power to the Profession recommends that the ECE sector should adopt the minimum standards of public education.

The report also established professional standards and competencies, including knowledge and skills in child development, family partnerships, child observation and assessment, culturally-appropriate teaching, integrated discipline, and professionalism. The report further recommends that educators become licensed through a state board and are provided opportunities for higher education and professional development.

APPRENTICESHIP PROGRAMS FOR EARLY EDUCATORS

States have invested in apprenticeship programs to attract new entrants to the ECE sector, providing scholarships for enrollment in ECE coursework and compensation for simultaneously working or apprenticing at a participating ECE program.

- The Connecticut Department of Labor implements a Registered Apprenticeship for Early Childhood Educators, providing work-based learning, pathways towards credentials, and wage increases for new early educators in center-based settings.
- Kentucky has a four-part apprenticeship approach that builds broad career readiness, supports new entrants in acquiring credentials and experience, helps practising early educators gain advanced credentials, and prepares early educators for leadership positions.
- In Nebraska, the Responsive Equitable System for Preparing Early Childhood Teachers (RESPECT) Across Nebraska project is promoting apprenticeships as a pathway for new early educators to enter the field.

Conclusion

Despite strong evidence supporting the benefits of early childhood education, significant disparities persist in access to ECE, especially for children from low-income families, rural communities, and historically marginalized groups. These stem from fragmented ECE governance, underinvestment in infant and toddler care, and low wages for the early childhood workforce. Some families live in child care deserts, where licensed providers are scarce or unaffordable. These disparities contribute to opportunity gaps that compound over time for children, constrain parental workforce participation and limit the state's economic productivity. Addressing these challenges requires integrated, multi-level solutions, which are discussed in the next two chapters on governance and funding.

RESOURCES

- The Building Blocks of High-Quality Early Childhood Programs | Learning Policy Institute
- Serve and Return | The Center for the Developing Child
- Impacts of Early Childhood on Medium and Long-Term Outcomes | Education Researcher
- Lifecycle Benefit of an Influential Early Childhood Program (13% ROI) | Heckman Equation
- Unifying Framework for the Early Childhood Education Profession | Power to the Profession
- Types of Child Care | Child Care Aware of America

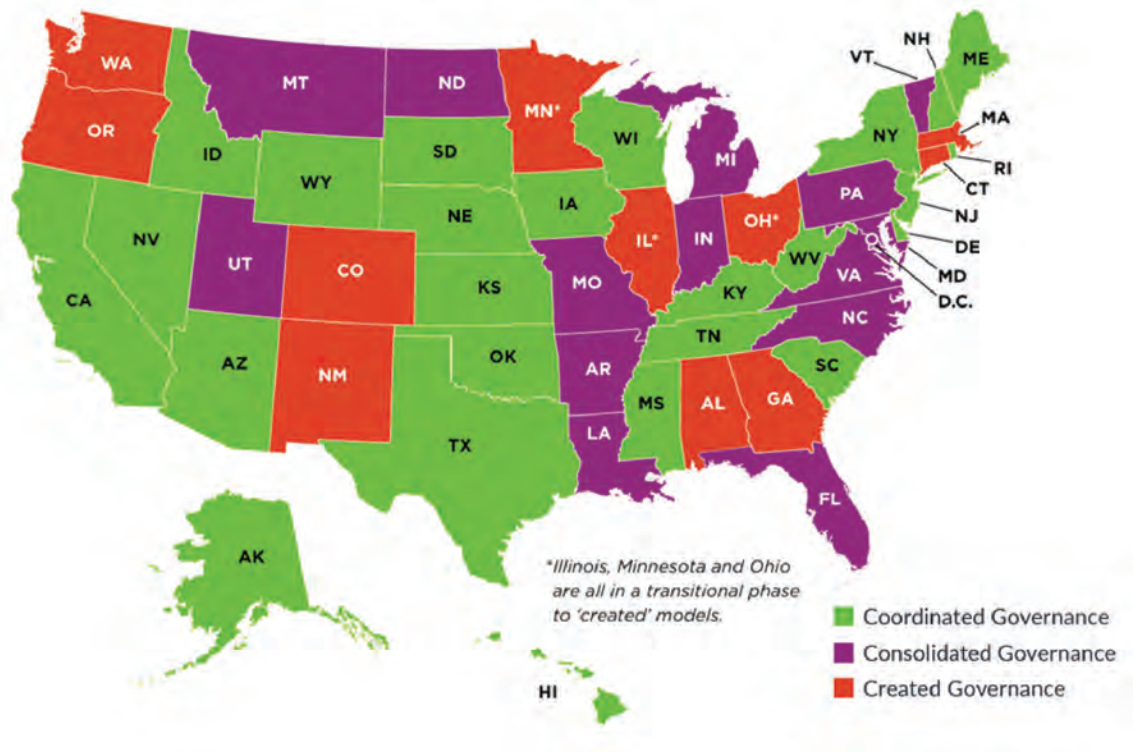
II. EARLY CHILDHOOD GOVERNANCE

Early childhood governance refers to a state's organizational structure and placement of authority and accountability for programs and services for children aged birth to five. Streamlined governance is the foundation for a comprehensive, high-quality early childhood system that supports children's learning and development. It determines the efficiency and stability of a state's child care sector and plays a critical role in shaping the availability, quality, and affordability of ECE programs. Effective governance ensures that funding is equitably distributed and accountable to families and communities. Early childhood governance has historically been fragmented with oversight for varied ECE programs such as child care licensing, subsidies, and state Pre-K programs distributed among varied state agencies. The lack of cohesion in early childhood governance led to widespread program closures during the pandemic.

The Early Childhood Governance Continuum

States have been moving toward unified governance since 2000, with several states either consolidating governance within an existing body or creating a new early childhood agency that houses all or most early care, education, and health programs. Figure 1 maps systems of early childhood governance along a three-point spectrum of coordinated, consolidated, and created systems. As of 2024, 11 states had created governance; 14 states and the District of Columbia had consolidated governance; and 25 states coordinated funding and oversight across different departments.

Figure 1: ECE Governance Systems



Education Commission of the States

- **Coordinated Governance:** Authority over ECE programs is distributed across multiple agencies, which can cause inefficiencies and communication gaps that hinder streamlined access to programs for children and families.
- **Consolidated Governance:** Authority and accountability are consolidated under an existing agency for ECE programs previously governed by disparate agencies.
- **Created Governance:** A new dedicated agency or department is established, which assumes authority and accountability for all ECE programs and services, streamlines, funding, and improves program delivery.

CONSOLIDATED GOVERNANCE

Virginia | In 2020, Virginia's General Assembly passed legislation requiring the Board of Education to establish a unified public-private system for early childhood education administered by the Virginia Department of Education, which went into effect in 2021. The legislation also established an Early Childhood Advisory Committee and Virginia Quality Birth to Five (VQB5), a uniform measurement and improvement system.

North Dakota | In 2021, North Dakota passed legislation requiring all early childhood programs and functions to be consolidated within the Department of Health and Human Services' new Early Childhood Division. In 2023, then Governor Doug Burgum authorized over $65 million of state general funds to the North Dakota Child Care Initiative for improving child care access.

Unifying governance supports transparency and accountability, which helps to foster trust, improve decision-making, and ensure that resources are allocated effectively and equitably. Transparent governance enables:

- Visibility into how decisions are made, funds are distributed, and ECE programs are evaluated, reducing waste.
- Stakeholder engagement in the decision-making process, enabling families to have a voice in shaping policies that affect them.
- Collection of data on ECE program outcomes, such as enrollment rates, achievement gaps, and funding disparities.

CREATED GOVERNANCE

New Mexico | New Mexico streamlined early childhood governance by initiating the development of the Early Childhood Education and Care Department (ECECD) in 2020. Previously, the Children, Youth and Families Department oversaw child care assistance, home visiting, preschool, Head Start and the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP). The Departments of Health and Public Education and the Health Care Authority managed other early health and education programs. The creation of the ECECD led to all ECE-related programs being supported by one agency, streamlining access to early childhood programs for families.

Colorado | In 2021, Colorado established the Department of Early Childhood (DEC) to unify early childhood governance under a new state agency. The DEC consolidated programs previously implemented by the Department of Education and the Department of Human Services. DEC oversees child care, home visiting, early childhood mental health, and child abuse prevention programs and houses the new Colorado Universal Preschool program. A few early childhood programs remain with other agencies. The state will evaluate transitioning these programs to DEC in 2025.

Regulatory Systems

Additional considerations for states, as they calibrate ECE governance, are addressing tensions between centralization and decentralization for stabilizing and expanding the ECE sector. Centralized models promote consistency and reduce disparities but may not account for local context and variation. Decentralized models promote innovation and allow for stakeholder input but may complicate equitable and consistent implementation across contexts. Table I compares centralized and decentralized approaches:

Table I: Centralized and Decentralized Models of Governance

Centralized Models	Decentralized Models
Advantages ▪ Promotes consistency in policies, funding, and regulations across the state, facilitating uniform standards and ease of monitoring. ▪ Reduces disparities by ensuring that all regions regardless of size or wealth, follow the same guidelines. **Challenges** ▪ May not address local needs or be adaptable to diverse contexts	**Advantages** ▪ Allows for greater flexibility in tailoring programs for local populations. ▪ Allows for stakeholder input in decision making **Challenges** ▪ May result in significant variations in ECE program quality and availability. ▪ May not ensure equitable access to high-quality ECE for underserved communities.

Three areas have become focal points in discussions of regulatory changes: staff credentials, staff-to-child ratios, and safety standards. Proponents believe that relaxing some requirements related to these can reduce operational costs for child care owners and attract new entrants to the sector, particularly in underserved areas. However, experts caution that relaxing regulations related to early educators' minimum age, background checks, credentials, and staff-to-child ratios raise safety concerns. Higher staff-to-child ratios are shown to reduce the level of individualized attention that is shown to foster secure attachment and responsive interactions in young children, while lower preschool ratios are shown to correlate longer-term reading and math outcomes.



POLICY PRIORITIES

Policy decisions at all levels of government impact the resources available for ECE, influencing important issues like compensation, subsidies, and preschool access. To further strengthen ECE governance, could policymakers consider:

- Examining the governance landscape to identify opportunities to streamline funding in service of a stable and thriving ECE sector throughout the state.
- Developing greater coordination among public agencies governing child care and early education to reduce inefficiencies and promote greater systematic coherence.
- Ensuring that opportunity gaps in access, affordability, safety and quality for underserved communities are addressed through improved governance of ECE programs.

RESOURCES

- A Framework for Choosing an Early Childhood Governance Model | The Build Initiative
- Early Care and Education Governance Models | Education Commission of the States
- A Path Forward on Child Care Regulation | Center for American Progress



III. FUNDING EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION

K-12 education has long been recognized as a public good and supported by sustained public funding. However, Early Care and Education (ECE) is typically funded through a mixed approach that often falls short of the need. It is estimated that parents spend $42 billion on ECE annually, while federal and state funding provides about $34 billion to the ECE sector. ECE is typically funded through federal grants and programs and supplemented through general funds at the state level. Philanthropic and private funding provide additional resources for ECE programs in many states. States may additionally use alternative strategies like braided funding for ECE initiatives. This chapter details the landscape of ECE funding, including public, private, and mixed funding streams.

Public Funding Streams

Early childhood programs are supported through the following federal funding streams:

- Head Start and Early Head Start, which provides eligible children and families with early education and wraparound support.
- Preschool Development Grant Birth to Five (PDGB5), which supports the development of high-quality preschool programs, enhances early childhood education systems, and supports professional development for early childhood educators.
- Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG), which supports child care subsidies for eligible families and compliance with safety standards in child care centers.

State and local funding may be leveraged to initiate and expand public preschool programs, supplement existing early childhood education initiatives, or extend services such as special education programs for preschool-aged children. Many states offer public Pre-K Programs that provide free or subsidized education for four-year-olds to ensure that children from low- and middle-income families develop school readiness. Local school districts may also allocate funds for early intervention or additional educational supports for preschool-aged children.

Federal and state expenditures for ECE programs have increased over the past few years but are still inadequate relative to the number of children who are eligible for these programs. Table I lists the percentage of eligible children served by the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG), Head Start, and Early Head Start in three sample states.

Table I: Percentage of Eligible Children Served by Key ECE Programs

States	CCDBG	Head Start	Early Head Start
Louisiana	14%	31%	8%
North Dakota	10%	50%	17%
Washington	13%	25%	13%
National Average	13%	26%	10%

Alternative Funding Strategies

The Children's Funding Project defines braided funding as, "two or more funding streams... used in a coordinated fashion to support a single initiative, but costs are closely tracked and allocated to individual funding streams. There may be restrictions as to which funds can be used for which purposes." At the system level, a state may braid funds to support preschool and wage supplementation initiatives. At the program level, a licensed child care center may accept child care subsidies, receive early intervention funds, and also serve as a Head Start or public preschool provider through braiding private tuition dollars with public funding.

BRAIDED FUNDING SUPPORTING WORKFORCE INITIATIVES

Workforce incentives that help early educators improve their qualifications and training are shown to support the retention of educators. They include scholarships, loan forgiveness programs, and salary supplements for early childhood educators. T.E.A.C.H Early Childhood® and Child Care WAGE$® are established workforce programs that several states have implemented through combining federal, state, local, and private funding streams.

Teacher Education and Compensation Helps or T.E.A.C.H Early Childhood® is a national, evidence-based initiative active in 22 states that provides early educators with scholarships to advance in their education. Scholarship recipients are expected to complete a specified number of hours of coursework and remain with the sponsoring ECE program for a specified period of time after completing their course. The program is funded through the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) Quality Funds, state general funds, state Pre-K funds, and other sources. In 2024, T.E.A.C.H Early Childhood® invested over $64 million nationally and supported 17,000 recipients potentially benefiting over 640,000 children.

The Child Care WAGE$® program provides salary supplements to early educators and is funded through the same streams as T.E.A.C.H®. To qualify for this program, an applicant must have 12 semester hours of early childhood coursework or the Child Development Associate (CDA) credential. WAGE$® aims to increase recruitment, compensation, and retention of early educators. WAGE$ operates in six states. Nationally, in 2023-2024, the average six-month wage supplement provided per educator was $1,312. Over 4,000 ECE programs participated in the program, with over 10,600 educators receiving supplements.



States have funded ECE initiatives through other innovative methods as well. Table II includes examples of appropriations, taxes, funds and partnerships in support of sustainable early initiatives.

Table II: Alternative Funding Strategies

Strategy	
General Fund Appropriations	States may use **general funds** to match federal funding or to go beyond required matching or Maintenance-of-Effort requirements for early childhood programs.
Lotteries	States may use **lotteries** to fund education programs, including state-funded preschool.
Taxes	**Sales Taxes:** States may use sales tax income to fund early childhood programs. **"Sin" Taxes:** States may also levy taxes on items such as alcohol, tobacco, and gambling.
Tax Credits	A variety of **tax credits** support early education, including personal income tax credits, business income tax credits, and investment and incentive tax credits.
Land Grants	States may allocate **revenues** gathered through land, oil, and gas, toward early initiatives.
Tobacco Settlement Funds	The Tobacco Master Settlement Agreement of November 1998 allowed states to use a portion of their **settlement** to fund early childhood initiatives.
Children's Trust Fund	These **funds** are typically used for child abuse and neglect prevention but can also support early childhood initiatives.
Children's Funding Project	This agency supports policymakers, agency staff; and advocates identify and leverage existing funding in effective and sustainable ways.

Private Funding

Private funding refers to financial support for ECE that comes from foundations, private corporations, and donors. Private funding can help bridge the gap in areas where government funding is insufficient or unavailable.

- **Foundations**, both local and national, provide grants for initiatives that strengthen early learning and development.
- **Corporate funding** may take the form of donations, grants, or in-kind contributions from private companies supporting scholarship opportunities, cost-sharing initiatives, or workforce development and wage supplementation programs. Companies may also partner with nonprofits, community organizations, and state agencies on pooled funding initiatives in ECE.
- **Community donors and private citizens** may contribute through direct donations, fundraising events, or endowments.

POLICY PRIORITIES

States vary widely in their investment in ECE, with some providing robust funding while others have limited support. Underfunding and funding volatility may widen gaps in access and quality for rural, and low-income communities. To further strengthen ECE funding, could policymakers consider:

- Assessing which funding streams could be used more effectively and/or combined to increase funding for child care subsidies and develop targeted grant programs for child care programs.
- Building partnerships with philanthropic and business entities to develop funding streams that support expanded access to affordable, high quality child care and preschool programs, and workforce initiatives.
- Developing braided and alternative funding streams to support mixed-delivery models in underserved areas of the state.

RESOURCES

- Federal Funding Streams for Child Care and Early Childhood Education | National Conference of State Legislators
- State Fact Sheets | First Five Year Fund
- Blending and Braiding | Children's Funding Initiative



IV. ACCESS TO AFFORDABLE EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION

This chapter discusses the impact of fragmented governance and funding on access to and affordability of early care and education (ECE). The market-based child care business model is inherently unbalanced as the true cost of providing care for families is often higher than the price that families can afford to pay for this care. Costs, including salaries and wages, as well as space and materials, add up for child care program owners, and profit margins are low or even non-existent for many programs. Early educators, on average, are some of the lowest-paid professionals in the country, and rarely have access to paid time off or health benefits. Low compensation combined with demanding work frequently causes burnout in this workforce, leading to high rates of attrition. The combined effect of elevated costs and attrition limits the capacity of child care programs, leading to challenges with access to care for families with young children.

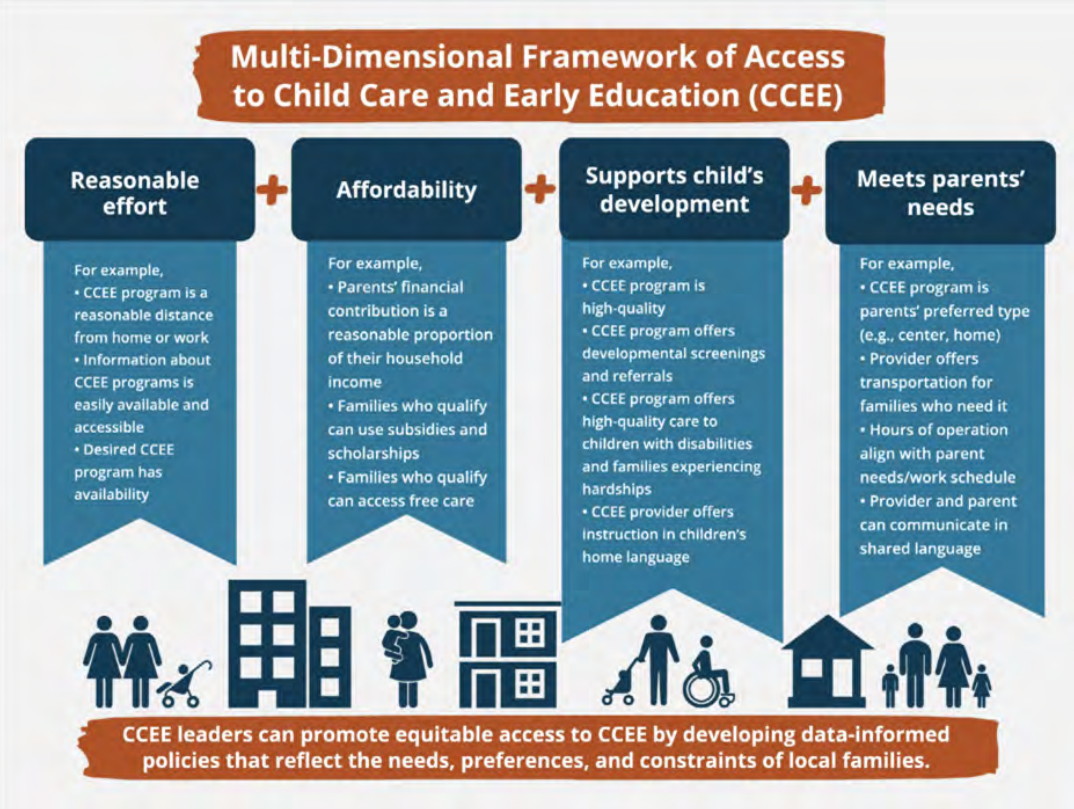
The chapter also examines how child care is largely unaffordable for low- and middle-income families. The cost of infant and toddler care is especially high, due to the smaller class sizes and the intensive care provided to this age group. Many working families struggle to pay for care for their young children, which leads to parents working part time or taking career breaks to reduce child care expenses. Mothers are likely to experience these discontinuities more than fathers, hampering their economic independence and career growth. The US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) defines affordability for subsidy-eligible families as child care that costs no more than seven percent of a household's income. The reality is that the average price of care in many states exceeds housing and food costs. The tenuous cost-revenue equation underlying the child care sector rules out reductions in the price of care. Finding affordable care is especially challenging for families in rural areas and families working non-traditional hours.



Access to Early Care and Education

Access is often discussed in terms of the availability of spaces in licensed center-based and home-based settings. The Access Guidebook offers a nuanced definition, stating that "parents, with reasonable effort and affordability, can enroll their child in an arrangement that supports the child's development and meets the parents' needs." The graphic below illustrates a multi-dimensional approach to assessing access to child care and early education.

Figure 1: Access to Early Care and Education



Administration for Children and Families

The Guidebook identifies the following as important factors to consider in assessing ECE access:

- **Ages of children served:** Disaggregating access to care by the age of children served, as there are greater gaps in access to care for infants and toddlers than for preschool-aged children.
- **Provider locations:** Mapping locations of child care programs and the proximity to child care for families by income to understand variations in access across a region.
- **Family contexts:** Surveying families on their preferences, needs, and access to ECE to factor in schedules, budgets, and linguistic and cultural preferences.
- **Employment landscape:** Mapping types, locations, and schedules of employers in an area to estimate child care requirements.

Many child care programs closed their doors during the pandemic. Recent data show that the child care sector, especially center-based care, is steadily reaching its pre-pandemic capacity, but there is still a licensed child care deficit, relative to demand from working families. Table I illustrates the estimated child care gap and public Pre-K enrollment across a sample of states. This gap is partially filled by unlicensed child care, for which reliable data is not available.

Table I: Access to Child Care

State	Children with all parents working	Estimated Licensed Child Care Gap	Enrollment in State-Funded Pre-K
Arizona	61%	25%	3%
Florida	66%	14%	34%
Wisconsin	71%	41%	32%

The ECE sector experiences chronic staff shortages and high turnover caused largely by low wages and poor working conditions for early educators. This constrains the capacity of ECE programs to meet the demand for child care. Early educators are among the lowest-paid professionals in the country, often earning wages that place them below the federal poverty line. Figure 2 shows that the median hourly wages of child care workers are significantly lower than for other early educators and the national median living wage.

Figure II: ECE Workforce Median Wage Comparison



Source 1 Source 2

*Preschool and Kindergarten Teacher wages calculated by dividing the annual median wage by 2,080 hours.

**Living Wage calculated by determining the median living wage of all 50 states and Washington D.C.

PAY EQUITY FUND FOR EARLY EDUCATORS

The Early Childhood Educator Pay Equity Fund was created in the District of Columbia in 2021 to provide wage supplements to early educators. The program, administered by the Office of the State Superintendent of Education and implemented by the Early Childhood Educator Equitable Compensation Task Force, provides quarterly award payments to ECE programs to supplement staff wages. Awards are calculated through a formula that factors in roles and credentials of staff. Once received, ECE programs must pay eligible staff wages that meet or exceed $24.52 per hour.



Affordability of Early Care and Education

As mentioned, the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) defines affordability as child care that costs no more than seven percent of the income of subsidy-eligible families. The reality is that the average price of care is usually higher than the HHS threshold in most states. Table II shows that child care is costly for sample states (below), especially for single income families

Table II: Affordability of Child Care

State	Average Price of Center-Based Care for an Infant	Ratio of Median Income - Married Couple	Ratio of Median Income - Single Parent	US Department of Health and Human Services Recommendation
Connecticut	$18,492	12%	43%	7%
Minnesota	$20,421	14%	46%	
Mississippi	$7,696	7%	29%	

The Economic Policy Institute (EPI) Family Budget Calculator breaks down the main monthly costs for families by county. This tool calculates the cost of living for families ranging from one or two adults with zero to four children. Child care is a major cost identified in the calculator which uses the price of care for a four-year-old plus the price of care for one school-age child. Infant and toddler care is not calculated. The calculator utilizes center-based rates in urban counties and FCC rates in rural and suburban counties. Table III highlights cost of living estimates for a two-parent, two-child household in three counties across the United States which show that child care is a core expense that rivals housing and food costs across counties.

Table III: EPI Family Budget Calculator Comparisons

Monthly Costs for a Family including 2 adults and 2 children	Harding County, SD (Rural)	Houston Metro Area, TX (Urban)	Morris County, NJ (Suburban)
Housing	$967	$1,357	$2,262
Food	$1,008	$919	$1,174
Child Care	$1,009	$1,558	$2,261
Transportation	$1,800	$1,458	$1,622
Health Care	$2,006	$1,270	$1,425
Other Necessities	$665	$766	$1,156
Taxes	$794	$765	$1,878
Monthly Total	$8,249	$8,092	$11,778
Annual Total	$98,989	$97,109	$141,336

AFFORDABILITY OF CHILD CARE

"Childcare prices can vary dramatically based upon the age of the child, the population size of the county the care is provided in and whether the care is center-based or home-based. Home-based preschool care in small counties is the least expensive type of full-day care, while infant center-based care in very large counties is the most expensive."

U.S. Department of Labor



Improving Access to Affordable ECE

Public investment in cost modeling and incentivizing public-private partnerships are two broad strategies that can help improve access to affordable care for families.

Cost modeling: The Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF), administered by the federal Office of Child Care, allocates funding to states for providing child care subsidies for income-eligible families. CCDF requires that states use market rate surveys to calculate the cost of child care for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. A market rate survey is "a study of the prices or fees child care programs typically charge, and families typically pay for a given type of child care setting, care by age group, and per unit of care." Every three years, as part of the CCDF grant renewal process, states use statistically valid surveys to collect price data from providers to calculate rates of subsidy reimbursement. The minimum recommendation for child care subsidy rates is the 75th percentile of the current child care market though states can set the rates higher or lower at their discretion. According to Prenatal-to-3 Policy Impact Center's State Policy Roadmap's 5-year Progress Report, "as the cost of child care continues to rise faster than reimbursement rates, the gap between what a family must pay and what the state contributes is widening. As of October 2024, of the 47 states that set rates based on market rate surveys (the District of Columbia, Colorado, New Mexico, and Virginia use alternative methodologies), 29 states released updated surveys, but only 13 states set their base reimbursement rates at the 75th percentile." Using the Market Rate Study poses the following challenges for child care programs and for families.

- The study is a point-in-time capture of what licensed providers are charging across a state, which means the rate is set from an average of rates in rural, urban, and suburban areas, despite variations in the cost of living and of running a business.
- The study data reflects only what providers can charge to attract and retain families in a given area, which is rarely the same as what it actually costs to provide quality child care.
- The data are time-bound and not responsive to economic shifts that occur after the data is captured.
- Subsidy reimbursement rates set at the 75th percentile of statewide market rate data collected 1-3 years in the past may disincentivize child care providers from accepting families using child care subsidies.
- Providers accepting subsidies may have to absorb losses to their business income or charge the family the difference between the reimbursement rate and their tuition rate.

These challenges create a two-tiered system in which families dependent on the subsidy may be clustered in settings that lack the resources to meet the same standards as more expensive programs. For providers, accepting subsidy payments that don't cover the true cost of care can lead to financial strain, reduced staffing, or even program closures. CCDF allows two other methods of calculating costs: 1) the cost estimation model; and 2) the cost study or survey, widely known as cost models, which promise fairer subsidy pricing at the program level to keep child care providers in business, and powerful data at the systems level to help states make strategic investments in the sector. Table IV summarizes an analysis of the true cost of child care by Prenatal to Five Fiscal Strategies, at lower and higher quality standards. Both sets of figures are significantly higher than state averages for the price of infant care (See Table II).



Table IV: Comparison of Costs of Providing Care that Meets Minimum and High-Quality Standards — U.S. Averages

Type of Program	Infant		Toddler		Three-Year-Old		Four-Year-Old	
	Minimum*	High Quality**	Minimum	High Quality	Minimum	High Quality	Minimum	High Quality
Child Care Center	$27,620	$32,473	$18,615	$27,113	$16,814	$20,222	$16,814	$19,074
Family Care Center	$17,145	$23,933	$17,145	$23,933	$17,145	$23,933	$17,145	$23,033
Group Family Child Care	$13,549	$21,390	$13,549	$21,390	$13,549	$21,390	$13,549	$21,390

* Annual Cost Per Child, Licensing Ratio/Group Size, U.S. Average

** Annual Cost Per Child, Caring for our Children Ratio/Group Size, U.S. Average

A growing number of states are adopting cost modeling to calculate the true cost of care as they develop new ECE initiatives. Texas piloted a program to supplement staff salaries; Illinois analyzed child care supply by community to strategically invest in pandemic recovery in the worst affected regions; and Massachusetts built a cost model to assess the adequacy of subsidy levels statewide. New Mexico and the District of Columbia developed systemic cost models informing comprehensive ECE initiatives.

Partnerships: Public-private partnerships, which combine government and private sources of funding, have supported the development and expansion of ECE initiatives in several states.

Cost-sharing helps states meet the true cost of providing care by distributing child care costs between state entities, families, and employers. Tri-Share, a program developed in Michigan, facilitates a split in child care expenses between the employer, eligible employees, and the state.

Employer and employee incentives help engage employers in improving access to and affordability of child care for their employees.

- Employer incentives can take the form of an Employer Child Care Tax Credit for employers operating child care programs or contracting out child care to specified programs for employees. South Carolina currently allows employers to claim a tax if they established a child care program for the children of their employees, and Texas offers a property tax exemption ranging between 50-100 percent for child care facilities established by employers.
- Employee incentives are provided by employers to employees to improve access to and the affordability of child care. They include child care vouchers, flexible work arrangements, on-site child care, paid parental leave, and other strategies that ensure reliable and affordable child care for employees so that they can continue to work.

Tailored solutions developed by organizations like Executives Partnering to Invest in Children (EPIC) in partnership with employers also help address child care shortages that affect business productivity.

POLICY PRIORITIES

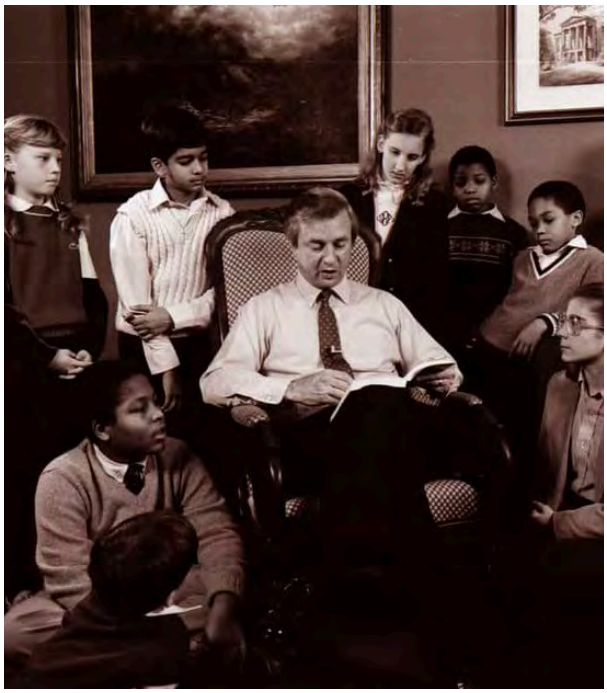
The combined effect of the high costs of providing care and the attrition of the workforce due to low pay and high burnout limits the capacity of child care programs to expand services. Working families with young children face high child care costs that stretch their finances, even as child care program owners struggle with razor thin margins. To help stabilize the child care sector and help working parents better afford care, could policymakers consider:

- Ensuring that the true cost of child care is factored into ECE models for determining subsidy reimbursement rates.
- Establishing cost-sharing partnerships with the philanthropic and business sector to help child care programs meet the true cost of providing care without burdening families with unaffordable child care costs.
- Exploring employer and workforce incentives to address child care shortages and workforce attrition.

RESOURCES

- The Economics of Child Care Supply in the United States | U.S. Department of the Treasury
- State-By-State Analysis shows Child Care Workforce in dire straits | Center for the Study of Child Care Employment
- 2024 Child Care Affordability | Child Care Aware of America
- Cost Modeling for Child Care: Illuminating State Policy Strategies | Bipartisan Policy Center
- Investing in the Birth-to-Three Workforce | Bank Street College of Education
- Estimating the True Cost of Care in all 50 States | Prenatal to Five Fiscal Strategies
- Public-Private Partnerships for Child Care: Examples and Insights | Child Care Aware of America





Established in 2001, **The Hunt Institute** honors the legacy of James B. Hunt, Jr., the former governor of North Carolina who distinguished himself as an ardent champion of education.

The Hunt Institute brings together people and resources to inspire and inform elected officials and policymakers about key issues in education, resulting in visionary leaders who are prepared to take strategic action for greater educational outcomes and student success.

In 2016, The Hunt Institute became an independent, nonprofit entity and joined forces with Duke University's Sanford School of Public Policy to pursue research, educational partnerships, and events related to improving education policy.

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ISSUE BRIEF

MARCH 2025

Public-Private Partnerships for Child Care

This resource explores insights and examples of existing public-private partnership models in the child care sector to help build supply and improve access to child care and early learning services for more families.

BACKGROUND

Public-private partnerships leverage support from both the public and private sectors to attain a shared goal. They can be an effective strategy for bringing together and maximizing diverse resources, perspectives, and expertise.

While each model is unique in structure, all share some general characteristics. They bring together the public sector (federal, state, or local governmental entities); and representatives from the private sectors (employers, philanthropic foundations, chambers of commerce, community organizations) around shared goals. Sometimes these models occur in conjunction with other stakeholders, such as parents or non-profits. Each partner contributes time, money, expertise, or other resources to the partnership. Decision-making and management responsibilities can be shared among the partners.

This resource examines these three public-private strategies:

- Setting incentives or requirements for employers to invest in child care to support their employees
- Pooling funding from public and private stakeholders that is distributed to child care programs to support provider compensation, construction or major renovation, supply building, or short-term operating expenses
- Sharing child care costs between employers, employees and the state/local entities

Setting Incentives and Requirements for Employers

Policies that expand access to child care can increase workforce participation and retention, which helps strengthen local and state economies. Providing employers with incentives or implementing requirements that facilitate access to child care can act as a catalyst to bolster the workforce and economic outlook.

The federal Department of Commerce has included an Incentives Program as it implements the CHIPS Act of 2022, which seeks to expand semiconductor production in the United States. Semiconductor manufacturers that apply for more than $150 million of CHIPS direct funding must develop a child care plan for workers through on or near-site child care, pre-arranged agreements with existing child care providers, child care subsidies, or other similar measures. The Department of Commerce expects applicants to develop solutions that are responsive to workers' needs, such as access at extended hours, and encourages applicants to work with community stakeholders, including state and local governments, families, child care providers, and local groups with expertise administering child care—such as child care resource and referral agencies (CCR&R)—to assess current child care capacity and gaps in the community and to create effective solutions. Both Intel and Micron Technology are advancing plans for several initiatives to expand child care access and affordability for its workers as part of their CHIPS Incentives Program award funding.

Intel is piloting a child care subsidy for hourly employees, expanding its backup child care program to cover up to $100 per day for up to 15 days, and partnering with multiple providers to offer priority registration, waived enrollment fees, and a 15% discount. The company is also launching a new navigation tool that will assist employees in finding child care, including non-traditional hour care. Intel is also dedicating a portion of its award to improve child care capacity in the communities in which it operates.

Micron is expanding near-site child care access by constructing and partnering with local providers to operate, near-site child care centers in Idaho and New York comprising over 120 seats in each location, including nontraditional

hour care. Micron is sponsoring development of a registered apprenticeship program in Idaho with a plan to expand it to New York after the child care facility is opened. The company is also partnering with child care organizations in Idaho and New York to expand the supply of family home child care centers through career pathway assistance and providing technical and financial support for providers opening their own home-based child care programs.

Pooling Funding from Public and Private Stakeholders

Pooled funding refers to blending investments from the public (governments) and private stakeholders (philanthropy, employers, chambers of commerce) to finance a specific initiative, including distribution to child care programs to support compensation, construction or major renovation, supply building, or short-term operating expenses. While each example will vary, sometimes a non-profit or a foundation plays a critical role in bringing together and disseminating the funding.

Kansas Children's Cabinet launched a Child Care Capacity Accelerator Grants program to support new construction, renovations, and operational costs to increase the number of licensed child care slots statewide. Accelerator grants were made available through braided funding streams from state and federal funds and $2.5 million in philanthropic dollars. Additionally, 53 grantees secured over $31 million in matching funding from private sources in 2023.

Iowa's Child Care Solutions Fund is a public-private fund created to offset the operating costs for child care providers. The funds can be used toward increasing provider wages, purchasing improved equipment, building facility additions and expansions, and contributing to insurance premiums for providers. Local employers, community members, city leaders, and county officials can all invest in the fund and receive a tax break. Since the establishment of the fund, Iowa's Hamilton County has pledged over $227,000 in public funds and $433,078 in private funding, which has resulted in serving over 100 additional children and a 36% increase in salaries for educators that has improved retention and provider recruitment.

Sharing Child Care Costs Between Employers, Employees, and the State

Several states are exploring public-private financing models that share the cost of an employee's child care tuition three-ways among an employer, the employee, and the state, sometimes called a "tri-share" program. Each state's program is modeled slightly differently in how it is coordinated, where it is available, how much state funding is provided to administer the program, and who is eligible to participate, but all programs provide the same types of benefits: it provides reliable payments to participating providers, helps employers retain and attract employees, and reduces out-of-pocket child care expenses for families who otherwise don't qualify for subsidy.

Michigan first secured state funding for a tri-share program in 2021. Since then, this strategy has gained popularity in Connecticut, Kentucky, New York, North Carolina, North Dakota, and Ohio. At the local level, Rapid City in in South Dakota is using philanthropic funds from a private foundation in place of state funding to operate a tri-share program. The chart below details different program aspects regarding coordination, participation eligibility, and funding sources in Kentucky, Michigan, North Carolina, and North Dakota.

POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

Child Care Aware® of America (CCAoA) supports policies that ensure every family in the United States has access to a high-quality, affordable child care system. Quality child care supports children's growth, development, and educational advancement and creates a positive economic impact for families and communities.

CCAoA strongly encourages policymakers to consider solutions that invest in all parts of the child care system and adresses the root causes driving the sector's existing gaps in affordability, availability, and quality. Public-private partnership models can be leveraged to create more robust financing for child care, including by making systemic or foundational funding available, not just resourcing individual slots, but they are just one piece of the puzzle. Solving our child care crisis requires a combination of policy levers and public investment that leads to the viability of the system long-term.

New program will expand childcare options for all

January 27, 2022

Making use of a half-million dollars of American Rescue Plan Act funds, the City of Moline is embarking on an ambitious plan to expand child care options across the city in an effort to allow more folks to go back to work while boosting early childhood educational outcomes.

The soon-to-launch ARPA Childcare/Workforce Infrastructure Forgivable Loan Program aims to assist families and businesses that have been negatively impacted by the COVID-19 Pandemic by delivering higher quality and more worker-friendly daycare options. The program will work similarly to the City's successful 2021 micro-business loan program that helped dozens of Moline entrepreneurs survive the economic impacts of the COVID pandemic.

"Childcare options are a crucial part of our workforce infrastructure," said Moline Mayor Rayapati, who has championed the new program with the assistance of a mayoral working group that included representatives from area child care facilities, the YMCA and Q2030 – a Quad Cities Chamber of Commerce created non-profit focuses on driving regional cooperation. "In order for our labor force to grow back to pre-pandemic levels and beyond, we need people to get back to work and to meet them where their needs are, whether that's increasing available slots or expanding the hours of operation."

Loans from $10,000 up to $50,000 will be granted to child care providers – either existing or new – to improve the quality and availability of daycare, encourage and support those businesses to continue their operations, expand their operations or to open new day care facilities. Priority will be given to providers that offer non-traditional hours, particularly second and third shifts, overnights and weekends, and those equipped to care for infants, toddlers and children with special needs. Funds may be used to buy equipment, such as cribs, toys, highchairs and books, to make minor building modifications to meet government regulations for safety and accessibility, expand operations, pay for staff training and to pay for certain start -up costs. Program funds are not available to pay staff wages.

Rayapati said many people who wish to go back to work cannot, due to having very young children at home or working hours when daycare options are extremely limited.

"You really need 24-7 coverage now," she said.

According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, the total Quad Cities labor forced decreased by 6,261 between April 2019 and April 2020. While the pandemic was the

driver of much of the loss, business organizations have cited lack of quality and convenient child care is among the biggest reasons for people not re-entering the workforce. Without such infrastructure, Moline and indeed the entire Quad Cities remain vulnerable to further reductions in its labor force and resulting decreased revenues.

The Mayor's working group received numerous letters of support for the program from the region's congressional delegation, the Quad Cities Chamber, the United Way and individual families needing expanded childcare options.

The ARPA Childcare/Workforce Infrastructure Forgivable Loan Program will award loans based on several criteria, including the applicant's business plan, the community needs the applicant will fill, as well as any unique services, such as second and third shift options that the applicant will offer. The program will provide much needed capital to current and new childcare providers/businesses affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, positively impact an important workforce concern and help stabilize Moline's economy.

Eligible applicants include:

- Individuals who are interested in opening a licensed childcare facility.
- Community-based organizations/businesses (existing or new; profit or non-profit.)

To be eligible for funding under the program, an applicant must accept all children regardless of race, religion, ethnic origin, disability, parentage, economic circumstance or any other protected characteristics. Recipients will be required to sign a non-discrimination form as part of the agreement.

Applications will be evaluated by an independent selection committee that includes City staff and child care industry professionals. Loan amounts will be determined based on number of children served with extra points toward a qualifying score awarded for programs that have evening, overnight or weekend hours, expanded capacity, new facilities and ability to accommodate children with disabilities.

Loans awarded under this program will be forgiven after the borrower remains open for 36 months after receiving funding.

More details and a sample application can be found here.

NATIONAL LEAGUE OF CITIES

City Profile Hartford, CT

Hartford – Overview

With a legacy and commitment for early childhood success, the City of Hartford was the first municipality in Connecticut to implement a citywide Early Childhood Blueprint and establish a department dedicated to early childhood education. Through an intentional lens, the City of Hartford continues to build on its historical roots through using data-driven practices to guide their work, engaging with and incorporating city and community voices, and supporting the early childhood workforce across all settings. The City of Hartford approaches the work of early learning with the understanding that it is never static and consistently remains open to learning and growing from their experiences.

The City of Hartford's commitment to early childhood education centers around three key themes:

- **Data-driven Practices:** Through building relationships with the community stakeholders to collect continuous data and conduct evaluations on the early childhood landscape, the City of Hartford has broken down silos to make impact within the early childhood sector and improve quality for children and families
- **City and Community Voices:** The City Hartford has intentionally incorporated the city and community into decision-making processes. Through community roundtables, workgroups and the Mayor's Cabinet Hartford has engrained a commitment for the future through a comprehensive lens.
- **Supporting the Early Childhood Workforce:** The City of Hartford has been intentional about both building the pipeline of the early childhood workforce through pilots with local institutes of higher education and ensuring the well-being and professional development of the current workforce.



City & Community Voices

One of the central pillars of the City of Hartford's early childhood approach is the inclusion of community voice in decision-making processes. As early as 1992, Hartford was at the forefront of parent engagement efforts through the development of the Parent Leadership Training Institute (PLTI), a project which was later adopted by the Connecticut General Assembly and made available to parents statewide. The city has made an intentional effort to ensure that families, parents, and community stakeholders from various sectors have a seat at the table. This commitment was further demonstrated with the development of the citywide Hartford Blueprint for Young Children (PDF), a collaborative effort undertaken by a team of community stakeholders under Mayor Eddie Perez. Through the Blueprint, the City of Hartford created clear guiding principles and an action plan that would shape early childhood initiatives for years to come.

Starting with just four staff members at its inception in 2004, the original Office of Early Childhood cemented its roots in valuing community engagement through innovative approaches. A cornerstone of their transparency efforts was the creation of "report cards" that used a simple but effective color-coding system (green, yellow, or red) to clearly communicate where the City of Hartford's children and families were progressing or needed additional support. This visual approach made complex data accessible to all community members and demonstrated the Office of Early Childhood's commitment to honest communication about both successes and challenges. Mayor Perez played a crucial role as a "cheerleader," actively participating in community meetings, demonstrating how mayoral support could legitimize and strengthen community engagement efforts. This early commitment to transparency and data-driven decision-making set the foundation for the City of Hartford's approach. The office has since evolved, from becoming the Department of Families, Children, Youth, and Recreation to the now Department of Families, Children, and Youth, reflecting its expanded scope while maintaining its core commitment to community engagement.

Over the subsequent decades, the City of Hartford has continuously evolved and strengthened its community engagement structures, while maintaining consistent,

significant commitment and support from its municipal leaders to the early childhood cause. The Mayor's Cabinet for Young Children, created at the same time as the department, serves as both an advisory body to the Mayor and the local School Readiness Council, allowing for streamlined decision-making while maintaining strong community input. The cabinet's diverse membership includes parents, community organization representatives, city staff, and the superintendent of schools, ensuring that multiple perspectives inform policy decisions affecting young children and their families. The development of six cross-sector working groups that meet on a monthly basis further demonstrates the City of Hartford's commitment to deepening community involvement, breaking down silos, and fostering collective impact.

The city's commitment to community voices is reflected in its inclusive governance structure, which brings together parents, community organizations, city staff, and education leaders. This collaborative approach acknowledges that no two families are alike, and solutions must be tailored to individual needs rather than following a one-size-fits-all model. Through multiple pathways for community input and leadership, Hartford ensures that policies and programs remain responsive to the actual needs of families.

Here's What They Did

- The Early Learning Parent Cabinet, established in 2022, was created to provide parents with a dedicated platform while ensuring they have access to city resources. This parent-led group supports the Mayor's Cabinet for Young Children and meets regularly to address key issues including child care, home visiting, and early intervention. This group exemplifies the City of Hartford's dedication to ensuring parent voices are central to decision-making processes.

- The City of Hartford's commitment to data-informed community engagement is demonstrated through partnerships like the one with the Connecticut Children's Medical Center. This dedication is evident in projects such as the federally funded North Hartford Ascend initiative, a cradle-to-career effort focused on improving outcomes for children in the North Hartford Promise Zone. As part of this initiative, the city supports monthly community conversations to gather community input. They gather stakeholders to discuss topics such as CTData survey results about post-COVID student enrollment trends and facilitate small group discussions where community stakeholders, parents, providers, and city staff collaborated to address enrollment

challenges and early intervention services, showcasing how the City of Hartford actively combines data with community voice to drive solutions.

Your Next Steps for Getting Started

- Map key stakeholders and community leaders in your city. This includes identifying parents, community organizations, education leaders, and other potential partners who should have a voice in early childhood decisions.
- Create a structure for regular community input and feedback.
- Establish parent leadership opportunities. Consider creating formal bodies like a Parent Cabinet where parents can directly influence policy and program decisions.
- Design inclusive meeting formats and schedules. Think carefully about meeting times, locations, and support needed (like child care, translation, parent compensation) to ensure all community members can participate.

Helpful Tips for Ongoing Success

- Prioritize transparency in all communications and decision-making processes
- Ensure diverse representation in all decision-making bodies, including voices from different neighborhoods, cultural backgrounds, family circumstances, and community organization types.
- Create multiple pathways for community input. Not everyone is comfortable speaking at formal meetings, so it's important to provide various ways for community members to share their perspectives.
- Maintain regular meeting schedules with consistent follow-through
- Close the feedback loop when incorporating community suggestions into decision-making. When community members see their input reflected in actual changes, it builds trust and encourages continued participation.
- Maintain flexibility and demonstrate agility to new challenges.
- Enable parents to take the lead by, for example, assisting them in understanding professional jargon and recognizing that the skills they acquire locally can be applied regionally, statewide, and nationally.





Data Driven Practices

The City of Hartford has placed a significant emphasis on data-driven practices to guide its early childhood initiatives. The city recognizes that effective early childhood systems require robust data collection, analysis, and application to inform decision-making and drive continuous improvement. Through strategic partnerships, innovative data-sharing agreements, and dedicated working groups, the City of Hartford has created a culture where data serves as the foundation for successful and effective program development, resource allocation, and supporting the early childhood workforce.

The city's commitment to data-driven decision-making extends across its early childhood ecosystem, from classroom-level assessments to city-wide planning. This approach enables Hartford to identify gaps in services, measure program effectiveness, and make targeted adjustments to better serve children and families. At the center of this work is the City of Hartford's Early Childhood Data System, which contains comprehensive information on all the City of Hartford child care centers receiving School Readiness Grants or Child Day Care Contract funding from the state. This robust system includes data on children enrolled in state-funded slots and, with parental permission, children in non-state-funded slots at sites receiving state funding. The system's comprehensive approach allows the city to follow a child's progress over time, creating valuable longitudinal data for program evaluation and planning as well as shaping professional development for the early childhood workforce.

The City of Hartford's data infrastructure continues to develop, with each strategic working group meeting monthly to execute goals and strategies, using key data to inform their work and adjustments. These groups function as collaborative learning communities, fostering innovation and continuous improvement. The city acknowledges ongoing challenges in data collection, particularly around family child

better understand outcomes and strengthen quality improvement efforts.

Here's What They Did

- The City of Hartford's partnership with CTData exemplifies the city's commitment to leveraging external expertise for data analysis and community impact and sharing that information transparently with the community. This partnership which initially began through a COVID-related project, has since developed into an ongoing collaboration supporting multiple initiatives. CTData operates under a formal data-sharing agreement with the city, conducting sophisticated analyses including needs assessments of Head Start programs and factor analyses of assessment tools. This partnership is enhanced by the Hartford Data Collaborative, a data integration initiative that brings together institutions serving the city. The collaborative has created a formal governance structure with an advisory committee, data oversight committee, and request process that allows partners to submit proposals for data sharing that benefit the community. When data findings are presented to stakeholders, city leadership ensures continued conversations with providers, demonstrating how data becomes a tool for ongoing dialogue and improvement.

- The City of Hartford has leveraged several partnerships for their data collection and analysis efforts. For example, in collaboration with the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving, school districts, and municipal leadership, the City of Hartford implemented UCLA's Early Development Inventory (EDI) to assess the school readiness and school success of Hartford's children. The City of Hartford's transition to PowerSchool represents a significant investment in its data infrastructure and demonstrates the city's forward-thinking approach to data management. This migration will allow for better alignment of early childhood data with K-12 systems, creating more seamless tracking of children's educational journeys from preschool through later grades. The system will enable better coordination across schools and programs, providing a more complete picture of children's development and learning experiences. By integrating early childhood data into the same system used by K-12 schools, the City of Hartford is better positioned to link early childhood education to K-12 and analyze kindergarten readiness trends, understand the long-term impact of early interventions, and make data-informed decisions about resource allocation and program improvements.

Your Next Steps for Getting Started

- Conduct a data inventory to understand what information is currently collected and where gaps exist. This assessment helps identify redundancies and missing elements in your data ecosystem. Consider creating a visual map showing data flows across your early childhood system.
- Establish data-sharing agreements with key partners including schools, healthcare providers, and community organizations. Clear agreements that address privacy concerns and technical compatibility are essential foundations.
- Develop a common data framework with shared definitions, metrics, and quality standards. Consistent terminology and measurement approaches enable meaningful comparison and analysis. Engage the early childhood workforce in developing this to ensure it reflects program realities.
- Invest in user-friendly data systems and staff training to ensure accessibility and utilization.

Helpful Tips for Ongoing Success

- Balance quantitative metrics with qualitative insights to gain a comprehensive understanding of data and integrate community voice into data interpretation and application. Create regular opportunities for community members to review and respond to data findings.
- Create feedback loops so data findings lead to program improvements and policy changes. Regular review cycles help ensure data actually influences practice.
- Make data accessible and meaningful to different audiences through varied visualization and communication strategies, including technical reports, infographics, and community presentations serve different purposes.
- Acknowledge and plan for challenges in data collection, particularly with vulnerable populations. Privacy concerns, language barriers, and technology access can affect data quality. Develop culturally responsive data collection methods that build trust with families.

> **“The approach is holistic and integrated. This data is shared in the Mayor’s Cabinet, this data is shared in the Hartford Opportunity**

> **Youth Collaborative, in talking to industry partners. Bringing everyone to an awareness perspective and then identifying what resources look like."**
>
> **– Dr. Leslie Torres-Rodriguez, Superintendent of Hartford Public Schools**



Supporting the Early Childhood Workforce

The City of Hartford recognizes that a well-prepared, stable early childhood workforce is the foundation of quality early learning experiences. As the first municipality in Connecticut to establish a dedicated early childhood division, the city has consistently prioritized workforce development as a key element of its comprehensive approach to supporting young children and families. Through strategic partnerships, innovative support systems, and responsive programming, the City of Hartford has maintained a steadfast focus on building professional capacity among educators who serve the city's youngest and most vulnerable residents, understanding that the quality of early learning experiences directly impacts children's long-term outcomes.

The city's approach to workforce development is rooted in a philosophy of community responsiveness and strategic partnership building. Rather than implementing top-down mandates, the City of Hartford engages directly with educators to understand their challenges and co-create solutions that address real-world needs. This collaborative approach extends to partnerships with higher education institutions, workforce development boards, and community organizations that collectively strengthen the early childhood ecosystem. By

positioning itself as a convener and facilitator rather than simply a regulator, the City of Hartford has fostered a culture of continuous improvement and professional growth across its early childhood settings.

The City of Hartford's workforce development strategies reflect a sophisticated understanding of the complex challenges facing early childhood educators. The city has taken a deliberate approach to meeting teacher credential requirements, understanding that appropriate support structures must be in place before accountability can be effective. This philosophy acknowledges the economic realities facing many educators, particularly those from underrepresented communities, and seeks to remove barriers to professional advancement through targeted financial supports, accessible training opportunities, and individualized coaching. Through initiatives like its collaboration with Capital Community College, which provided tuition and textbook support for over 100 non-degreed early childhood professionals to attend credit-bearing courses, the City of Hartford demonstrates its commitment to creating viable career pathways in the field.

Here's What They Did

- In 2018, the Mayor's Cabinet for Young Children conducted a comprehensive workforce survey focused on educators and administrators serving children from birth to eight years old. With 277 respondents, this survey provided crucial insights that continue to inform the City of Hartford's workforce development strategies. Key findings revealed that while professional development is highly valued by both workers and administrators, significant challenges remain in the field. These include finding qualified substitutes, addressing attendance issues, combating low wages, and confronting a misaligned workforce pipeline as current teachers retire or leave. Perhaps most notably, the survey highlighted a demographic mismatch between educators and the children they serve. This data-driven approach has allowed the City of Hartford to target its workforce initiatives to address the most pressing needs identified by the community.

- The City of Hartford's Staffed Family Child Care Network demonstrates the city's innovative approach to workforce support. Recognizing that the informal early childhood workforce is essential to the community, the City of Hartford created a network that provides resources to improve both the quality of and the sustainability of their operations. The network offers support to

providers taking the initial step to establish a family child care home, along with training, professional development, and individualized business support. This approach not only improves care quality but also creates a stable and professional early childhood workforce pipeline that can continue to serve families effectively while supporting the economic development of the city.

Your Next Steps for Getting Started

- In partnership with the agencies that support and employ the workforce, map the existing early childhood workforce in your community, including setting, demographics, qualifications, and needs. Understanding who makes up your workforce provides critical insights for targeted support strategies.
- Identify key partners, including higher education institutions, state and county offices of early childhood, and workforce boards. Building these relationships early creates opportunities for aligned credential pathways and funding.
- Develop a comprehensive professional development system with multiple entry points. Create financial incentives and support for credential attainment. Scholarships, wage supplements, and release time can make professional development accessible. Consider developing a graduated compensation scale tied to credential levels.
- Establish mentoring programs for new educators to improve retention. Pairing experienced educators with newcomers provides crucial support. Structure regular check-ins to make the mentoring relationship meaningful.

Helpful Tips for Ongoing Success

- Focus on both education credentials and business skills, including for home-based providers. Offering business training can improve both the quality and sustainability of the early childhood workforce.
- Collect and use data to continuously improve workforce support programs. Regular assessment helps identify what's working and what needs adjustment. Create feedback loops where providers can share their experiences with program implementation.
- Consider the entire workforce pipeline, from recruitment to retirement. A comprehensive approach addresses challenges at every career stage.
- Ensure professional development is accessible, relevant, and culturally responsive. Offering training at various times, locations, and in multiple languages removes barriers to participation.

- Address compensation issues through creative funding mechanisms. Low wages drive turnover and affect quality of care. Explore public-private partnerships, tax incentives, and shared services models to improve compensation.

> **"For the City of Hartford, this work starts way before someone decides to take the early childhood job. We ask: What is our relationship to high schools, colleges, and universities; How do we provide educational opportunities or internship placements for those studying early childhood; What type of experiences should a potential childcare worker have before they even take a job in this field? Just like we think about children from a developmental perspective, we think about professional development from a developmental perspective – a perspective that also recognizes that this work is embedded in an ever-changing landscape affected by a host of theoretical, political, contextual, and community factors."**
>
> **– Richard Sussman, Early Childhood and Family Consultant**

NAVIGATE THE TOOLKIT

URBAN WIRE

How Cities Can Fill Federal Safety Net Gaps in Child Care and Early Learning

Lizzy Ferrara, Gabi Velasco

September 5, 2025



FatCamera / Getty Images

As federal funding for safety net programs declines, local communities are facing mounting pressure to fill the gaps with fewer resources and tighter budgets.

Child care and early learning programing are an essential part of the safety net that yield wide-ranging benefits for communities. They

- support healthy development and strengthen school readiness for children,
- enable parents to fully participate in the workforce, and
- improve the local economy.

Localities across the country seeking to prevent ripple effects of safety net cuts can model their next steps after the approach Hartford, Connecticut, took during another period that intensely strained early learning systems and families nationwide: the COVID-19 pandemic.

How Hartford combated early learning gaps

In a city where 27.3 percent of residents live in poverty and the median household income is just $42,397, losses to child care and early learning programming could have devastating effects. To help remedy these losses during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, Hartford's Department of Families, Children, and Youth responded by rethinking its approach—using data to better align services with community needs.

The city faced a key challenge: Although Hartford's state-funded early learning centers were entering administrative data into a centralized system, the city lacked the capacity to analyze it in ways that could guide decisionmaking around equitable pandemic recovery for Hartford's young people. This challenge was compounded by a lack of comprehensive data on the needs and barriers facing young children, families, and providers.

In response to these challenges, in 2023, the city's Early Learning Division partnered with CTData Collaborative (CTData) on a project that aimed to support an equitable pandemic recovery for Hartford's youngest residents by analyzing and using data to guide targeted actions for maximum impact. The city's Early Learning Division oversees early childhood initiatives, including child care, and leads the implementation of a coordinated early childhood plan. CTData—a member of the National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership—is a nonprofit that helps people and organizations use data to make informed decisions and to advance equity in Connecticut. CTData provided technical expertise and strategic guidance, helping the city transform raw data into actionable insights to improve outcomes for children. The project was funded by a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

The project focused on several core activities:

1. **Analysis of administrative records** from Hartford's Early Childhood Data System, focusing on pandemic-related changes in early learning center enrollments and attendance rates from 2017 to 2022. The analysis highlighted disparities by race and ethnicity, English language learner status, age, family income, and zip code.
2. **A citywide survey of child care providers** identified operational and staffing challenges, including staff stress, burnout, and concerns about children's development. Notably, 85 percent of administrators reported feeling stressed or burnt out, and more than half said they were considering leaving the industry.
3. **Focus groups with parents of young children** surfaced parents' perspectives on the pandemic's impact and ongoing challenges with child care access. Parents voiced concern that the pandemic had negatively affected their children's development—particularly their social skills. They also emphasized the financial and emotional strain they experienced, including job losses and frequent, unpredictable child care disruptions. The focus groups also underscored the need to expand access to early learning and child care subsidies for working families who are not income-eligible under the state's current system but still struggle to afford care. Parents also called for improved communication about available resources to help them find child care.
4. **Engagement with the city to encourage use of the findings.** To assist the city in utilizing the findings, the research team created communications materials that were used to facilitate discussion with city leaders as well as the Hartford Early Learning Network.

This approach gave Hartford a more nuanced understanding of its early learning landscape—one that combined robust data with lived experiences and community voices. In 2023 and 2024, CTData shared the findings with city leaders, including the Division of Early Learning, the Mayor's Office, and the broader public. Dissemination occurred through presentations, meetings with Hartford's Early Learning Network (which included child care providers across the city), and a public webinar.

During one of the webinars, Hartford's Assistant Director of the Early Learning Division, Shyleen López, shared how her department was already using the data to strengthen early childhood systems: "This data helped us focus on evidence-based decisionmaking, to ensure policies meet the needs of children, families, and educators in our community."

The division translated these insights into concrete action:

- **Launched targeted outreach** to boost early learning and child care enrollment among families with low incomes, including a campaign to raise awareness about the availability and benefits of affordable early learning and care in Hartford.
- **Developed new programs** to support children's language development, social-emotional growth, and mental health—benefiting both families and providers.

- **Created staff training initiatives** to improve recruitment, training, and retention of qualified child care professionals.
- **Provided financial support** to early learning and child care providers facing funding gaps between operational costs and available resources.

Demonstrating that data were informing decisions helped the department secure funding to adopt PowerSchool, the same data system used by Hartford Public Schools. This upgrade enabled seamless information sharing between early learning providers and kindergarten teachers—addressing a long-standing gap that often left families repeating assessments and losing valuable time during school transitions.

This initiative reshaped how Hartford collaborates across sectors. The Division of Early Learning now convenes five ongoing working groups—focused on areas like literacy, trauma, and workforce development—that bring together families, providers, public school staff, and city agencies. These groups are helping to rebuild relationships, identify service gaps, and surface new community resources.

"We're not just collecting data—we're using it to build systems that can withstand the next crisis," López said.

The partnership with CTData brought the expertise Hartford needed to make informed decisions that put families first. Enrollment is rising, and although workforce shortages and low wages remain, the city is better prepared to adapt to shifting political and economic conditions. Hartford continues to track how state early learning policies affect families and providers—not as a box-checking exercise, but to guide real action.

Using data to fill child care safety net gaps nationwide

Hartford's experience offers a timely model for cities navigating today's realities: growing demand for services, limited resources, and increasing responsibility as federal support recedes. These pressures are echoed in places like Washington, DC, and Massachusetts, where leaders are working to build coordinated early childhood systems that truly center families' needs. By following Hartford's lead of combining rigorous data analysis with deep community engagement, other localities can develop solutions that are not only responsive to immediate needs but also designed for resilience.

MAYOR AND COMMISSION MEETINGS / LOCAL NEWS & ANALYSIS

ACC Commission funds workforce support plan, approves housing developments

by Chris Dowd | Published August 9, 2024 - Updated September 18, 2024 |

The Athens-Clarke County Commission has approved plans to provide $3.3 million towards workforce support and development over the next two years, including funding for worker-owned cooperatives and child care.

The commission also approved almost 600 new housing units in three different developments across town, authorized a $5.7 million bond to help keep the landfill operating into the future, strengthened Athens' anti-smoking ordinance and funded youth sports in collaboration with the Clarke County School District.

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Workforce support and development

The ACC Commission approved a workforce development plan that will ultimately provide $3.3 million with the goal of empowering the local workforce to help them meet the needs of Athens businesses in the immediate and long-term.

The workforce plan includes proposals from both the Athens-Area Chamber of Commerce and the Business Development and Workforce Support Taskforce convened by Mayor Kelly Girtz. The chamber's proposal, dubbed "Athens Achieves," was originally approved in June. It focuses on workforce development in a traditional sense, including job training, education and building pathways to employment. The plan developed by the county's taskforce takes a different approach. It seeks to empower and support workers through 'know your rights' trainings, improving child care provision, offering loan funds for small businesses and support for cooperative businesses and employee ownership.

Athens Achieves has been changed somewhat since it was originally approved. It will now receive a total of $2.35 million, up from $1.9 million, to provide support for some Athens-area nonprofits such as Destined Inc., which may receive up to $300,000 for their "Read to Succeed" program for elementary school students. Other nonprofits funded through Athens Achieves include Education Matters, which may receive $75,000 to support career pathways for high school students, and the Athens Community Apprenticeship Program, which may receive $150,000 for apprenticeship training.

The remaining $925,000 of the $3.3 million package will likely go to various nonprofits who can meet the goals laid out by Girtz's taskforce. For example, the Economic Justice Coalition is being asked to develop a train-the-trainer program on workers' rights topics such as the Fair Labor Standards Act, including ways to fight wage theft, discrimination and sexual harassment. Other nonprofits which are likely to receive funding include Quality Care for Children, which would provide business coaching and community support to promote high-quality child care in Athens; the Georgia Center for Employee Ownership , which would help

convert local businesses over to employee-ownership after the founding owners retire; and the **Georgia Cooperative Development Center**, which would establish a business purchasing and marketing cooperative to help small business band together for their mutual benefit.

Commissioners praised the plan, which passed unanimously in an 8-0 vote.

"The businesses that will grow out of [this plan] will contribute to the community and create jobs into the future for decades," said Commissioner Melissa Link.



Commissioner Tiffany Taylor

"All of it comes together in one great big bubble of collaboration and community…it includes everybody, youth as well," said Commissioner Tiffany Taylor, who served on Girtz's taskforce.

Commissioners Ovita Thornton and John Culpepper recused themselves from the vote out of conflicts of interest due to their current service on the Board of Directors for the Economic Justice Coalition and the Athens-Area Chamber of Commerce, respectively. Since Culpepper's vote was needed to pass the Athens Achieves plan back in June, that decision may not be legally valid, which is why the plan needed to be re-approved this month.

Despite universal approval for the plan, some commissioners expressed disappointment and frustration that it took so long to come together. **The plan was initially conceived back in 2022** when socialist Commissioner Mariah Parker was able to pass a proposal for workforce *support* (as opposed to workforce *development*) in a split 6-4 vote over significant opposition.

Parker would resign from office later that year. Around the same time, progressive Commissioners Tim Denson and Russell Edwards lost their seats due to Republican gerrymandering, further undermining support for left-wing economics on the body. Some of Parker's more left-wing ideas like support for union organizing ended up not being pursued, and the Chamber of Commerce developed their own plan in parallel to compete with Parker's vision.

Due to various delays, Girtz's taskforce ended up convening too late to allow for a robust request-for-proposals process in which different proposals would be vetted and carefully selected for funding. Instead, the commission decided to fund the nonprofits listed above directly, without a formal proposal process.

"In the best of all possible worlds, at least from my perspective, we would have had this done early enough that we could have had a request-for-proposal process," said Commissioner Carol Myers, who served on Girtz's taskforce and drafted the final proposal. "At this point, it was really a question of how supportive are we of the *goals* of the workforce development, versus following what would be a standard procedure."



Commissioner Carol Myers

These workforce support programs are funded through the federal American Rescue Plan which must be entirely allocated by the end of the year, leading to a tight timeline. The nonprofits which have been selected for funding must submit a scope of services for their proposals by Friday, August 16. If the commission gives their final approval at their September voting meeting, these programs will be funded through 2026.

UPDATE (9/18/24): The ACC Commission approved the funding plan, giving $150,000 to the Economic Justice Coalition, $300,000 to Quality Care for Children, $150,000 to the Georgia Center for Employee Ownership and $150,000 to the Georgia Cooperative Development Center. They declined funding for OneBreath CNA because it is incorporated as a for-profit LLC, not as a nonprofit.



Commissioner Patrick Davenport

Youth sports program approved

The commission also voted to continue their investment in Athens youth through the ACC School District by providing $110,158 to extend their youth sports program through the 2024-2025 school year. This covers half of the program's expense with the school district covering the other half.

An estimated 2,150 youth will be served in this program, called the Athens Youth Development Initiative. These children will get an opportunity to play or compete in basketball, cheerleading, football, flag football, soccer, track and field, volleyball, and cross country. Additionally, swimming and wrestling could be available as well, if some logistical hurdles can be worked out.

"[The] primary objective is to create opportunities for Athens-Clarke County children, while removing barriers, especially the cost barriers for our families," said Chris Hulse, the coordinator of the Athens Youth Development Initiative. "In the last year, I've seen our children come together and not only compete but grow and learn lessons…that include but are not limited to accountability, humility, determination, selflessness and what an honor it can be to represent our community."

The local government's portion of the funding will come from the American Rescue Plan. Commissioners were supportive, although some wondered if the local government should continue to contribute in future years after American Rescue Plan dollars were expended.



Commissioner Dexter Fisher

"I think our taxpayers would have some angst if we put the school district as part of our budget [going forward]," Fisher said at the commission's agenda-setting meeting in July. "They got a higher millage rate [than we do]…We should not have them in our general budget at all."

Funding for the Athens Youth Development Initiative passed unanimously.