2023

CandL Listening Session Analysis

UNDERSTANDING BARRIERS AND FACILITATORS TO CHILDCARE FROM THE VOICES OF PARENTS AND PROVIDERS ACROSS 33 COUNTIES IN NORTH CAROLINA

THE LINK GROUP, IN COLLABORATION WITH CANDL

The Link Group

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BACKGROUND & METHODOLOGY

The CandL Listening Tour was launched in February 2022 with a key objective: to move towards a publicly funded system in NC, where early childhood education (ECE) is a public good and is equitable, culturally responsive, and relevant to parents, teachers, and providers.

To this end and to ensure that the voices and needs of parents and providers were heard, a listening tour was conducted of focus groups among these stakeholders across the state. The goal of the listening tour is to listen to and more fully understand the wants and needs of stakeholders when it comes to ECE.

To kick off the tour, six pilot sessions were conducted in February 2022. These pilot sessions were conducted by four different community organizations in the following counties: Durham, Mecklenburg, and Craven. Groups were conducted among both parents/caregivers and childcare providers. The purpose of these focus groups was to gather preliminary findings and understand how the discussion and logistics of the session could be optimized before moving forward throughout the rest of the state.

Each listening session in the tour was facilitated by an experienced facilitator from a community group.

Hosting listening sessions in as many North Carolina counties as possible has remained an important goal for CandL. Each county in our state has different early education experiences and needs. It is important to understand the specific needs of regions that may be underserved by statewide advocacy initiatives – particularly many of the rural counties in the far east and west corners of the state.

Oversampling western NC is an important component of creating a more equitable ECE system in NC, due to the fact that western NC is at a disadvantage when it comes to accessible and affordable childcare, particularly for infants and toddlers. For example, many of the western NC counties have significantly lower childcare subsidy market rates compared to the rest of the state, despite providing the same high-quality care. Thanks to funding from the Dogwood Health Trust, CandL hosted listening sessions in 10 additional western counties. As a result of the additional listening sessions, the CandL team has been able to develop new relationships with western-NC based grassroots organizations who work on early childhood education and connect them to the ongoing statewide early childhood education advocacy in North Carolina.

While each facilitator tailored the conversation based on the needs and background of the specific group, they all followed a common discussion guide which was created in collaboration with The Link Group (a market research firm in Durham, NC) and members of CandL. Each session was conducted either in-person, virtually, or a hybrid and recorded. Respondent demographic information was also collected at the time of the session. Each participant received an honorarium (either in the form of a gift card or cash) and were typically provided a meal in appreciation for their time and perspective.

Analysis was conducted post hoc from on the recordings. For those sessions which were conducted in Spanish, analysis was conducted on the English transcripts. In a few instances where the recording quality was poor, analysis was based upon the notes which many facilitators provided with the recording.

A total of 56 listening sessions were conducted across 34 counties in North Carolina. Care was taken to ensure representation from both parents / caregivers (referred to as parents in this report) and childcare providers (referred to as providers in this report). Care was also taken to ensure that voices from different races and ethnicities were heard.

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Base sizes by respondent type:

County	Parents / Caregivers	Providers	Total
Alamance	11	6	**17**
Avery*	6	6	**12**
Buncombe*	23	10	**33**
Burke*	11	4	**15**
Cabarrus	11	9	**20**
Cherokee*	8	9	**17**
Clay*	-	4	**4**
Craven	15	-	**15**
Cumberland	8	2	**10**
Durham	13	-	**13**
Forsyth†	9	-	**9†**
Gaston	14	-	**14**
Graham*	2	10	**12**
Guilford	11	3	**14**
Halifax	8	3	**11**
Harnett	7	6	**13**
Henderson*	-	17	**17**
Hertford	5	11	**16**
Jackson*	6	9	**15**
Lenoir	4	-	**4**
Madison*	17	-	**17**
McDowell*	12	-	**12**
Mecklenburg	19	2	**21**
New Hanover	3	9	**12**
Onslow	*Not included in this report but will be included once recordings are received*		
Pitt	5	-	**5**
Polk*	8	2	**10**
Richmond	9	17	**26**
Robeson	5	14	**19**
Rutherford*	11	8	**19**
Swain*	13	3	**16**
Wake	-	18	**18**
Watauga*	6	9	**15**
Wayne	19	30	**49**
Wilson	9	-	**9**
Total	**308**	**221**	**529**

*Denotes a western county. Western counties are included in the overall findings and also in a dedicated section that focuses on just the findings for western counties.

†It is unclear from the recordings and records how many people participated in Forsyth County's five listening sessions. At least one session was attended by nine respondents, but many more participated across the five. As such the total number of participants show in the chart is lower than the actual number.

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Base sizes by race

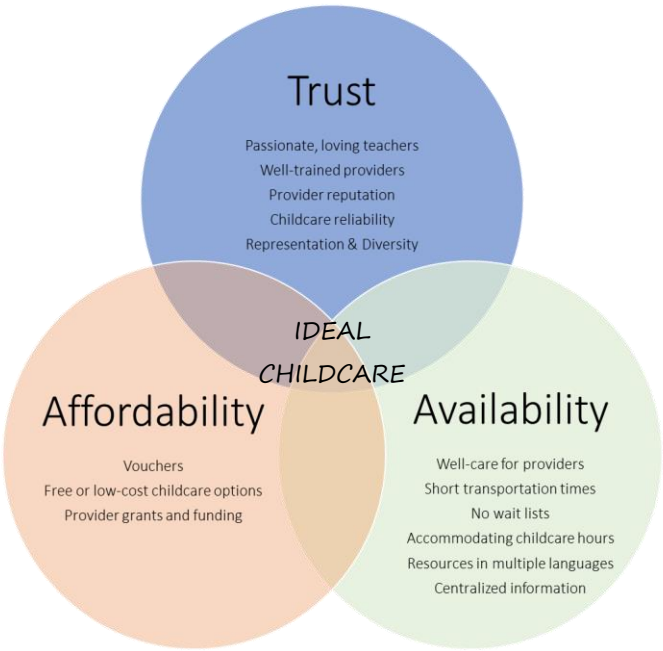
County	Asian	Black / African American	Indigenous	Latinx / Hispanic	Multiracial / Multicultural	Not part of BIPOC community / White	Person of Color
Alamance	-	12	-	-	-	2	-
Avery							
Buncombe	1	1	-	15	-	12	4
Burke	-	2	-	7	-	3	4
Cabarrus	-	10	-	2	1	3	2
Cherokee	*Demographic information not collected*						
Clay	*Demographic information not collected*						
Craven	-	15	-	-	-	-	-
Cumberland	1	6	2	-	-	-	-
Durham	-	13	-	-	-	-	-
Forsyth	-	7	-	2	-	-	-
Gaston	-	14	-	-	-	-	-
Graham	*Demographic information not collected*						
Guilford	-	12	-	1	-	1	-
Halifax	-	11	-	-	-	-	-
Harnett	-	3	-	1	-	7	-
Henderson	-	4	-	1	-	7	-
Hertford	-	11	-	1	-	1	-
Jackson		-	-	2	-	13	-
Lenoir	-	-	-	1	-	3	-
Madison	-	-	-	-	1	16	-
McDowell	-	1	-	-	1	9	-
Mecklenburg	-	6	-	15	-	-	-
New Hanover	-	3	-	-	-	9	-
Onslow	*Not included in this report but will be included once recordings are received*						
Pitt	-	-	-	5	-	-	-
Polk	-	1	-	-	1	8	-
Richmond	-	4	-	-	-	4	1
Robeson	1	7	2	-	1	1	-
Rutherford	-	1	-	10	-	8	-
Swain	-	-	1	8	-	6	-
Wake	-	15	-	-	3	-	-
Watauga	-	1	-	1	-	13	-
Wayne	3	31	-	4	1	10	-
Wilson	-	-	-	9	-	-	-
Total	**6**	**191**	**5**	**85**	**9**	**136**	**11**

Number of respondents by race does not equal total number of respondents; some counties were missing demographic information on all or some of their respondents, so those numbers are not included in this chart. Identity is recorded as respondent recorded it, either as a write-in or a drop-down box in the respondent form.

OVERALL FINDINGS ACROSS THE STATE

NC is facing a childcare crisis.

Across all counties who participated in the listening sessions, parents and providers define quality childcare as <u>trust, affordability, and availability</u>. These three factors create a three-legged stool; without one of these legs, childcare is closed off to parents, or parents must settle or make hard sacrifices. Without trust, parents do not feel confident they are leaving their child in safe care; without affordability or availability, parents cannot access childcare. And these same three factors are those that providers strive to provide for their parents and are most frustrated by when they cannot.



In this report, we'll dive deeper into each of these factors: what contributes to them and what are the barriers to achieving them. As the voices of parents and providers across the state were lifted through these listening sessions, one chorus became loud and clear: providing quality childcare is critical to the health of North Carolina's economy. Childcare providers play a critical and essential role within a community and the state. Childcare allows parents to work and contribute meaningfully to their family, community, and economy. And childcare is often the entry point for providing support and resources to children who are disadvantaged or disabled and provides the foundation for education to all children. North Carolina must shine a light upon the childcare industry so that our state can continue to thrive for generations to come by providing parents an opportunity to achieve their goals and dreams, by giving providers the tools and resources for them to support children and parents, and by giving children a strong foundation for learning, development, and love.

Quality childcare is defined by trust

What are the barriers to childcare *trust*?		What is needed to address these barriers?
Availability of, and accessibility to, in-home or kin care	☛	Lower barriers to entry to allow more availability of in-home and kin care providers
	☛	Allow voucher use for in-home and kin-care providers at the same rate and allowance as traditional centers to create more equity in access
	☛	Lower barriers and burden for these providers to access STAR ratings and STAR funding
STAR ratings creating an inequitable system for both parents and providers	☛	Re-examine how "quality" is defined in STAR so that it better aligns with parents' definition of quality (i.e., trust factors) to allow for more relevant and equitable ratings
	☛	Provide funding to help centers earn STAR ratings, particularly around staffing retention and training
	☛	Ensure that four-and-five STAR facilities are accepting children from all backgrounds (including socio-economic status) to ensure diversity, representation, and equity in highly rated centers
Representation and diversity of children within the classroom	☛	Increase equity in the accessibility of childcare so that children of all backgrounds and races are together and learning from one another
	☛	Ensure more providers of different backgrounds and who speak different languages are entering ECE
Lack of a centralized portal with information about childcare and parent resources	☛	Work with the community and/or state to create an easy-to-access online portal for both providers and parents. Information to include available providers in the community and what services they offer (i.e., providers who speak non-English, have providers trained to care for children with special needs, Head Start, NC Pre-K, etc.); financial assistance information; community events; parenting workshops, trainings and workshops; after-school care and programs, etc.

Across all counties, the one thing that stood out – more than affordability or availability – is trust. Parents want to know that their children are learning in a nurturing environment and providers want to create that nurturing environment for children and parents. How this trust manifests itself doesn't always align with how the state may define trust and quality, and that creates a disconnect for both parents and providers.

While affordability and availability are tangible, tactical things that can be addressed, trust feels more nebulous. But by understanding how parents define trust, the state can work to find ways to better meet the core needs of parents and providers.

Simply put, parents want to know that their child will be safe, will be well cared for / loved in the provider's care, and will learn things that the parent cannot (or does not feel equipped) to teach themselves.

- The relationship between parent (and child) and provider is of paramount importance. Without that relationship, parents do not feel safe and secure leaving their child in someone else's care. And parents want to know that their children are learning new things, especially skills that they may not feel they can provide

themselves. Parents want their children to develop a solid educational foundation, as well social, emotional, and behavior skills. While some parents feel confident that they can provide those skills themselves (by providing their own childcare), others recognize the importance of children being around other children and caregivers who can provide different perspectives.

- This feeling of trust is especially important among parents who have children with disabilities or special needs and among immigrant parents. Because these children are especially vulnerable, parents want to ensure that they are well-cared for, and their needs are met. For children with special needs, this means having providers who are trained to offer special assistance or specialized care to ensure that children with disabilities or special needs are still learning and developing appropriately or that facilities are equipped with resources (i.e., wheelchair ramp, toys, etc.) that allow children to engage with others. For children of immigrants, parents already feel marginalized (especially if they don't speak or understand English fluently) and want not only for their child to feel safe but parents also want to know they, as adults, are being valued and heard.

*"**I haven't felt enough trust to leave my children in a daycare.** There are people who sometimes don't have the love or the preparation. It would be better to leave them somewhere where the teachers love what they do." – Hispanic Parent, Mecklenburg County*

*"**Parents have to trust you.** These are their children, especially when it's their first child. They have to trust you...That parent-teacher rapport has to be good." - Provider, Hertford County*

Trust can manifest in many different ways in the classroom. **And both parents and providers are aligned on what trust looks like.**

- While there are many similar themes across and within counties, each parent or provider may value some of these factors differently than others depending on their experience, background, and needs. However, there was a strong chorus about what trust looks like to both parents and providers (in loose order of importance):
    - ***Passionate, loving teachers:*** parents want providers who love what they do and want to be there for children. This energy (or lack of it) is obvious to parents and children and is usually the basis for a trusting relationship among parent-provider-child. And providers recognize that you must love this profession in order to stick with it for so many years. One of the issues with finding staffing (discussed more in the availability pillar) is the lack of providers who are passionate about this calling. Many parents and providers think of each other as family because of the close bonds they form with one another and with the child.
    - ***Well-trained providers:*** parents want to know that providers are properly trained in ECE and can teach appropriate social, emotional, and behavioral skills to students. Parents want more than just a babysitter and providers want to be seen as more than a babysitter; they both want children to create a solid foundation for life-long learning and often see those who are trained in this area as the best people to provide that foundation. This includes teaching skills like potty-training, reading, basic writing, knowing colors and shapes, and playing well with others. It also means having a variety of toys and resources for children to experience. Providers would like to have access to even more training so that they can be the best teacher they can be.
    - ***Specialized training:*** where appropriate, parents want to be sure that providers are properly trained and able to deal with children with special needs and ability, such as autism and Down's Syndrome. Many times, the childcare center is the only place where parents know where to access resources for their children with special needs, and so rely on the providers to give support to the child and parent. Those providers who care for children with special needs also want more training in this area to be the best teacher they can be for these children, and often feel they fall short in this area.

- ***Reputation of provider:*** many parents rely on the word of mouth and recommendations from family and friends to find a provider. This is for two reasons: 1) they trust first-hand accounts more and especially those from people they already know and trust; 2) most of the time they do not know where to go to access information about providers. Many wish there was a centralized location where they could find information about the providers in the area. And while some look to STAR ratings (more on this below) as a loose proxy for reputation, most are unaware of the STAR rating, don't know where to find that information, or quickly disregard it in favor of word-of-mouth reputation. Directors and providers understand how important that word of mouth reputation is, which is one of the reasons they spend so much time looking for the right staffing needs for their center or home.

"Word of mouth is strong, in these circles, and Google reviews. ***And having professionals say they're trusted, and to hear those stories or reasons they're reputable.*** *We all want children safe. We get to hear everybody else's story and their opinions." – Parent, Watauga County*

- ***Reliability of childcare:*** a much more tactical display of trust is the provider being open when they say they will and having consistency of staffing. During COVID, and in the post-COVID era, provider closures impact the ability for parents to work and can cause a disruption to the day. For this reason, many in-home providers often forgo their own medical needs because it would otherwise mean having to close for the day, which they do not want to do as they know parents depend upon them. Staffing turnover, especially at centers, also erodes trust because it means parents have to start over in building and establishing a relationship with the provider.
- ***Providing and connecting resources:*** parents often do not know where to turn to access resources like childcare vouchers, parenting resources, resources for children with special needs, off-hour childcare, or food and housing assistance. If providers are able to help them navigate this and connect them to resources, then the trust in, and relationship with, the provider grows. This is especially heard among those parents who use Head Start and among Head Start advocates, who are often the point person for these resources. While Head Start is the obvious example, some other providers also step into this role informally, although to a lesser extent.

"There's a huge disconnect, speaking as a provider. There isn't always the right family support. ***There are so many organizations, but nothing connects. Parents don't know how to connect the dots.*** *It's not that they don't care, they just don't know." – Provider, Mecklenburg County*

- ***Representation and diversity:*** parents want to see themselves and their child represented by the provider: the provider speaking the same language as the parent or child, being the same race of the child, seeing other children of the same race in the classroom, and/or a classroom and teacher that honors and celebrates different customs and cultures. It's important to note that this is not just something heard among parents of color, but by all parents. Parents want their child to see and celebrate different races, cultures, and customs, regardless of their own background. Diversity is important to all and is seen as setting the foundation for navigating life.
  - *Speaking the same language:* parents who may speak another language (like Spanish) want to be able to communicate with the provider and know what is going on with their child every day. They also want to preserve the native language proficiency in their child and fear that children may lose this skill as they interact with others who only speak English. Providers also want more staff who speak other languages besides English: they often struggle to communicate with parents who don't speak English as a first language or have to resort to using the child to translate (which may not be ideal if there are sensitive matters about the

child to discuss) or finding another provider in the center to translate (which places additional burden and responsibility upon that provider).

- *Respecting diversity:* some parents have experienced discrimination or prejudice due to the color of their skin or different customs. They feel both them and their child have been treated differently by providers, or assumptions were made about them because of their background. They want their child (and themselves) to be respected no matter their language, background, or skin color and this adds to the feeling of safety and trust.
- *Celebrating diversity:* while less common of a theme, parents would like providers who celebrate different holidays and customs of all the children in the classroom, or which exposes children to different holidays and customs. A few providers mention that they do this, but it didn't seem to be a common practice mentioned.

*"Being a mother and grandmother of biracial children, **the need for multiple races for children is key.** You need to have that component in childcare. And we don't have many African American teachers who want to go into childcare and it needs to happen. To have a well-rounded child, it has to happen. As a result, the trust factor is not there. With so many biracial children, they need both of those components to build that trust." – Parent, Polk County*

Trust is often strongest in the in-home care or with kin care setting.

- In-home and kin-care providers are often related to parents and children, or known to them for some time, which strengthens that trust bond. These settings often have fewer children, which means that parents feel more attention and care is paid to their child, and there is often flexibility when parents need it. For example, needing a few extra minutes to pick up their child or having a grace period in paying childcare fees. And word of mouth reputation seemed to be the strongest among this type of care.
- When kin care is used, parents do sometimes feel a sense of guilt, especially if it is a mother or in-law who is providing care. They know that the kin are often sacrificing their own ability to earn money by not taking a paying job, or feel they are putting burden onto an older family member. But parents also feel that their child is the safest in this care, as they know the person caring for them loves them and will give them attention.

*"**I wish I had the opportunity to drop my kid off with a friend or other kids they know in a safe home**." – Parent, Madison County*

*"I have good family support with my mom and dad, **but I don't want to be a burden with them in their older years**." – Parent, Avery County*

STAR ratings do not translate to trust and are often a barrier to childcare, for both parents and providers.

- Among the more than 529 respondents surveyed, the STAR rating was mentioned by only a handful of respondents unaided (in some counties the facilitator explicitly aided the conversation to talk about STAR ratings, upon direction from the CandL team). There are a few parents in the listening sessions who used STAR ratings to help find their provider and they found it helpful, especially if they were new to the area and didn't know where to start in the childcare search or didn't have an established friends and family network who could recommend providers.
- But the vast majority of parents were either not aware of STAR ratings or did not use it as a meaningful input into their childcare decision:
    - ***Parents are not aware of the STAR ratings.*** In many of the conversations, STAR ratings just did not come up by parents. This indicated that parents may not be aware that they exist or just disregard them altogether. A few providers feel that the parents who tend to ask about STAR ratings are those who have received higher education, indicating that STAR ratings may discriminate against those who have received less formal education.

*"My child is at a childcare facility. **I'm not sure of the STAR rating**…maybe a 1, 2, or 3?" – Parent, Lenoir County*

*"STAR rating is important for different people based on certain populations. If you don't understand STAR rating, it means you haven't been educated on it. **Depends on education level and socio-economic status of parents**." – Provider, Robeson County*

- ***Parents do not know how to access STAR ratings.*** Some parents indicated that they had heard of ratings and knew of them but didn't know how to access that information. In some sessions, parents were sharing information with one another about how to find STAR ratings.
- ***Parents do not value STAR ratings when deciding on childcare.*** For those parents who were aware of STAR ratings, there is an understanding that there is a loose correlation between higher ratings and higher quality care and more expensive care.
  - But for parents, an indicator of quality is trust…and an indicator of trust is relationship with provider, which is something the STAR ratings do not measure.
  - Some parents also see the STAR ratings as discriminatory or inequitable:
    - *In-home providers.* There is an understanding among some parents that documentation and red tape is involved in getting a rating, so they assume that in-home providers cannot be a part of the STAR rating system because they don't have the bandwidth to navigate this application process.
    - *More expensive.* Some parents see the STAR ratings as discriminatory, where only those who can afford more expensive childcare can access higher-star facilities.

*"**The more stars the more expensive**. At this point, childcare is so scarce the rating systems doesn't even matter. You want to believe that all childcares provide quality childcare. **I know someone who provides in-home didn't have the time or money to get the five-star rating. There has to be something done at the higher level that we don't care about stars anymore.** You're talking about families who are already looking and don't have the financial resources and then you're saying **in order to get quality you have to pay way more.**" – Parent, Polk County*

- Providers also find that parents are infrequently asking, if asking at all, about STAR ratings and don't find that it's an adequate marker of childcare quality. They feel that applying for – or keeping – stars requires too many stipulations and depends on how "lucky" the provider gets on any particular day. However, it's not a measure of long-term or sustainable quality.

*"Some of it you're not in control of. **You can work hard and have a pristine setup, but you might miss a star because of something you can't control.** That's concerning to me." – Provider, Graham County*

- Providers also find the STAR-ratings as inequitable and a barrier to parents accessing childcare, especially when it comes to childcare affordability (more on this below). And they also see the STAR system as impacting funding for their facility (especially funding for staffing which they so desperately need).

"I am a teacher and I am half Mexican and half Cuban. **I aspire to see native Spanish speakers have access to five-star day cares and more to come into them.**" – Provider, Buncombe County

*"**STAR ratings do not play into quality childcare at all**. It's meaningless and restricts us." – Provider, Clay County*

- Of note is a 5-STAR facility in Alamance County, which is a government facility and prides themselves on offering high quality childcare to those who may not otherwise be able to afford it. This type of facility seems

to be the exception among those who participated in the listening sessions and underlies the finding that 5-STAR facilities are primarily accessible to those with higher incomes.

*"**We have people who are way over income who get mad because they want their child at a 5-star site and they can't find it.** And they say they can pay, but we're a government program. That means a lot to some parents." – Director, Alamance County*

Quality childcare is defined by affordability

What are the barriers to childcare ***affordability***?		What is needed to address these barriers?
The high cost of childcare that impacts parents' ability to work and to become financially independent	☛	Raise awareness to legislators and policymakers about the cost of childcare and the impact those costs have on families and the economic opportunity cost on the state
	☛	Find opportunities to lower the cost of childcare across the board, whether through expanded use of vouchers or through a publicly funded system
	☛	Allow childcare providers and centers to work together, rather than competing with one another, to create more equity and stability in childcare costs
An outdated and ineffective voucher system	☛	Remove the social stigma around vouchers so that more people are comfortable applying for them. Increase education around voucher availability and qualification
	☛	Raise the earnings ceiling for voucher qualification so there is more coverage for those who need assistance
	☛	Allow vouchers to be used for all types of childcare settings, including in-home or kin care. Ensure that reimbursement rates for in-home or kin care are equitable compared to facility or center care
	☛	Ensure that all parents have access to vouchers, including those who are immigrants or who do speak English as a second language
	☛	Allow an unemployment grace period with vouchers, so that parents have childcare options while looking for employment
	☛	Expand the number of centers who accept vouchers / incentivize centers to take vouchers so that parents who use them don't have to tradeoff quality for affordability
The use of STAR ratings to allocate funding to providers or set childcare pricing	☛	Provide incentives to (or require) highly rated STAR centers to accept vouchers and/or families from all socio-economic backgrounds
	☛	Provide funding to help centers earn STAR ratings, particularly around staffing retention and training
Availability of childcare centers hinging on grant opportunities	☛	Allow for more equitable grant allocation so that all centers, not just those with more stars, have access to funding
	☛	Ensure that grants are given for longer periods of time to alleviate the burden of applying for grants year over year

	➢	Address staffing shortages and pay issues (more on this in the following section on availability) which may eliminate some of the grant and funding needs

In nearly every county, childcare affordability was mentioned as a key barrier to access. The cost of childcare is so high that it is often the deciding factor of whether a parent (most often, the mother) can work or not. For those who do work, childcare costs take up a significant portion of the paycheck. While few parents mention having to sacrifice food or shelter for childcare, childcare costs do mean that parents often sacrifice other bills or pursuing other dreams / careers to keep their job that pays the childcare bills.

Providers also cite the high price of childcare, but even then, those prices don't always cover their costs of doing business and many have relied on COVID grant money or other grants to keep centers running.

The high cost of childcare means that parents often decide not to work in order to provide their own childcare.

- Some parents are proud of this decision, as they want to be in control of their child's experiences, education, and exposure. They sometimes feel that their child is safer at home and, especially immigrant parents, like that they can continue to instill their language and culture in the child. Parents cherish the additional time they get to spend with their child during their formative years. However, these parents also acknowledge that they are able to stay home with their child because the other parent can financially support the family on just one income; if their financial situation was different, then they recognize that both parents would need to work, and they would need to find childcare in that situation. In some cases, they would also like to have the ability to have a mental break from parenting duties.
- But many other parents don't feel like they had a choice to stay home with their child: they would prefer to work and provide better financial stability for their family, but the cost of childcare would mean that most of their paycheck goes towards childcare. Therefore, they feel that the cost of childcare doesn't make working worth it. The impact of this means that parents are not able to fulfill their hopes and dreams: some parents have completed higher education and want to put their experience and degrees to work and feel "cheated" that they are not able to do so because of the cost of childcare.

"I haven't been able to start work despite having graduated with my MPH and it breaks my heart because I love the program and I loved going to school. It's not been easy, and it's been a process of grieving because I don't know when I can get back to me. ***I love being a mother and his caregiver, but I feel like a part of me died, who I was up to the point of becoming a mother.*** *That's not fair to me, personally." – Parent, Harnett County*

"It is insanely expensive and that's why a ***lot of families would rather take the cut of income and stay at home****." - Provider, Buncombe County*

- Other families are not able to afford childcare, so they trade-off duties with the other parent or with their partner. One parent will watch the children while the other works, and then they trade duties. This means that parents or partners are often "ships passing in the night": they barely see one another, which can cause significant mental and emotional strain.

"I'm having to provide childcare myself. My husband is often gone a lot because of his military job. I do a lot on my own with no family and little community. I'm 24/7 attached to a toddler with just no break. I ***feel he would probably do better with some care outside of the home but finding something that works, that is affordable, is a challenge.*** *I just need some mental time." – Parent, Harnett County*

"The reason we chose to alternate taking care of our child. ***What we would spend on childcare was what we made with our paycheck.*** *It's a wash." – Parent, Madison County*

- Those who stay home with their child, regardless of whether they do so out of choice or necessity, often feel burned out. They rarely get a break from childcare duties, which has an impact on their mental health. And they feel like they are only able to turn to temporary childcare (i.e., babysitters, drop-in care) in emergency situations because of the cost of these services. When possible, they rely on friends and family to help, but not everyone has a trusted friends and family network nearby to turn to. And they also understand the social, emotional, and academic value that exists in childcare and want their children to have those experiences and exposure to others, even if it's just a few days or hours a week.

Those that do work often find that the cost of childcare cuts significantly into their paycheck, meaning that they are not able to become as financially independent as they would like, creating additional financial strain and hardship.

- Many find that they are spending most of their paycheck on childcare costs, but they continue to work because they enjoy their work or need the break from parental duties. However, the childcare costs mean they have to keep a close eye on budget, or they forgo medical needs in order to afford childcare.
- Those who have inconsistent income struggle to piece together childcare so that they can look for work: without childcare, they are unable to go on interviews. Piecing together childcare is also very expensive, which then creates additional financial strain.

"The cost of childcare is so high. It's hard to piece it together when my income isn't consistent. I have people that can pitch in, which I am grateful for. ***It's really hard to just go to an interview. How are you supposed to get a job when you don't have care? You don't want to put your child into just any facility. You want to be able to trust the facility****." – Parent, Durham County*

Childcare subsidies (vouchers) are not adequately meeting the need for all and many often find that vouchers discriminate against them.

- For some, vouchers are a lifesaver; without them, many parents would not be able to afford childcare.

*"****It is affordable with vouchers.*** *Before I was getting vouchers, I paid $1534/month with two. When I got the vouchers, I went to paying $235 a month for all three. Got the voucher through my daycare." – Parent, Alamance County*

"It's hard to be middle class and childcare being $2,000 a month. So, I stayed home and struggled. I didn't work, there was no point. ***With the voucher, I'm able to work now.*** *It's easier to be poor or to be rich. It's hard to be middle class." - Parent, Hertford County*

- However, even with vouchers, many families struggle to pay the parent fee, especially when they have to account for other family expenses. In some cases where grant money exists, providers will help parents by waiving the parent fee or allowing parents to float their monthly payment to help ease the burden on parents.

"We have lost children because their parents are not able to pay that parent fee. ***A lot of the parents work, but with all the other obligations they have, the parent fee is too much sometimes****. If they get a month behind, then it snowballs...if they can't pay one month, then they won't be able to pay two or three." – Provider, Hertford County*

- Many families find it difficult to qualify for vouchers:
    - Some parents don't know where to go to find guidelines for vouchers, and some parents didn't know that vouchers existed until they "stumbled" upon the information. This is especially true for immigrants or parents who don't speak English as a primary language. Parents would like easy to find and easy to navigate information about the existence of vouchers and how to qualify for them.
    - Some parents describe a Catch-22 situation with vouchers: they don't qualify for vouchers unless they are employed, but they can't gain employment without childcare, and they can't afford childcare without employment. As a result, these parents are often left in limbo, trying to piece together interim childcare until they qualify for the voucher.

*"They told me that they needed me to obtain a job before [getting the voucher] and I am like '**How am I supposed to go interview without daycare?'** I think they need a 30-day probation to allow you to try to obtain employment. It felt like a catch-22 for me." – Parent, Durham County*

    - Not all childcare centers take vouchers and parents find themselves having to trade off quality childcare for affordable childcare. They are in desperate need for childcare they can afford, but often those options are not ones that parents trust that their child will receive quality care and feel safe.
    - Vouchers don't adequately cover family or kin care. Parents often use family or kin care over center care but find that vouchers can't be used for this care, or that this care is not subsidized at the same rate, which creates additional financial strain on those who wish to use kin care.

*"**Having vouchers or subsidizing shouldn't just be for official providers, but for family members that provide childcare too**." – Parent, Craven County*

    - Immigrants do not qualify for vouchers. In many instances, they must provide legal documentation or tax records which they feel shut them out of the voucher system.
- Vouchers create a social stigma that contributes to discrimination parents may already feel. Some immigrant parents believe they don't qualify for vouchers or feel uncomfortable providing the documentation needed to qualify for vouchers. And others feel embarrassed or "less than" in applying for vouchers.

*"I went to apply, but I was asked for tax papers, and it depends on the income. So, for that issue, they didn't call me. They should not have too many requirements. **I think my child would have enrolled, but since they asked for the taxes, they didn't call me**." – Hispanic Parent, Wilson County*

- Parents who make just over the threshold to qualify for vouchers find themselves in an impossible situation: they no longer qualify for the vouchers they desperately need and don't make enough to be able to afford childcare. They feel that the voucher system therefore disincentivizes them to make more money or try to earn a better life for their family and keeps them stuck in a discriminatory system.

*"We have parents that say, 'I'm trying to better myself but if I take this job, I'm going to lose benefits.' **You get a little bit better, but they take more money away.**" – Parent, Avery County*

*"It would have been a lot easier if I knew what supports were available for families who don't meet guidelines for poverty or different lines. Some of us are doing the best we can and trying to do better but don't match those. I'm in school full-time and I work, and I coach, and I have two kids. **We don't get those resources because we're a couple hundred dollars over each month.**" – Parent, Buncombe County*

Many providers struggle to stay in business; some childcare centers are closing due to funding and others are worried about what the future holds once COVID grant money runs out.

- Providers often find themselves needing additional funding or grant money to adequately pay for their expenses and staff. While many were able to take advantage of COVID grant money, it is running out for many providers and they worry what that will mean for their center and community, as they rely on those

funds to stay open. Some use the grant money to help parents with their parent fees (who are using vouchers) and who rely on the childcare facility to remain open so that they can work.

"If the government finds the funds to support our industry, then we will be open and be able to meet the needs of all families. Not having classrooms open is a common theme. We can't do our jobs of having fully opened classrooms if we don't have the workforce to man them. We can't get the workforce without the funds. We were already at crisis level for staffing, but then if that [COVID grant] money disappears, we're going to hit a new crisis level. And it's going to get the attention of the state. ***But we have the chance to have our voices heard right now. Someone needs to have these conversations, and someone needs to hear it.****" – Provider, New Hanover*

"It's helpful when the state pays the parent fees or gives more funding to the daycares like they did with the COVID grant. During COVID the parent fees were waived, and that was helpful. Some parents still haven't started paying parent fees. ***I'm still waiving those because we have some grant money left and I'm helping parents out****." – Director, Robeson County*

- Asking for money and qualifying for grants is an ongoing burden that providers and directors must go through. This adds to the mental strain and burnout that many feel, especially as they feel an obligation to be open for their parents and children.

STAR-ratings contribute to the high cost of childcare, effectively discriminating against lower-income families and disadvantaging providers.

- Some providers strive to keep their prices as low as possible in order to cater to parents of all income levels. However, they find that this impacts their ability to receive stars, and therefore may impact the perception of the level of quality they provide.

"When they started the Smart Start program, they were going to cater to all children 0-5 but now it's only for star ratings. ***We don't get the star ratings to keep our rates low so all parents can afford us.****" – Provider, Forsyth County*

- In addition, staffing shortages are a huge challenge providers are currently facing (more on this in the availability pillar below), impacting their STAR-rating. Providers are struggling to keep up their funding and don't often have the funding to pay their staff more. This, in turn, impacts their STAR-rating.

*"****How are we going to remain a five-star daycare when we can't keep the staff and can't pay them?*** *If we pay them good, we can keep them. Everyone is getting raises except in daycare." – Provider, Richmond County*

- Providers feel that not all childcare facilities are treated equally: that the state caters more to those centers who have four-and-five STAR ratings and leaves other facilities behind. Across the board, providers would like to see more equity among childcare providers, in order to help lower the costs of childcare by working together as an industry.

"The state caters more to the STAR rated centers. ***That's unjust because (religious based) facilities have to go through the same work, but we aren't granted the same privileges****." – Provider, Forsyth County*

*"****We make education a competition. We all need to be on the same platform.*** *Childcare is competing based on price. Make it all on one platform so we charge the same and make it easier for us." – Director, Gaston County*

Quality childcare is defined by availability

There is a shortage of childcare options across the state. This childcare shortage is driven by lack of childcare centers / facilities and staff shortages which then fuel long wait lists and wait times for childcare, both for facility and in-home care. In addition, few providers have non-traditional hours, which limits accessibility for parents who work early mornings or late nights or who just need part-time care.

What are the barriers to childcare ***availability***?		What is needed to address these barriers?
Staffing shortages and high turnover within the childcare industry	☛	Elevate the role and importance of the childcare provider within the community and demonstrate the value that they bring: providing a foundational education before formal school, acting as a central hub for sharing information within the community, providing emotional support to parents and children, and developing the economy of a community
		Provide mental health support and resources to providers
		Provide access to relevant trainings, which directly tie to the individual needs providers have in the classroom
		Provide comparable benefits to public school teachers, including health insurance and retirement
		Increase the wages for providers, compensating them appropriately for the value they provide to the community
Long wait times for childcare centers, which adds stress and limits employment options for parents	☛	Increase the number of centers within a community, including providing incentives and reducing the "red tape" for in-home centers
		Increase the number of providers in the industry, which allows for more classrooms within a center to open with the current student-to-teacher ratio
Long distances to / from centers, resulting in long transportation time	☛	Increase the number of centers within a community, especially rural communities, including providing incentives and reducing the "red tape" for in-home centers
		Work with communities to strategically distribute centers so that there is equitable access within a county
Lack of non-traditional hours at a childcare center	☛	Incentivize centers to provide flexible and/or non-traditional hours to cater to parents who need it (i.e., work third shift, in the service industry, or in the gig economy)
Lack of a centralized portal with information about childcare and parent resources	☛	Work with the community and/or state to create an easy-to-access online portal for both providers and parents. Information to include available providers in the community and what services they offer (i.e., providers who speak non-English, have providers trained to care for children with special needs, Head Start, NC Pre-K, etc.); financial assistance information; community events; parenting workshops, trainings, and workshops; after-school care and programs, etc.

Long wait times are a result of few childcare options in many parts of the state, a high demand for childcare, and childcare provider shortages and high industry turnover. Let's start by digging into what is driving childcare provider shortages and high industry turnover.

- **Providers are passionate about what they do. It takes a special person to provide the level of trust, education, and love that children need to thrive.**
    - Throughout every county included in the listening sessions, providers and parents talk about the love and passion that providers bring to childcare and early childhood education. For providers, childcare is not a job, it is a calling. Many have dedicated most of their life to childcare and/or have received (or are currently working towards) degrees, training, and education in the early childhood education space.
    - Many parents in the listening sessions recognize the value that providers bring to their children. Those who use childcare providers understand that these providers are able to teach their children skills and lessons that they cannot teach as parents. And they understand the importance of having this foundational education in order to succeed in school.
- **Providers play a crucial role within a community, as they are the central "hub" for information sharing, education preparedness, and economic development.**
    - Providers allow parents to work, go to school to pursue their own education, and fulfill their own dreams. This opportunity seems to be especially impactful for women, who made up the vast majority of parents in the listening sessions and on whom childcare responsibilities appear to fall on more heavily. By women having access to childcare, they are the ones more likely to be able to work and pursue education opportunities compared to men.
    - Childcare providers create a foundation for early childhood education. While this is especially true for NC Pre-K and Head Start programs, it is also true for providers who do not offer those programs. Providers' goal is to set up children for success at school and to teach academic, emotional, and social skills to all children.
    - Providers also are a source of emotional and physical support for parents. They make themselves available to talk to parents about their children and to offer advice and perspective to overwhelmed parents. And often they may help parents find resources like parenting workshops, access to therapists for children with special needs or behavioral challenges, and financial support for childcare (i.e., subsidies).
    - Lastly, childcare provides employment in the community. Being able to hire qualified and passionate teachers, both in-center and in-home, can help the financial health of a community.
- **However, the provider role is underappreciated.**
    - Providers do not feel that all *parents* understand the value they bring to a children's academic, social, and emotional education. They feel that some parents see them – and treat them – as a babysitter and don't respect what they do day in and day out for children.
    - Providers also do not feel that *the state* understands the value they bring a children's academic, social, and emotional education. Many educators, throughout several counties, wished that government officials could spend just one day in their classroom to truly understand what providers deal with and how they touch a child's life.

"What the community is lacking is the real understanding of what it means to be a childcare provider, to be a teacher. It is not a drop-off center, a babysitting situation. Sometimes I think the respect for what we do is not valued. ***Which is why we are one of the most underpaid professions you can have****." – Provider, Cabarrus County*

- **Providers often feel overwhelmed.**
    - Providers talk about burnout because they don't have all the resources available to them. This includes:
        - *Training for children with special needs or behavioral challenges:* Many providers in the listening sessions care for children with special needs or behavioral challenges and don't know how to appropriately care for these children, which creates stress. Because these children often take up more of a provider's time and attention, providers feel they are short-changing the care and attention for other children in their classroom. Providers don't know where to go for training or they just can't find teachers who specialize in this care. And while the state and county may sometimes help provide resources like OT, PT, and Speech therapists, it is often not enough for the need.

"The biggest challenge at the center is that we haven't had a lot of training on working with special needs children and we've had many of them come to the school and ask if we can provide care. ***We don't have the training or knowledge to keep that child safe and meet their needs.*** *It's not that we don't want the kids there, but it's not fair to bring the kids to the center not knowing what to do for them." - Provider, Cumberland County*

        - *Additional training in applicable topics or interest areas:* Providers often deal with different challenges in the classroom, depending on their population. As a result, they would like training opportunities to help them provide the best possible care for the children in their classroom. These types of trainings include: social and emotional development, bridging gaps between communities (building cultural connections), racism and bias, and mentorship. However, providers often do not know where they can find these trainings nor have the time to attend these trainings.
        - *Mental health resources:* Providers want resources that help them cope with the challenges that come with their career. This is especially true for those who provide in-home care, as they lack the natural support network that exists in a facility with multiple providers. Many providers who have their own children are not only providing care for other children but are also dealing with the challenges of finding childcare options for their own children and paying for that care, which can be overwhelming given the low pay they receive as a provider.

"When you have undiagnosed children [in the classroom] it can be very hard, especially if you're the only teacher in the classroom and dealing with your own emotions that come with that. ***If we could have resources for mental health, it would create better stability and produce a better teacher for children.*** *" – Provider, Harnett County*

    - Because providers care so much about their families, they often take on the troubles of their children and parents. They are sometimes stressed if they cannot provide financial assistance or space for parents and have to turn them away.
        - Some Directors will allow parents who face financial troubles to "float" or pay a lower fee for a few months to help them out, which creates financial strain on the center, further adding to the stress. However, Directors are reluctant to turn parents away, especially if the parent's job depends on having childcare.
    - And some providers feel burnout from the shortage of providers, itself. Having fewer providers in a classroom mean that providers cannot take breaks, or they are allowed fewer breaks. Those in a facility often have to work more shifts. And in-home providers don't have additional staffing resources which would allow them to go to a doctor's appointment or have back-up if they get sick, which means their daycare has to be closed, which negatively impacts families.

"Some days I wish I could find help. ***When I have a doctor's appointment, I don't have anyone to come in, so the majority of my appointments I have had to close the facility.*** *Which puts parents in a bad spot who had to go to work." – In-Home Provider, Hertford County*

- **Providers are undervalued.**
    - On top of feeling overwhelmed and underappreciated, providers are not paid commensurate to the value they provide, or to the education and training and they have. Many providers lament that they are paid less than fast-food workers, who are not required to have specialized training or licenses and often are not dealing with the same level of stress.
    - In addition to low pay, providers often do not receive healthcare benefits or retirement savings like a pension or 401k. This means that they do not have the opportunity to save for the future and must pay out of pocket for medical insurance. This adds additional financial strain on them and their families, which then impacts their ability to bring their whole self to serve children.
    - Many providers and parents across counties would like to see a system for childcare providers much like public school educators: at the very least state insurance and retirement benefits. Since providers are educating children, it makes sense that they are given the same benefits as public school teachers.

"We do need more pay. It doesn't make sense to have to work two jobs to make a living. I work all the time. I beg for extra hours. I have to keep my house going. ***It don't make sense that you have can't get health care, benefits, retirement. They don't even pay you enough to save.*** *Single incomes struggle more.* ***I can't go to another job because I LOVE this job. But it just don't pay enough to run my house.*** *" – Provider, Robeson County*

"Every childcare provider I know has a second job, so they aren't getting paid enough. They shouldn't have to go watch another group of children. ***Our society is missing the public investment in ECE. If our society valued it and made the investment like they do in K-12. ECE doesn't have that at all. They think it's a babysitter. But they are teachers, they are educators. It is a school.*** *" – Parent, Buncombe County*

- **Because of these reasons, there is high turnover in the industry, which frustrates Directors / Owners, other teachers, and parents.**
    - Directors / Owners have seen a lot of people in their center leave for the school system or for other jobs due to the stresses outlined above. And when searching for new staff, Directors / Owners have a difficult time finding qualified childcare providers and when they do, they often quit soon after starting. This places additional stress on the remaining staff at the center.

"There is a not a commitment to this field like there used to be. I'm not sure where the breakdown was. ***I think I could run a retail store with less turnover and burnout than I can a staff of 21 at a daycare. You have to have a love for this field and want to make a difference and I don't know if that's a passion anymore.*** *" – Director, Robeson County*

    - The high turnover erodes parent trust. Stability and consistency are key to helping a child feel safe and in creating a nurturing learning environment; when teachers turn over, it creates instability which can negatively impact the child and the trust the parent places in a facility.

"If there's a lot of turnover, that's not consistency. ***I don't want my 4-year-old to have a different teacher every week because then she's not learning anything.*** *" – Parent, Cabarrus County*

- And, as mentioned in the previous pillars, the high turnover and staffing shortages impacts funding and STAR-rating for many facilities.

The staffing shortages, along with the limited childcare options available in some counties, create extremely long waiting lists. The long waitlists create stress and frustration for parents, as it limits their employment opportunities. And many feel that they contribute to inequities in the access that parents have to childcare.

- The long wait times are driven in a large part by high turnover of providers and difficulty in finding qualified providers to fill vacated spots. Turnover adds to the already-long waitlists, as some facilities must limit the number of classrooms they have or the number of children they can take to stay in compliance with teacher-student ratios.
- Some feel the difficulty providers face in opening in-home centers contributes to the childcare shortage in their county. They would like to see less bureaucracy required for in-home providers to gain their licenses, to help ease the waitlist burden.

"I'd like to see something that's close to incentivizing small daycares in a way that minimizes liability. When I hear people say I couldn't do this, it's terrifying. ***If there is a way that the government is involved that provides licensure, resources, and protections so people have more options to daycares****." – Parent, New Hanover*

- Parents describe being on waitlists for months or years, which severely impacts their ability to find employment. Many times, parents must decline job opportunities because they do not have childcare available. For some, getting off the waitlist comes too late as employment opportunities have passed before childcare becomes available. Missing out on employment opportunities – or on the right employment opportunities – limits their financial freedom and ability to pursue their passions and dreams. Parents desperately need childcare in order to achieve financial freedom, but they must balance that with placing their children with a provider whom they trust.

"Lots of families are running into waitlists, ***but I really need a job now and I can't wait 6 months to maybe wait for my kid to get a spot****, but I don't want to just put my kid anywhere." – Parent, Harnett County*

- Providers and parents alike feel like the waiting lists creates a sense of competition and elitism among centers: the more highly valued centers are the ones with the long wait lists, and that sometimes means they can also charge more, which contributes to financial stress and inequities. They would like to see centers work together to shorten or eliminate the wait lists to provide more equity across centers in a county.

Availability of childcare is impacted by transportation time between the center, work, and home.

- In those counties with fewer childcare options, especially larger counties, rural counties, or those counties in the western part of the state, the distance between home, work, and childcare can be a burden to the point that it deters parents from seeking outside childcare options. Parents often drive up to 30 minutes to access childcare, which not only adds to the time stress of traveling for this long, but also the financial stress of paying for gas.
- This transportation issue is compounded when the childcare has limited hours or is a NC Pre-K classroom that follows school hours: by the time the child is dropped off, the parents has very little time before they have to travel to pick them up again. This shortened day, impacted by the long travel time, again impacts the kinds of job opportunities that parents can take or the decision to use an outside childcare provider.

*"****Everything is so spread out, so traveling to these places can be difficult. The area is not easy to navigate.*** *A program may be available for two, three, or five days and short amount of hours (9am-12pm) but it takes 45 minutes*

to get there which is not feasible with the commute and traffic and gas for just a few hours of childcare. That has been the biggest hurdles to finding care." – Parent, Harnett County

- The solution to this is to open more childcare centers or options within a county and to equitably distribute them within a county so that travel time is minimized for parents. In addition, some parents and providers would like to see childcare provide transportation to and from the center to minimize the transportation burden on parents.

*"**There needs to be smarter locations for facilities for daycare for their residents.** Or if you have children who have school-age, have children who ride the bus together to the facilities (i.e., large apartment complex within school systems)." – Parent, Lenoir County*

*"We are driving 30-45 minutes each way to get our kids to childcare and my child is only there three hours. **The resources are not abundant within Madison County.**" – Parent, Madison County*

More flexible and non-traditional childcare hours are needed to serve a wider parent population.

- The most commonly mentioned childcares offer full-day options during the traditional day (i.e., 7:00am – 6:00pm). While this works for those parents who work full-time in traditional job settings, there is a large population of parents who just need part-time care or care that is available outside of 7:00am – 6:00pm. This includes parents who work in the service industry, who have third shift jobs, or who work in the gig economy.

*"**I work third shift. If I don't have the ability to have anyone watch her, I have to schedule around my older kids to watch her.** Because I don't have anybody to watch after her. When it's my turn to have her, I do what I can to have her with me." – Parent, Lenoir County*

- Without flexible or non-traditional hours available, parents often have to rely on drop-in centers or friends and family / kin care, which may be expensive or places additional burden on family and friends, which parents don't want to do on a regular basis. In some instances, parents may leave children with an older sibling or may trade-off with the other parent, which creates stress and burnout for family members.

Immigrant parents, or those parents who do not speak English fluently, often feel that childcare options are not available to them.

- Parents often struggle to find information about childcare options (and resources about financial assistance for childcare) in Spanish. This means that they are missing out on critical information, and they often rely on word of mouth from friends, family, and religious communities when it comes to childcare options.
- In most of the childcare centers included in this research, providers do not speak Spanish (or other languages) fluently. They often have to rely on a translator (very few centers have a translator and for those who do, it's often just one translator for the entire facility), use the Google Translate app, or rely on the child to translate, which doesn't create a sense of trust, inclusion, or belonging within the childcare setting.
- Finally, some parents feel that they need to have legal status in order to enroll their child into childcare. As a result, this precludes some parents from looking into childcare and ECE options (i.e., Head Start, NC Pre-K) because they are unclear about the qualifications and options available to non-citizens.

*"**I went to apply to [NC Pre-K], but I was asked for tax papers, and it depends on the income. So, for that issue, they didn't call me.** They should not have too many requirements. I think my child would have enrolled, but since they asked for the taxes, they didn't call me." – Parent, Wilson County*

Counties and the state lack a centralized location to access information about childcare and childcare assistance resources.

- Parents wish there was a place where they could find information about childcare options (providers in the county, services they provide like catering to children with special needs, application information, and financial assistance for childcare) and parenting resources (like workshops, community events, and parent meetups). Currently, they rely on word of mouth from family, friends, and communities – or end up doing their own research – and, as a result, do not feel they receive the latest or fullest information available.

"I didn't know what I should be thinking about and how the different facilities all measure up compared to one another. ***I went online to get agency reports and did my own thing. But would have been nice to have some of those things and guidance during pregnancy and direction for what to check out and resources there were.*** *Knowing that wait lists were a year long, knowing about Head Start, would have helped manage my anxiety." – Parent, New Hanover*

- Providers also wish they had access to a centralized location of information in order to assist parents. Since childcare providers often act as a "hub" to distribute information to parents and caregivers, they feel a responsibility to help connect parents to resources like play groups, workshops and trainings, parent support, and access to therapists and special needs assistance. They often end up doing their own searches or pulling together information based on their own networks and wish there was something more centralized and formalized from the state or county.

*"****There is no central portal for parents who need respite care or mom's day out.*** *We're scouring social media to find events to our parents or to refer them to a center with a half day program or special needs.* ***We'd love to partner to send those parents elsewhere but no portal that provides that information we can provide. Everyone is using tech, but no one is using one central place for everything.*** *If we had that, it would make it easier to parents to find options for whatever their needs are." – Provider, Cumberland County*

OTHER FINDINGS

The purpose of the research was to dig into the barriers and facilitators to childcare across North Carolina, with the focus being on ECE. There were other findings and themes that emerged during the listening sessions that were tangential to these objectives, but important enough to call out in this report.

The responsibility of childcare and ECE falls disproportionately on women, which has major implications on their financial independence and ability to pursue their dreams.

- When childcare scarcity means that a parent must stay home and sacrifice not working, that responsibility almost always (at least in these listening sessions) falls on the mother. Lack of childcare availability and affordability handcuffs a woman's ability to provide for her family and pursue her own goals, regardless of her educational level. This also adds to her mental exhaustion and frustration, which again, she bears the brunt of.
- The childcare providers who participated in these sessions were almost all females. And many of them are parents, themselves, and are juggling dual duties of caring for their own children as well as others' children. As providers, they are dealing with burnout, not feeling respected, and not being paid for the value they bring to the community. Some feel that this devaluation could be that they are not seen as the heads of households and so their contribution to the family income is deprioritized. Again, this burden is being place disproportionately onto women.
- We wonder, as we hear these women's voices, is the childcare crisis being overlooked by the state because this responsibility primarily falls upon a group who is traditionally undervalued by our society? How much of

the devaluation and under-compensation of providers is because they are primarily women, who are traditionally underpaid in our society? It seems that our state's childcare crisis is also a crisis among women and is contributing to female burnout. By stepping up for childcare, the state is also stepping up for women.

"Many staff in this field are heads of households. There's a misconception that the women in this field are second income. ***Acknowledge that we are either the only income or the primary income.*** *We need health insurance for us and our family." – Provider, Henderson County*

"Childcare work is emotionally taxing. ***It's historically been 'woman's work' and underpaid****." – Provider, Cherokee County*

Parents desire more "third spaces" for school-aged children.

- Many of the parents who participated in the sessions with children ages 0-5 years old also had children with a range of ages and are often juggling childcare for their younger children and their school-aged children. These parents desire spaces where children can safely socialize with others and be entertained when school is out. These include:
  - *Community spaces* like pools, gyms, and parks, where children can meet with others, be outdoors, and be active.
  - *Affordable after-school programs*, for parents who work later than school hours and know their children are safe and well-cared for.
  - *Affordable summer camps*, so parents know their children are safe and entertained when they are working during the summer months.
- Having childcare options for older children has many of the same benefits as for younger children: it provides enrichment opportunities for children, allows parents to juggle multiple obligations as a parent, and allows parents to work and fulfill their dreams.

Both parents and providers value community and the "village" that is necessary to raise a child.

- For many, that community creates a sense of family and support network – both within the social community and within the childcare community – that they rely upon in order to thrive as a parent. They turn to their network for advice, to step in with childcare as needed, for assistance, or for emotional support. And this family is often made up of non-relatives and includes the childcare community.
- However, some lament the loss of that community in society and feel that it's not as close-knit as it used to be when they were growing up. They recognize the value the community provides and feel like society is worse off because that community does not exist.

*"****We don't have a village no more. Everyone is looking out for themselves.*** *Back in the day, we all looked out for each other. If we came home from school early and my mom was out, my neighbor got us. We didn't have to be family. We don't look out for one another anymore." - Parent, Hertford County*

- All this points to the role that childcare can, and does, play within a community. It can be the hub of the village: it can create a family for those who do have family nearby, it's a support system for those who need it, it creates an educational foundation for children, and it provides advice. When the system is working well, everyone in the community benefits and society becomes stronger, more accountable, and more close-knit.

"Everyone was helping each other, not matter what color, disability. Not having any type of boundaries of who or when to help. Always having that village, that even if I don't know your name, I know you live here and I'm here to help. ***Where your teacher is a neighbor. Having resources, access to things, holistically there and open for everyone****." – Provider, Alamance County*

WESTERN COUNTY FINDINGS

A separate analysis was done on the western counties to identify key themes and needs among this subgroup of respondents. Overall, the findings in the western counties echo what was heard throughout the rest of the state; the barriers, facilitators, and needs are universal among North Carolina parents and providers. However, a key finding is that childcare barriers seem to be exacerbated in the western counties and there was greater stress and frustration heard in the voices of parents and providers. One common refrain is that the western counties feel overlooked or forgotten, and it can be extremely frustrating for them to see other counties have access to resources that they do not.

"It's incredibly sad to live in an area that feels forgotten. I would try and pay a little more attention to the small counties. ***There are families here that matter****." - Parent, McDowell County*

Using trust, affordability, and availability as the framework for quality childcare, the key sources of pronounced tension are heard in the affordability and availability pillars.

Quality childcare is defined by trust

The same themes and findings outlined for trust continue to exist in the western counties. This the most important factor for them. Trust is a universal theme when it comes to seeking and providing childcare and there is nothing different or unique in this area for the western counties specifically. However, there was a pronounced tension when it came to STAR ratings.

STAR ratings are meaningless in counties which already have few childcare options.

- Consistent with findings from the rest of the state, parents in the western counties don't value STAR ratings because they are simply looking for available daycare that they trust. Because of the scarcity of childcare options in this region, STAR ratings are even more devalued than they are in the rest of the state.
- Providers also find the ratings frustrating because they already don't get the funding they need to keep teachers, which is one of the inputs into the STAR ratings. While many of their teachers value additional trainings or education (which would also increase the center's STAR status), they simply don't have the time or the resources to pursue this.

"It's hard to get educators to go back to school for the classes to get a better STAR rating. ***Educators have family and there isn't time****." – Provider, Clay County*

"I had a daycare that I loved [in a different county]. It's hard to find the same kind of care here. ***I don't care about ratings. I care about my child being taken care of****." - Parent, Polk County*

Quality childcare is defined by affordability

Parents struggle to afford childcare and vouchers aren't an option for some parents who need them.

- The price of childcare is often too much for families to afford, even if a two-income household, and some families switch off or sacrifice an income stream in order to stay home with the child. As heard in other parts of the state, some families earn just enough that puts them over eligibility for vouchers, but they can't afford childcare without the voucher.

- And providers struggle to keep up with their own funding in order to stay open. They often find:
    - *They cannot increase prices* because what may seem like a small increase has a really big impact on families. Some providers find that families leave after a small increase, which not only impacts families but also the provider's funding stream.
    - *The voucher reimbursement lags* and so providers feel that they are constantly chasing revenue. It was not explicitly stated in the listening sessions that this impacts their ability or decision to accept vouchers, but it does seem that this lag would create financially instability for those centers who do.

*"What we get paid went up 5% based off 2015 data. **A 7-year delay for data**." – Provider, Cherokee County*

*"We need more available, affordable childcare. The market rate needs to be looked at again. **Many centers have to charge more than market rate to run a quality center but this is a burden for the families**." – Provider, Henderson County*

Quality childcare is defined by availability

The western part of the state is a childcare desert, meaning that many parents are staying home with their child out of necessity, not choice.

- While lack of childcare options is a common theme across the state, it is especially pronounced in the western counties. This is due to even fewer options to choose from within a county and made worse by the staffing shortages. Those childcare centers that do exist often are closing classrooms or centers because they don't have enough providers to staff them. This means that parents do not have a reliable source of childcare.

*"It's impossible to meet ratio with the staff we have. **If one teacher is sick we might have to close the center.** It's a daily struggle." – Provider, Cherokee County*

*"**We have childcare deserts in the eastern part of the county**. We had a big center that closed recently. We really, really, really need childcare here." – Provider, Burke County*

*"I was given a list of places, called around, they were all so sympathetic, but **'It's a daycare desert'** is what I kept hearing. I said, 'Oh my gosh, what am I gonna do?' But we just kept doing our thing, I would call back, and it just so happened the lady was on the phone with me and got a text that someone was moving. And we were able to get him into daycare fulltime. It's been a godsend." – Parent, Watauga County*

- Some parents turn to childcare options outside their county to expand the pool of options. As a result of the high demand and few options, there are long waitlists, longer transportation times to and from childcare, and few options that provide the childcare hours that parents need. This adds to parent stress and frustration.
    - *Longer transportation times and transportation challenges:* Because the western counties tend to be more rural, transportation can sometimes be a challenge. Parents find themselves driving long distances to and from childcare or find it more difficult to find reliable transportation options to reach childcare locations.

*"**We are driving 30-45 minutes each way to get our kids to childcare and my child is only there three hours.** The resources are not abundant within Madison County." – Parent, Madison County*

    - *Non-standard hours:* While finding childcare with non-standard hours is a challenge throughout the state, it is particularly challenging and important in the western counties. Many of the parents who participated in the western listening sessions work in the service industry, which has non-traditional

hours. Parents need to find locations that offer flexible hours or hours that match those of the service industry.

*"The hours of operation of traditional daycare **don't line up with the hours of the service industry where we all work**." – Parent, Burke County*

- The high turnover erodes parent trust. Stability and consistency are key to helping a child feel safe and in creating a nurturing learning environment; when teachers turn over, it creates instability which can negatively impact the child and the trust the parent places in a facility. This has led some parents to value in-home providers because there may be more consistency and reliability, which leads to strong relationships with the provider.

*"Feeling like your kid is more than a number. That's why I [use in-home] to have the connection. **I want to feel like the provider has a relationship with you and your child**." – Parent, Burke County*

- There is urgency to find more well-trained providers and people who value this profession and want to make it into a career. Providers suggest streamlining the licensing process to make it easier for people to enter this field, both at the center and in-home level. And parents also would like to see more in-home options to help expand the childcare options.

*"Smart Start is a great support system but **there must be parents out there who are struggling and want to stay home with their kids and it would be great if they could start an at home program.**" – Parent, Madison County*

Parents highly value Head Start and Early Head Start, but access is limited in this part of the state.

- Parents love that Head Start and Early Head Start provides a solid ECE foundation and creates lifelong social skills. Many parents seek out this option because it feels like high quality care that is affordable (free) which seems to be an anomaly when it comes to childcare. Parents also like that the program offers more holistic care and support. In some counties where there isn't Early Head Start parents would like to see that program developed in order to cater to children at an even younger age, so that children can benefit from ECE earlier and parents can have the childcare coverage needed for finding work. While Head Start programs were used in counties throughout the state, there seems to be an even stronger prevalence, need, and desire for it in the western counties.

*"I use early Head Start and have used it for all our children. It has been very helpful. **It gives the kids social skills and language skills. It helps us (parents) so we can work and provide for our family.** We are in a year-round program." – Parent, Rutherford County*

*"We figured out that my **child needed glasses at two years old because of Head Start**." – Parent, Avery County*

- However, there are not enough Head Start and Early Head Start options for the number of children who need them. Many parents find that they don't qualify because they are just over the qualifying income level, but this then puts traditional childcare out of financial reach for them, so they find themselves without a childcare and ECE option. Parents would like to see everyone qualify for the program, or at least raising the threshold so that more qualify.
- As part of this, parents also want more clarify on the qualifications and eligibility for the program. While many parents had their children enrolled in the program, others just learned about it during the listening sessions. Still others had heard about it but didn't know where to go to find additional information about it.

- And parents would like to see more grants – either at the federal or county level – which would provide more staffing for Head Start and Early Head Start so that more programs can be opened or more classrooms can be filled.

*"**If the Federal government doesn't grant funds for Early Head Start then the State or Local governments need to step up**. Pay for one or two full time staff!" – Provider, Graham County*

Just as the western counties have a childcare desert, there also seems to be a desert of information for parents to access.

- Parents struggle to learn about programs and resources that are available to them. During the listening sessions, many parents were learning about programs like Early Head Start for the first time. Others were sharing information about parent classes. They lamented the fact that there is not centralized location for them to learn about the available resources in the county.

*"One of the things we need more of is resources, more info. **I do get a lot of info from parent and teacher groups, but still find myself wanting to Google a lot. So I never really know what to do with him to help him develop**. More resources would help." – Parent, Watauga County*

ALAMANCE COUNTY FINDINGS

Facilitating Organization	Date of Listening Session	Group Type	# of Participants
Impact Alamance in Partnership with Alamance Achieves	September 20th, 2022	Providers & Parents / Caregivers	11
Impact Alamance in Partnership with Alamance Achieves	October 2nd, 2022	Parents / Caregivers	6

For the September 20th session, six providers participated: five identified as Black / African American and one as Latinx. Of the five parents / caregivers who participated: two identified as Black / African American, two as not a member of the BIPOC community, and demographics were not recorded for the other parent.
Of the six parents / caregivers who participated in the October 2nd session, five identified as Black / African American and demographics were not recorded for the other parent.

Quick summary of Alamance:

Providers and parents / caregivers VALUE…	Providers and parents / caregivers NEED…
• A close-knit family community in childcare where everyone looks out for one another to raise the community's children together. • Convenient and flexible childcare • Respect and full engagement from parents so that all resources can be taken advantage of and realize the impact providers have of children's lives.	• Further assistance and consistent, clearer guidelines in the process of getting a voucher to increase ease of use and navigability. • A centralized place to find information so they can easily connect parents with community resources. • Support groups for parents to help exchange information and share in each other's journey

Beyond simply being a place to drop off their children, parents value a family-oriented and close-knit community dynamic in their childcare.

- This atmosphere often mirrors the communities in which parents grew up in and provides security and peace of mind to the parent.
    - *"Childcare is impeccable. She treats him as if he was her. She has others helping. Having that family dynamic within a childcare center makes a difference … Learning and sometimes a little extra. She's in the process of trying to potty train him." – Parent, Alamance County*
    - *"Everyone was helping each other, not matter what color, disability. Not having any type of boundaries of who or when to help. Always having that village, that even if I don't know your name, I know you live here and I'm here to help. Where your teacher is a neighbor. Having resources, access to things, holistically there and open for everyone." – Provider, Alamance County*
    - *"Community resources. Having support from everyone in the community and programs in place where kids can learn new skills and also be close knit and trust with your child." – Parent, Alamance County*

While many find that childcare is made more affordable with vouchers, certain pain points exist around getting a voucher.

- Many desire a voucher system that has clear and consistent guidelines, makes it easier to get assistance, and supplies quicker responses to inquiries.

- *"It is affordable with vouchers. Before I was getting vouchers, I paid $1534/month with two. When I got the vouchers, I went to paying $235 a month for all three. Got the voucher through my daycare." – Parent, Alamance County*
- *"Making the process easier for the family to get vouchers and to look at guidelines for the vouchers. You make a lot of money; you still need help. Rent is high, mortgage, taking care of a child is higher, period." – Parent, Alamance County*
- *"Just the process of getting a voucher for a kid, make it easier to fill out and get a response quicker." – Parent, Alamance County*
- *"Some children need before and after school; our day is 8-2:30 and they use vouchers to get in the before / after school program and the wait list is very long. But we have a collaboration with DSS but sometimes it's harder for them to take the daycare vouchers. We don't take money, just the voucher. Voucher is for a certain number of hours a day." – Provider, Alamance County*
- *"When daughter was in daycare, I had vouchers. My sister has vouchers for her kids, and it helps out. She doesn't have to pay that much and can afford other things as well." – Provider, Alamance County*
- *"Accessibility. Make the prices easier to get assistance. And providing assistance at every level at tax brackets. There are people who make a lot of money who still need assistance when paying for daycare. Just because you make money doesn't mean they are in a place where they can afford childcare." – Provider, Alamance County*

Providers have a clear passion and feel a sense of duty to not only teach the children, but to be a continuing resource for parents so that they might carry over the teachings and education into the home.

- Especially when it comes to special needs, teachers would like trainings and further education for themselves and parents to make sure they are meeting the needs of all children they care for.
  - *"We need a lot of help, especially kids with special needs and getting parents training because sometimes they are in denial." – Provider, Alamance County*
  - *"We don't know about the (special needs) of children unless parents tell us. And sometimes the parents don't know, or they are in denial. If we ask them, they say no. But the teachers won't find out until the child is in the classroom. So, we try the best to question the parents, but we have a lot of parents who are young and in denial and we don't know until we assign the children to the classroom. So, needing to educate the parents about their child." – Provider, Alamance County*
  - *"A lot of parents need education and training. A lot of parents are not taught or don't understand the impact that they choices make on their children and the cycle and the outcomes we get from those processes." – Provider, Alamance County*
  - *"We help a lot of children who have developmental needs, even more so now than before, helping parents understand how to work with their child because a lot of times they don't know what to do. Resources to help with emotional and developmental needs." – Provider, Alamance County*
  - *"Our community needs more patience and kindness, especially towards special needs. They are hard to deal with sometimes, but they need love just like everyone else." – Provider, Alamance County*
  - *"Education for the parents. Helping the parents out too so they know how to teach their children." – Provider, Alamance County*
- A key frustration for providers is when parents don't respect their efforts or take advantage of the resources that teachers offer to them.
  - *"We are not just a babysitter. We have to get education on top of education. If we want a rewarding career in childcare, parents don't realize or accept what's being offered or how we can help them. We can't cross them over the finish line. But we can get you almost there. One thing about the childcare community, a lot of church's participate and are willing to help but very few parents are willing to take that initial step. As teachers, and as advocates, you offer, but until they do their part, we'll*

continue to have these conversations. It's hard to pull someone across the finish line." – Provider, Alamance County

- *"Communicating things you see when a parent is in denial is frustrating, especially when you have documentation. And you've spoken to them about it and then the parent comes in and turns it and says why aren't you helping the child. You can say you've recommended they take the child to a pediatrician, and they look at you like you have 15 heads. I want that child to be successful, but they need the extra support to get where the child needs to go. And I will help take the child to the doctor. But take the initiative to take care of your child first." – Provider, Alamance County*
- *"I can tell you where the food is, but it is up to parents to go get the food. Head Start offers services and the services they offer will benefit the child. They ask to bring the child to school so they can go to dental. And some will not. It's free. Why can't you get the child. They will say they overslept. We want to help, but we should not enable parents to not take initiative." – Provider, Alamance County*

However, many parents do see the efforts that providers put forward and call for more respect and higher pay for teachers as a sign of their appreciation.

- *"My biggest problem with daycare is the teachers. They are teaching our future and they feel so unappreciated that I would want to do something for them. Something to entice them to continue to pass along the education for the kids." – Parent, Alamance County*
- *"Bonus for the teachers because they do so much in raising our kids. Maybe an end of year bonus. For parents, some type of discount in terms of payment per month so it's more affordable." – Parent, Alamance County*
- *"I feel that every 30 days anyone who deals with education in the government should spend 6 hours in a classroom in this state. Because 6 hours gives you enough time for the kids to be there for a meal and a daily perspective of what's going on in that classroom. You see things that say "this rule or guideline" makes no sense because you're in it. It also makes them appreciate what we do more.* ***Instead of us being labeled babysitters. They will understand what our profession is to the highest. And maybe we would get more fundings or new avenues of new ways to handle and come up with different programs or breaks for teachers, or better ratio in the classroom****." – Provider, Alamance County*

AVERY COUNTY FINDINGS

Facilitating Organization	Date of Listening Session	Group Type	# of Participants
Blue Ridge Partnership for Children	February 2nd, 2023	Providers	6
Blue Ridge Partnership for Children	February 2nd, 2023	Parents / Caregivers	6

Demographic information was not collected on the respondents.

Quick summary of Avery:

Parents / caregivers VALUE…	Parents / caregivers NEED…
• The continuity and community of Head Start and Early Head Start • The importance of investing in teachers' and students' future	• Not only an accessible childcare facility but one that they can find trust and dependability in • Expanded childcare hours to accommodate their working schedules and allow them to stay in the workforce

Childcare becomes increasingly difficult to manage on days when parents or caregivers have to work, but school is not in session, e.g., on teacher workdays or snow days.

- *"I have trouble with childcare on days I have to work but they are out of school - like snow days and holidays. I'm a single mom and I can't afford childcare - even at the YMCA where it's $35 a day." – Caregiver, Avery County*
- *"I work for Head Start and my daughter goes there. It's been great for the kids. My issue is teacher workdays and snow days. I'm a single mom with no one (family or friends) for childcare." – Caregiver, Avery County*
- *"Juggling childcare can be tough at times." – Caregiver, Avery County*

While having family members to help is welcome and appreciated, often times family members are elderly and not physically dependable.

- *"Me and my husband have a two-income household, but school lets out at 2/2:30. My father-in-law who is 77 years old tries to help but that's a lot!" – Caregiver, Avery County*
- *"My in laws will help but it's a lot to get older people to deal with young children. It can be hard when you can't get the things you need to do for your family." – Caregiver, Avery County*
- *"I have good family support with my mom and dad, but I don't want to be a burden with them in their older years." – Caregiver, Avery County*
- *"My work hours are 8:30-5pm, if it wasn't for my father-in-law helping, I wouldn't be able to work." – Caregiver, Avery County*

Parents and caregivers highly value Head Start and Early Head Start for their helpful programs.

- *"Head Start is a family and helpful. We have been a part of them for over a decade." – Caregiver, Avery County*
- *"We figured out that my child needed glasses at two years old because of Head Start." – Caregiver, Avery County*
- *"Head Start is wonderful. They help with problems. They diagnose problems." – Caregiver, Avery County*
- *"If it wasn't for early Head Start, I wouldn't be able to work." – Caregiver, Avery County*
- *"It's [Head Start] free, there are background checks, there's continuity and a community." – Caregiver, Avery County*
- *"If I took Head Start out of the equation it would have been VERY difficult. There were only three daycares available and one of those wasn't an option." – Caregiver, Avery County*

Aside from realities like affordability and accessibility - finding facilities that caregivers can trust and depend on represents a set of other challenges.

- *"I'm currently not working because my son is on the waitlist (for Head Start). I have no where dependable to take my son." – Caregiver, Avery County*
- *"It's not just a matter of finding someone to care for your kids, you have to find someone safe and reliable." – Caregiver, Avery County*

The voucher system comes with much appreciation but for some, there's also trade-offs involved of the social stigma that can follow and the abrupt cut-off for increased incomes.

- *"The voucher system was great. It was when I was married. When we got better jobs, we lost the vouchers. I think there should be some sort of grace period where your subsidy is gradually lowered." – Caregiver, Avery County*
- *"We have parents that say, 'I'm trying to better myself but if I take this job, I'm going to lose benefits.' You get a little bit better, but they take more money away." – Caregiver, Avery County*

- *"Let's say you get a HUD voucher. If you do not work they will pay all your rent. But if you start to work they take money away. You are struggling to buy food and pay rent and find childcare. It's a flawed system. People wonder why people stay home and not work. We need a sliding scale/fee with childcare." – Caregiver, Avery County*
- *"When we had subsidy, you can only miss a certain amount of days even if you're sick. That was always a fear." – Caregiver, Avery County*
- *"When I was finally able to get all my kids in a daycare we did have vouchers. I'm a single mom with one income paying all the bills but I still had to pay $300 overage in daycare because the voucher didn't cover the full amount." – Caregiver, Avery County*
- *"Using a voucher made me feel downgraded but I knew it was necessary." – Caregiver, Avery County*
- *"Only the director knows which kids get vouchers so the kids aren't treated different." – Caregiver, Avery County*

An underlying importance exists in investing in teachers and students for the future.

- Highly valuing teachers with trainings and adequate pay encourages longevity in their careers.
  - *"Having staff. Teachers are so undervalued. They are quitting because of the pay. It's sad." – Caregiver, Avery County*
  - *"If we don't have staff, we don't have accessibility." – Caregiver, Avery County*
  - *"We need to protect our teachers. We have lost awesome teachers because they get paid more elsewhere."- Caregiver, Avery County*
  - *"There needs to be change. I would increase pay for our teachers. They deserve it." – Caregiver, Avery County*
  - *"We don't need more bodies in the classroom to keep ratio. We need quality people taking care of our kids. We need money to put into these settings." – Caregiver, Avery County*
- Investing in child activities now promises enrichment of their lives and mindset for the future.
  - *"We need to put some money towards childcare. Get teachers the trainings they need." – Caregiver, Avery County*
  - *"Put some money towards these kids so we can raise them to be the next generation of leaders." – Caregiver, Avery County*
  - *"It [a supportive community] would need to be a community that was invested in the children and childcare." – Caregiver, Avery County*

BUNCOMBE COUNTY FINDINGS

Facilitating Organization	Date of Listening Session	Group Type	# of Participants
Verner Center for Early Education	August 3rd, 2022	Parents	12
PODER Emma	August 3rd, 2022	Parents	11
YWCA of Asheville	August 29th, 2022	Providers	10

Of the parents who participated in the Verner group, two identified as Persons of Color, one as Latinx, one as Asian, one as Black / African American, and seven did not identify as a member of the BIPOC community. All parents in the PODER Emma group identified as Latinx. The PODER Emma group was conducted in Spanish and summary notes were provided in English. Therefore, findings from this group are included in the overall findings, but specific quotes are not included.

Of the providers who participated, three identified as Latinx, two identified as a person of color, and five identified as not a member of the BIPOC community.

Quick summary of Buncombe:

Providers and parents / caregivers VALUE…	Providers and parents / caregivers NEED…
• Bilingual providers • Educated and experienced providers to teach and emotionally support their children • Support from family and others	• More staff to eliminate issues around wait list and allow for smaller ratios • More affordable childcare options • Support and resources both financially and emotionally • Eliminate stigma around ECE providers

Parents wish there was more readily available information about access to childcare programs, including support programs and financial assistance.

- Many of the parents in the group heard about childcare options through word of mouth and wished that there was a more centralized place for information.
    - *"It would be nice if there were brochures available about childcare at more places, like even the OBGYN office." – Parent, Buncombe County*
    - *"You find out [about childcare] through connections. I knew a mom that already had their kid here." – Parent, Buncombe County*
    - *"We didn't know anything about Verner before the pandemic." – Parent, Buncombe County*
    - *"I will go somewhere that is supposed to help and they don't know how to or don't want to. It took 4 months to get him into speech therapy because they were asking questionnaires and had to watch him and had to keep watching him. It was terrible, but we finally got him hooked up. He's at a crucial time and 4 months is a long time at that age to not get those resources." - Parent, Buncombe County*

Staffing issues leave both parents and providers frustrated with lack of support and difficulties in finding childcare.

- Because of short-staffing and difficulty with retention, providers feel unsupported and overwhelmed. They want smaller ratios in their care, so they have the bandwidth to provide the attention and support that each child needs.
    - *"Ratios take it back to staffing, retention, recruiting, hiring and maintaining good teachers that support the kids and each other. In my personal experience, I think a lot of the challenges could be eliminated if we were fully staffed. Then everyone's feeling supported and capable. When everyone can stay in their own lane, it takes away all the challenges of everyone being pulled in different directions. You can lose focus of what your real job is when you are pulled away all the time." - Provider, Buncombe County*
    - *"Sometimes I wish I was an octopus because there's not enough me to go around. The general consensus in the room is that there's not enough time in the day to make sure that everyone's needs are met. I just wish we had more staff to facilitate more octopus arms." - Provider, Buncombe County*
    - *"We have a lot of kids with a lot of needs, and I have patience to deal with them. That's important as well as the imagination and training to go along with it. What's dissatisfying is I am never able to do enough. I can never do what I need to do for each of them." - Provider, Buncombe County*
- Lack of providers contributes to the long waitlist parents are on to receive care. This leaves some parents desperate to find childcare. In some cases, one child may receive care while their sibling is still far along on the waitlist forcing them to enroll their children in different centers.
    - *"I field questions about our waitlist on a daily basis. People want to know how long the wait is. Other centers are one to three years wait, ours doesn't operate in that same type of way but I know that is a huge priority for parents because they need care now... We've got almost 800 families on our waitlist." - Provider, Buncombe County*

- *"A lot of us know where the centers are, but it's getting your kid into a center or into the program when you really need it." - Parent, Buncombe County*
- *"There're literally moms on the phone crying because they're desperate. They're about to start a brand-new job, their dream job, but their childcare fell through because a teacher just quit." - Provider, Buncombe County*
- *"I had a mom who came in and she was on the waiting list for 7 different places, and she was not able to get anywhere because like the rest of us; if we had the staff, our waitlist wouldn't be as long as it is, but we just don't." - Provider, Buncombe County*

Providers want to change the stigma around childcare to help emphasize the value they provide to increase the respect and pay they receive.

- Providers and parents feel that there is a common misconception that childcare is an unchallenging job. This creates false perceptions of the skills and requirements of the position. This also raises an issue of the community and government not giving them the credit or funding they need.
  - *"Respect the job that teachers do and give them the credit that they deserve. Give them their keep, understand what they do, and instead of sitting behind a desk and making rules for everyone, maybe come out. Go into the community, see how what you do and say impacts the teachers, and encourage people to go into education. This profession is dwindling out because we don't feel respected or understood. There are more women than men. Men are very important in this profession. I wish there were more, and I wish they were encouraged to be in this profession more. In order to continue early education, education and further we need to get the respect from the government and trickle it down to here in order for it to continue to survive." - Provider, Buncombe County*
  - *"Some think you just come and play with kids. You are there for their emotional needs, social needs, behavior, and observing kids who are not meeting those goals." - Parent, Buncombe County*
  - *"Parents cannot afford to pay more than they are paying yet we don't have enough money. Whether it's for salaries, the center or any of that...If you made qualifications and paid for them, you get that quality through. If people were getting paid and this was a difficult job to get, there would be more respect. People would work for it, and we would get higher quality care." - Provider, Buncombe County*
- Both parents and providers believe that increasing pay is necessary because of how high the demands of the job are. Not only do providers desire higher salaries, but it would also help attract more people to the field.
  - *"Every childcare provider I know has a second job, so they aren't getting paid enough. They shouldn't have to go watch another group of children. Our society is missing the public investment in ECE. If our society valued it and made the investment like they do in K-12. ECE doesn't have that at all. They think it's a babysitter. But they are teachers, they are educators. It is a school." - Parent, Buncombe*
  - *"I worked at a daycare for 3 years and didn't even make $10/hour." - Parent, Buncombe*
  - *"You want to have well-trained providers but also need to be compassionate. Paying them $12/hour is not going to help them be compassionate. Take care of them so they can take care of our kids." - Parent, Buncombe County*
  - *"Pay childcare workers more money so they actually want to show up to work." - Parent, Buncombe County*

Parents and providers feel there are issues with accessibility of care both financially and due to limited hours of care.

- The cost of childcare limits some families from receiving care for their children. Even small increases in cost can affect a family's ability to afford care. Several families make just over the qualification for financial assistance and struggle from the lack of support.

- *"It is insanely expensive and that's why a lot of families would rather take the cut of income and stay at home." - Provider, Buncombe County*
- *"The feedback of increase in rate is not positive from parents. Something that feels really small to us can be make or break for some people. We had four families withdraw their kids after we announced that small increase. We increase yearly, so we thought that parents would expect this, but that doesn't make it easier." - Provider, Buncombe County*
- *"It would have been a lot easier if I knew what supports were available for families who don't meet guidelines for poverty or different lines. Some of us are doing the best we can and trying to do better but don't match those. I'm in school full-time and I work, and I coach, and I have two kids. We don't get those resources because we're a couple hundred dollars over each month." - Parent, Buncombe County*
- *"If you make even a little over that limit, it doesn't mean you can afford it, so it really does affect a lot of people." - Provider, Buncombe County*

- Many families need care during nontraditional hours due to work schedule. The lack of nontraditional hours forces families to take cuts from their work hours and income.
  - *"A lot of families who work on the weekends don't have care." - Provider, Buncombe County*
  - *"I lose three hours of pay a week and come in late every week because I need to be there at 7:30 and Verner doesn't open until 7:30. So 7 am would be good. If you have multiple children, you have lots of stop to make in the morning so I can do everything and still get to work on time because I am losing money." - Parent, Buncombe County*
  - *"It would be nice if you had a set number of hours but had flexibility of drop off and pick up time. A lot of times I have to bring my kids to work. In the evenings they come to work with me. Right now, our employers are flexible ...but eventually it's going to balance itself out and if I don't have a sitter. We're going to lose our jobs because we don't have a way to get our kids to daycare on time." - Parent, Buncombe County*
  - *"It's hard to make ends meet with a server job, which is the only job available for the hours that the voucher program will allow (8:30-2pm)." - Parent, Buncombe County*
  - *"I can't ask my mom to not go to work one day because I need her to watch my kid because I don't have daycare. When you're going to school and trying work and trying to be there for my family, it's really overwhelming to be a parent and be there and try to be present at home when I have to get my kids by 2:00pm and get dinner, and get my slides done by midnight and be there so I'm not just sitting there but trying to be present for them." - Parent, Buncombe County*

BURKE COUNTY FINDINGS

Facilitating Organization	Date of Listening Session	Group Type	# of Participants
The Industrial Commons	December 15th, 2022	Providers & Parents / Caregivers	15

Of the four providers who participated, two were teachers and two were facility Director / Owners. All four were not identified as part of the BIPOC community. Of the 11 parents who participated, seven identified as Hispanic / Latinx, two identified as Black / African American, and three did not identify as part of the BIPOC community. All of the parents are the childcare provider themselves or have a family member who is the caregiver. No parents used a childcare facility. In the group there were two native Spanish speakers. Interpreters were in the background interpreting simultaneously through an earpiece.

Quick summary of Burke:

Providers & Parents / Caregivers VALUE…	Providers & Parents/ Caregivers NEED…
• Well-trained and trusted providers to educate their children • Spanish-speaking providers • Being able to work to provide for their families	• More options and more affordable childcare options in the county • Childcare options that offer non-traditional hours or flexible hours • Access to information about subsidized childcare options

There aren't enough childcare centers in Burke County, which has an impact on the kinds of jobs that parents can take.

- There is a lack of childcare options for children, both from infant to school-aged children. This has caused some parents to not be able to work because they do not have childcare coverage or to have to rely on friends and family.
    - *"We have childcare deserts in the western part of the county. We had a big center that closed recently. We really, really, really need childcare there." – Provider, Burke County*
    - *"We need infant care." – Provider, Burke County*
    - *"There aren't enough after-school programs." – Provider, Burke County*
    - *"I had to leave my job so I could take care of kids. I'm definitely not going to avoid being fired with three kids." – Parent, Burke County*
    - *"I stay home with my child because there are no childcare options in the county." – Parent, Burke County*
    - *"My kids stay with my mother-in-law but the perfect facility would be able to accommodate all children because they are all different. I want to feel more secure." – Parent, Burke County*
- Some parents wish there were more childcare options which allowed for non-traditional hours or for drop-in care. While some parents have the flexibility in their job to work their schedules around when they have childcare coverage, others do not and sometimes fear losing their job because they don't have someone to watch their children. And even for those parents who do not work full-time, having childcare coverage is important for a mental break or to visit the doctor.
    - *"I have flexibility in my job. So I work the childcare schedule around my husband and mother and then I tell my employer when I can work." – Parent, Burke County*
    - *"In the service industry the employers aren't bad people, but they don't have the capacity to be flexible." – Parent, Burke County*
    - *"The hours of operation of traditional daycare don't line up with the hours of the service industry where we all work." – Parent, Burke County*
    - *"If my child is home more than one day you either get fired or penalized." – Parent, Burke County*
    - *"A lot of people would love a drop-in childcare center. I've wanted to go to the dentist for a really long time but I have five kids." – Parent, Burke County*
- Because of the lack of childcare options in the county, transportation between facilities, home, and work can often be long.
    - *"One of the biggest challenges is transportation in a rural area." – Parent, Burke County*
    - *"Transportation is a huge issue. Getting from pre-school to after-school programs." – Provider, Burke County*

Parents value the education that children receive from well-trained providers. Knowing that providers are teaching their children and providing a safe environment contributes to a feeling of trust in leaving their child in someone else's care.

- There seems to be a few incidents in the county which may have soured the trust that parents have with childcare providers.
    - *"I'm a teacher and my heart breaks when I hear what you have to say. The abuse. The lack of diversity. It's hard because I see the same things you see. I see how you question if your children will be taken care of." – Provider, Burke County*
    - *"Social media hyper focuses on the bad parts of childcare. You don't hear about the wonderful experience because they are overshadowed by the negative ones." – Provider, Burke County*
    - *"I wish there were surveillance Cameras in the centers. I don't personally know you (the provider). I want to see what my child is doing but also how the child is being treated." – Parent, Burke County*
    - *"I would like to see facilities provide confidence, comfort, and security for families so they are comfortable to leave their children." – Provider, Burke County*
- However, parents understand the value that well-trained providers can give to children's growth and development and want more people in the county to be trained and better compensated for the impact they make on children.
    - *"Early childhood is so important and providers need to be trained and compensated. You are helping develop children." – Parent, Burke County*
    - *"Having a place I would voluntarily take my children there for enrichment and development. As opposed to I'm taking them here because I have to." – Parent, Burke County*
    - *"Feeling like your kid is more than a number. That's why I homeschool to have the connection. I want to feel like the provider has a relationship with you and your child." – Parent, Burke County*
    - *"Providers should be paid what they deserve so they want to be there and will take pride in their job." – Parent, Burke County*
    - *"If the provider was being paid more with benefits they wouldn't be looking for the next best thing. So longevity would be there." – Parent, Burke County*
    - *"I want childcare workers taken care of in a way where they are provided for and can live a good life outside of work. Then they could provide a space where our children can flourish." – Parent, Burke County*
- Among the Hispanic parents in the group, they would like their children to be around Spanish-speaking providers so that their children can continue to communicate in Spanish with the older generations.
    - *"Lots of children speak Spanish when they are young and once they go to childcare or school, they forget the language." – Hispanic Parent, Burke County*
- And providers work hard to make sure that their classrooms create a positive learning environment for children to grow and thrive.
    - *"I really try to create a diverse environment with toys and books. I feel bad because everyone has a negative connotation of childcare but there are some good ones out there." – Provider, Burke County*
    - *"I have 8 children in my classroom and they range in age from 6 months to 3 years old. I try to replicate a family in the classroom." – Provider, Burke County*

Parents often struggle to afford childcare and it's not always easy to find information about eligible programs.

- Parents need childcare in order to work, but the cost of childcare means that they may have to use less desirable childcare options, or it creates financial strain on the family.
    - *"The job that I'm working needs to be paying more so I can afford better childcare for my child. It doesn't add up." – Parent, Burke County*
    - *"If daycare was cheaper maybe we wouldn't need vouchers." – Parent, Burke County*
- Some parents want more information about how to learn about their eligibility for subsidized childcare programs.

- *"What's actually available and the eligibility for each program? What is early Head Start? How do I get my child into it? Other than calling 211 there isn't a way to engage in the available programs." – Parent, Burke County*

CABARRUS COUNTY FINDINGS

Facilitating Organization	Date of Listening Session	Group Type	# of Participants
Endless Opportunities	August 16th, 2022	Parents / Caregivers	11
Endless Opportunities	August 16th, 2022	Providers	9

Among providers, two were Director / Owners. Five providers identified as Black / African American, one identified as a person of color, and three did not identify as a member of the BIPOC community. Among parents, five identified as Black / African American, two as Latinx, one as a person of color, and one as Multicultural / Multiracial.

Quick summary of Cabarrus:

Providers & Parents / Caregivers VALUE…	Providers & Parents/ Caregivers NEED…
• Mental health support for providers and children • Adequate training for providers • The experience and expertise providers bring	• Fair compensation for childcare providers • Increased accessibility for parents – more daycare options to eliminate wait times, more affordable care

The biggest challenge providers currently face is high level of turnover and burnout within their care centers.

- It's becoming increasingly more expensive and takes a significant amount of time on the part of the centers, to attract childcare providers to work in the field, and many centers are unable to meet this pressure.
  - *"We need funding. I can't find staff who will work for $12/hour. I have to pay new staff more than some of my teachers who have been working here for some time." – Provider, Cabarrus County*
  - *"For the assistant teacher, they don't make too much; about $14/hour which is not good. The assistant has the same amount of work as teacher, share the same load. So, it's not fair." – Provider, Cabarrus County*
  - *"Staffing is the biggest challenge. I will spend half my day looking at resumes, setting up interviews only to have them not show up. Or someone works for two days and never come back. Childcare is not an easy job." – Provider, Cabarrus County*
- High levels of turnover leave many families unsatisfied, given the difficulty children will have forming bonds with their caregivers. This turnover erodes trust that families have in providers. And it leaves providers feeling burned out because they are constantly having to wear a lot of hats within the childcare setting because they are short staffed.
  - *"And a consistency thing. If there's a lot of turnover, that's not consistency. I don't want my 4-year-old to have a different teacher every week because then she's not learning anything." – Parent, Cabarrus County*
  - *"The challenge is we don't have enough help. One person for five babies is too much. I had to take a mental break and just came back to work after 3 weeks because it was overwhelming, I'm not a spring chicken. I love what I do and the rapport I have with my parents. We need two more able-bodied people. I am serving multiple roles - changing diapers, cooking, cleaning. You have to love what you do, but this is where we need to use our state legislators." – Provider, Cabarrus County*
  - *"You get tired of seeing turnover. Sometimes I wonder why is there so much turnover?" – Provider, Cabarrus County*

- Providers don't feel valued; the low pay signals that they are not respected by the community and feel the community, including parents, see them as babysitters, rather than educators. But providers feel provide the love, care, support, and learning that children need to grow and thrive. And they often also provide support to parents.
    - *"They don't see the quality in us, as teachers, and a lot of teachers coming out of childcare because we aren't getting the pay for what we are worth." – Provider, Cabarrus County*
    - *"We need more good quality childcare providers, incentives to get parents more involved, onsite counselors for the parents. Many parents are facing hardships and leaving the children. They come to us and not knowing what to do. We are the most underpaid people. We love what we do and the children and I'm here to serve the parents as well as the children. I want parents to feel safe and children to want to be here." – Provider, Cabarrus County*
    - *"Parents are lacking the understanding what it means to be a childcare educator. It is not a drop-off situation. The respect for what we do is not there, which is why we are the most underpaid profession you could have. It's a trickle-down situation of understanding and compensation." – Provider, Cabarrus County*
    - *"Get rid of the stigma that everyone in the ECE setting as just babysitters. We need to show how important we are to the community. We are just as important as regular teachers. We are the foundation, beginning, the basis of all learning." – Provider, Cabarrus County*
    - *"We aren't just teachers, but we become the second mom. The children bring out the best in me. I look forward to that." – Provider, Cabarrus County*
    - *"If you keep the teachers, you have the support the parents need. Parents want consistency and that the teachers are connecting with one another. If you have the support, the money, and the teachers, then parents are pleased that their children are in a safe place with loving teachers." – Provider, Cabarrus County*

However, there appears to be a disconnect between what provider and parent perception: while providers feel a lack of respect, parents express that they value ECE in childcare centers.

- Parents value well-trained and reputable providers because it means that their children are safe and are getting an early start to their education and to socialization. They see childcare as more than just a babysitting service.
    - *"I want her to be around other kids to help her develop in other areas. We could do it at home, but they have the tools and resources there more than I do." – Parent, Cabarrus County*
    - *"Just because they can watch my child doesn't mean they can instill values in her and help her learn." – Parent, Cabarrus County*
    - *"[I want] well-trained providers: that's the point of daycare: to learn. I don't want them to go to daycare to be babysat." – Parent, Cabarrus County*
    - *"Reputation of childcare provider: I don't want someone who is not advocating for my child or listening to the parent. And I want a seasoned provider who knows what they are doing and has experience." – Parent, Cabarrus County*
    - *"That's the point of daycare, to learn. I don't want them to go to daycare to be babysat, that's two different things. I want them to provide for her, know she is safe, she is learning something, stable and dependable." – Parent, Cabarrus County*

Mental health of the children is becoming an increasing priority for parents and providers alike.

- For providers, this frequently starts with their own staff – children won't receive the level of care and support they need if the ones taking care of them aren't mentally well.
    - *"Mental health is needed, for the staff and teachers. If we're not well, then the students are not well. Thankful for the health we get from our facility and that we have a mental health specialist. We need*

to be fixed first and the love and caring will be there. Because we are all stressed out." – Provider, Cabarrus County

- *"If I don't have a staff that is happy and feels valued and gives support, they are not going to be able to take care of the children. We have gone through a lot and I need to support them." – Provider, Cabarrus County*

- Counselors or therapists are also mentioned in the conversations around adequately equipping childcare providers. And parents also seek mental health support for themselves and their families.
  - *"Mental health services [are a priority]: my boys are in speech and have ADHD and ADD needs." – Parent, Cabarrus County*
  - *"Mental health is needed for children and teachers. They are dealing with not only our children, but their children and pouring back into others. They need to provide that to the centers who are providing services to our children." – Parent, Cabarrus County*

Affordability is a challenge for parents and providers alike.

- Some parents don't use childcare services because of the cost and expense. Others who use childcare find it very expensive and have wondered if they should quit their job to save on childcare expenses.
  - *"I've considered leaving my job and staying at home because of cost of childcare." – Parent, Cabarrus County*
  - *"Affordability is a challenge. It costs $1,000 a month, which is more than a mortgage." – Provider, Cabarrus County*
  - *"If I was governor for a day, I would open more affordable daycares." – Parent, Cabarrus County*
- While no one in the group explicitly stated if they used vouchers, some would like to see a voucher system, a sliding scale based on income, or free childcare for all.
  - *"Provide every parent who applies with a voucher." – Parent, Cabarrus County*
  - *"Make the charge for daycare based on what you make. Like a pay scale for daycare." – Parent, Cabarrus County*
  - *"The government should make free childcare for all." – Parent, Cabarrus County*
- Providers also recognize the affordability issue for their parents. Some try to work with those who cannot afford childcare, which can add to the stress and burden of running a facility.
  - *"I have to write grants and beg for funding. I have to advocate continuously for Head Start and with my school district. At some point you get tired of fighting the good fight. When you're dealing with families in poverty, it takes its toll. I think the hardest is making everyone happy." – Provider, Cabarrus County*

Many parents experience long wait lists or have trouble finding childcare.

- There is considerable frustration and stress with the process of getting on waitlists and waiting to hear back from centers. Parents are also frustrated that there isn't a centralized location for information about centers and often rely on word of mouth to find one.
  - *"You put your name on the waitlist and no one calls you back. We were just blessed to find some people who recommended us somewhere. Its' a runaround. Wait on the list. No communication. It's really sad." – Parent, Cabarrus County*
  - *"Daycares are full until 2023. There was a number online to call and that number is not updated. I wasted gas, go to 5 places, called over 35 daycares and then I talked to a girlfriend to told me to go someone. It was hard. No one called me back. I called Head Start and they called me back 3 weeks later. I called them 5-6 times per day. The worry of a parent to try to get a child into daycare and work and put food on the table. I was stressed." – Parent, Cabarrus County*
  - *"I found my daycare from a referral from a family member." – Parent, Cabarrus County*

- *"You have to get on the wait list but also find something that was in my budget. If you have a long waiting list, you are a good center." – Provider, Cabarrus County*

CHEROKEE COUNTY FINDINGS

Facilitating Organization	Date of Listening Session	Group Type	# of Participants
Region A Partnership for Children	February 2023	Providers & Parents / Caregivers	17

Demographic information was not collected on respondents. Among the participants, eight were parents and nine were providers. Among the providers, four are Directors / Owners of childcare centers.

Quick summary of Cherokee:

Providers and parents / caregivers VALUE…	Providers and parents / caregivers NEED…
• Dedicated providers who work at facilities that not only "watch" their children, but also teach them. • Centers that are in close proximity to their home and work	• Flexible childcare hours to accommodate parent working hours • More childcare centers to accommodate special needs children

Parents call for more variety and flexibility in the hours childcare is available.

- However, a primary barrier to this is in not being able to find staffing to work hours outside the traditional full time or part time schedule.
  - *"Variety. Hours are either full or part time. There needs to be more flexibility." – Provider, Cherokee County*
  - *"Providers have the challenge of maintaining a qualified staff that will work the flexible hours. We desperately want to offer weekend, early morning or evening care." – Provider, Cherokee County*
  - *"We have a hard time placing foster kids because there aren't more flexible hours with childcare." – Parent, Cherokee County*
  - *"We are so appreciative of the daycares but need more flexible hours." – Parent, Cherokee County*
- A contributing factor is the overall challenge of staffing in the childcare industry today. Many leave childcare to work in retail, specifically, for the higher pay and less emotional burden.
  - *"Most people are not going to spend 2-4 years in college to work in early childcare and then barely make minimum wage." – Provider, Cherokee County*
  - *"All childcare centers in our county are full of kids but short staffed. Part of it is the pay, some places it's only $8 an hour. A lot of teachers say, "I can make more at Walmart." – Provider, Cherokee County*
  - *"We are consistently losing qualified teachers to the retail industry." – Provider, Cherokee County*
  - *"Childcare work is emotionally taxing. It's historically been 'woman's work' and underpaid." – Provider, Cherokee County*
  - *"It's impossible to meet ratio with the staff we have. If one teacher is sick we might have to close the center. It's a daily struggle." – Provider, Cherokee County*

There's a strong need for better accessibility and number of facilities overall that are geared towards special needs children.

- *"We are support developmental daycare for special needs. The closest one if always full and a 45-minute drive one way." – Provider, Cherokee County*

- *"There needs to be care for special needs care. I can't find that for my one child." – Parent, Cherokee County*
- *"There are kids that have special needs that can't thrive in a traditional facility and we don't have that." – Parent, Cherokee County*

The qualification process for vouchers could be re-examined to incorporate other factors of life as criteria.

- *"There is a very blanket form whether you qualify. They don't dig deeper. My husband left, I have four kids, I don't get child support, but I still have bills and a mortgage payment. I have a good income but I thought I would have a partner helping me. The government doesn't look at that. I don't get any help because I make too much." – Parent, Cherokee County*
- *"I had a kid to need a service and I filled out the form but signed it the wrong date. It's a mess." – Provider, Cherokee County*
- *"What we need with rising rages is someone in government to understand that people who need these services are taken out of play." – Provider, Cherokee County*
- *"What we get paid went up 5% based off 2015 data. A 7-year delay for data." – Provider, Cherokee County*
- *"My husband and I both work but with inflation we need help. But we make too much money to get it." – Parent, Cherokee County*
- *"Vouchers are great but it's hard to find a place that takes them." – Parent, Cherokee County*

CLAY COUNTY FINDINGS

Facilitating Organization	Date of Listening Session	Group Type	# of Participants
Hinton Rural Life Center, Inc	February 28th, 2023	Providers	4

Demographic information was not collected on the respondents.

Quick summary of Clay:

Providers VALUE…	Providers NEED…
• Being able to help families and provide a service that is desperately needed in their community • Flexibility from parents and as providers	• Adequate compensation • Respect from parents and leadership • More consistent staffing and availability

Childcare facilities face challenges staffing their centers, stemming from a number of root issues:

- Compensation for childcare providers is not adequate.
  - *"There's nobody going into this field anymore because there isn't good pay or benefits. It's hard mentally and physically. We are in a crisis. If something doesn't change, there won't be daycares in a few years." – Provider, Clay County*
  - *"People would get halfway through schooling and then realized they would only make $8 an hour so they quit because it wasn't worth it." – Provider, Clay County*
  - *"They want you to have all this education that costs money but then they don't pay you when you're done." – Provider, Clay County*
  - *"We have noodle but outside of that the teachers have to pay for their trainings out of pocket. It's a struggle." – Provider, Clay County*
  - *"We can't get staff. We put an ad out for $15 an hour with no degree needed and had zero applicants." – Provider, Clay County*

- Many providers feel they are not receiving the same level of respect as other education professionals.
    - *"There's a lack of parent participation. The parents think we are uneducated babysitters. We aren't and we want to get parents involved." – Provider, Clay County*
    - *"I wish the parents would look at the teachers as educators and not just babysitters." – Provider, Clay County*
    - *"If teachers feel supported, they would go into the community and tell others that teaching is a great job." – Provider, Clay County*
    - *"[I wish I knew] the lack of support, not just from administration but from the parents. I think people don't go into this profession because parents no longer value teachers." – Provider, Clay County*
    - *"We hear that 0-3 is the biggest time of need for child education but there is no funding. I would like more than lip service to the idea that the most important time of a child's life is birth to 3." – Provider, Clay County*
- The work itself can be emotionally taxing.
    - *"Parents point fingers at us or other kids. It's never their kid. There's no accountability and as an educator you get burned out." – Provider, Clay County*
    - *"The amount of manipulation a four-year-old can give is crazy. The parents are rewarding bad behaviors." – Provider, Clay County*
    - *"They plaster all the bad things educators do all over the news but what happened before the incident is never considered." – Provider, Clay County*
    - *"Why would you go get a job that pays $25,000 a year that's emotionally draining? You can go to Walmart and start at $18 an hour with benefits and not be stressed when you get home." – Provider, Clay County*
- This means providers can end up critically understaffed.
    - *"[We don't need] more daycares but more staffing for the ones we already have. There is a huge lack of childcare providers." – Provider, Clay County*
    - *"Are we going to have enough staff? Will I be able to take a break tomorrow? I've even asked parents if they know people we can hire." – Provider, Clay County*
    - *"[If we could be fully staffed] the morale at our center would go way up. We have PTO time and teachers feel guilty for taking the time off." – Provider, Clay County*
    - *"You used to know everybody (the teachers) and now you're like who is that? Have I seen her before? Will I see her next week?" – Provider, Clay County*

STAR ratings can be incredibly difficult to achieve and frequently primarily serve to increase funding.

- Staff education is critical to a high STAR rating, but without proper compensation for employees, it can be difficult to pursue.
    - *"One of the biggest components about the STAR rating is staff education. We need that." – Provider, Clay County*
    - *"One of my degrees isn't recognized for STAR Ratings, even though I taught kindergarten at Private Schools." – Provider, Clay County*
    - *"It's hard to get educators to go back to school for the classes to get a better STAR rating. Educators have family and there isn't time." – Provider, Clay County*
    - *"I've seen many good teachers leave our program because they couldn't go back to school to get all the degrees required." – Provider, Clay County*
- STAR ratings have more financial implications than anything else.
    - *"If you can't get four or five stars you can't get the money to pay the staff. But if you don't have educated staff, you can't get the high STAR ratings." – Provider, Clay County*
    - *"STAR ratings do not play into quality childcare at all. It's meaningless and restricts us." – Provider, Clay County*

- Parents aren't particularly concerned with STAR ratings.
    - *"The parents don't know about it. They don't realize we have to do all this. They think we are babysitters." – Provider, Clay County*
    - *"With the lack of availability, I think parents don't look at the STAR ratings as long as they can get into a program." – Provider, Clay County*
    - *"I've had two people in 13 years who have asked me about the STAR Rating." – Provider, Clay County*

Providers also worry about the parents' and families' ability to pay for services.

- Vouchers and subsidies have a limited range of applicability for families.
    - *"I think incomes are going up but when parents make $1 more an hour, vouchers are taken away. They go from paying $200 a month in day care to $200 a week. They are struggling." – Provider, Clay County*
    - *"There is no way that childcare is available for the median income level in our county which is $42K a year." – Provider, Clay County*
    - *"We have people who cannot afford full time day care but they make too much to quality for services. You're in this middle ground. We hear this a lot from our families. They can't do it either way." – Provider, Clay County*
    - *"It's that income bracket $30-$60K - they don't qualify for subsidy but they can barely afford daycare." – Provider, Clay County*
    - *"They keep narrowing the criteria of who qualifies for vouchers." – Provider, Clay County*
- Providers see an opportunity for government funding to assist with accessibility.
    - *"[We need] county funded childcare centers. We fund the public schools so why aren't we funding early childcare education?" – Provider, Clay County*
    - *"As a mom you are expected to go right back to work after birth. There's no maternity leave. What if we had a fund to pay women to be stay at home moms? It would be cheaper for childcare." – Provider, Clay County*

CRAVEN COUNTY FINDINGS

Facilitating Organization	Date of Listening Session	Group Type	# of Participants
Peletah Ministries	February 22, 2022	Parents / Caregivers	15

All parents in the session identified as Black / African American. One male parent attended the group.

Quick summary of Craven:

Parents / caregivers VALUE…	Parents / caregivers NEED…
• ECE, socialization, and exposure to new ideas for their children • Affordable, quality childcare • In-home and kin care	• More affordable options and more affordable part-time options • Higher income limits to childcare vouchers • Vouchers that can be used for in-home or kin care

Parents recognize the need for a healthy support system, which includes childcare providers, to help their children grow and thrive; they want early childhood education for their children which many see as something childcare providers are uniquely equipped to do.

- A quality childcare program provides the opportunity for children to socialize with other children, to learn new skills, to explore new opportunities, and to be exposed to new cultures and ideas.
    - *"Kids need a strong support system and genuine love, from the family and/or the childcare facility. They need support individually, to be loved where they are and for who they are." – Parent, Craven County*
    - *"Children should be exposed to as much as possible, they already dream big and need to see all that there is to see beyond their immediate surroundings."- Parent, Craven County*
    - *"Children need quality time with parents and with extended family members, along with kids their age." – Parent, Craven County*
    - *"I value the education, they teach colors, shapes, name writing, and my kid is only 3. They are already potty trained; they were counting in Spanish at 2." – Parent, Craven County*
    - *"I love when they do spirit weeks, different themes. I appreciate the events they do for Black History Month." – Parent, Craven County*
- In addition, parents want their children to be safe and to feel loved and seen.
    - *"Teachers should be communicating what the kids are learning at any given time, that they are having fun and safe." – Parent, Craven County*
    - *"Patience is really important, that's what I appreciate about a small facility. It's one-on-one care." – Parent, Craven County*
    - *"I like that the teachers know my son's name, they give him hugs and love on him. They play along with the kids. My son is excited when I drop him off and excited when I pick him up." – Parent, Craven County*
    - *"I want my child to be in a safe environment, and the social piece. At least two meals a day." – Parent, Craven County*

Parents feel there is often a trade-off between affordability and quality when it comes to daycare.

- While many parents chose their current daycare option because it was affordable, many are dissatisfied with the quality of the education that their children receive there; for example, ability to socialize with other children (especially if using kin care) or more formal early childhood education. However, they feel they are not able to afford more "high quality", desirable options.
    - *"My current childcare option is affordable, which makes me feel okay. I wish that she could go to an actual daycare that I could afford so she could receive an education and socialize." – Parent, Craven County*
    - *"My childcare is affordable because it's free. My aunt keeps my daughter, but she's not learning much or being sociable." – Parent, Craven County*
    - *"I provide my own childcare for my son, but it can be hard when I have to work or take meetings. I can't always give them attention and my son is also not playing with anyone so the social piece is missing." – Parent, Craven County*
    - *"My current childcare option is safe, which makes me feel fortunate, and I wish there were more affordable childcare options. My parents are 60 (parents provide childcare for son), it's hard for them to keep up with my son. If I could afford childcare, I would put him in it." – Parent, Craven County*
- Some parents struggle to pay childcare costs even with vouchers. And some who are on vouchers find it challenging to continue to pay for childcare when they earnings make them ineligible for vouchers.
    - *"I wish I would have known that when you get subsidized care, they kick you off once you make enough money. I had to start paying full daycare within 10 days of getting paid more. It needs to be known. It was a brick wall, and we ran right into it." – Parent, Craven County*
    - *"Subsidies should be a sliding scale. You shouldn't be totally cut off if you make over a certain amount." – Parent, Craven County*

- *"If I was governor, I would raise the limit for subsidized childcare. Middle class families still need help. Even if it was a quarter of the bill. It's hard to make sure everything is taken care of and still have money to save. The working class should be able to afford childcare." – Parent, Craven County*
- *"I would change the incentives. It's backwards, because when I make improvements, the benefits get snatched from me, so there's no reason to improve. Incentives should reward income or marital status. The compensation shouldn't be for the people who aren't working or are working 10 hours/week." – Parent, Craven County*

Parents value childcare options that provide part-time options, which are difficult to find in Craven County.

- While there are some part-time or drop-in services, they are often unaffordable or end up costing as much as full-time care.
  - *"My daycare is affordable for the daycare piece, but it's unaffordable for the drop-in piece. It's a whole other bill." – Parent, Craven County*
  - *"My current childcare option is adequate, which makes me feel content (okay but not perfect), and I wish there was affordable, quality, childcare close by, even if it wasn't every day of the week. Even if it was half a day." – Parent, Craven County*
  - *"My current childcare option is hectic, which makes me feel overwhelmed, and I wish I could find affordable, part time care, because I don't want to pay for full time care just for them to go part time." – Parent, Craven County*
  - *"My current childcare option is affordable, which makes me feel easier, and I wish there were options for me to be able to do drop-ins as needed that was less expensive." – Parent, Craven County*

Parents also want childcare options that are close to where they live.

- Having a childcare option that is nearby is important, as gas is expensive. While some would consider driving longer distances for quality childcare options, distance to and from the facility is a consideration.
  - *"Having childcare close by is extremely important, especially with gas prices. I would drive my child further if they needed to, if it was a better facility, but I value having it close by." – Parent, Craven County*
  - *"I don't want to go all the way across town to have to get my child." – Parent, Craven County*

Parents value kin and in-home care and would like to see more government support for those options.

- Many of the parents in this listening session use some sort of kin care, stitching together childcare due to affordability or need for part-time care. Parents trust kin and in-home care and often feel like their children are safer in that environment. But they do wish there was more training and compensation (including voucher support) for those options.
  - *"Having vouchers or subsidizing shouldn't just be for official providers, but for family members that provide childcare too. If they offered it to the providers, they could pay their workers better or lower their prices. The wages aren't adequate at all. Free Pre-K programs for 3–4-year-olds would be amazing. It has to be equitably done. Poor schools will offer poor programs." – Parent, Craven County*
  - *"The government needs to make sure the programs are culturally competent. The family network is important for many cultures and populations. The family network should be trained and compensated for caring for the children. Care and safety are different for each culture, you can't assume what they need." – Parent, Craven County*

CUMBERLAND COUNTY FINDINGS

Facilitating Organization	Date of Listening Session	Group Type	# of Participants
ECAC Military Outreach Parent Educator	July 26, 2022	Providers & Parents / Caregivers	10

There were two providers in the group, both of which identify as African American / Black. Of the eight parents, four identified as African American / Black, two as Hispanic, one as Asian, and one did not indicate their racial identity.

Quick summary of Cumberland:

Providers and parents / caregivers VALUE…	Providers and parents / caregivers NEED…
• Afterschool / summer programs and activities • Safe and quality care centers • Childcare as a method of socializing their children	• Specialized training and programs to accommodate children with disabilities • Affordable childcare options • More and retained staff

Both parents and providers feel that the childcare and school systems do not prioritize or do well at providing specialized training to providers on how to accommodate children with special needs.

- Parents with children with special needs feel skeptical when finding childcare because many places lack the proper training. Some families feel forced to enroll their children in centers that they feel are not equipped to care for their child because there are no other options available.
    - *"As a parent with a child with special needs, it was hard to find a space and I was limited. I was forced to just look in one area for care." - Parent, Cumberland County*
    - *"I also have a daughter with special needs. Since being in NC, I have a difficult time finding childcare. The places we looked at declined because they didn't want to be liable because she has a feeding tube. Most places are understaffed." - Parent, Cumberland County*
- The lack of specialized training causes many childcare programs to turn families with disabled children away. This leaves those families forced out of work. Providers also recognize the need for staff training in special needs in order to provide the best possible care for them.
    - *"I haven't been able to work because of it and it's hard when you have a special needs child because they don't want to deal with it, they're not qualified, or they make promises they can't keep so you end up looking all over again and hope and wait for them to get to school." - Parent, Cumberland County*
    - *"I was able to find some summer programs for my 6-year-old, but they would not accommodate him because of his needs and no means to help him." - Parent, Cumberland County*
    - *"At the moment I don't have childcare because they want to pull medical records on my 3-year-old, but we find more and more things wrong with him, so it keeps extending. He also has epilepsy. And a lot of people can't care for his seizures so he keeps getting turned away and on waiting lists for those places that will take him. So, I'm at home taking care of him but I really need to go back to work." - Parent, Cumberland County*
    - *"I'm trying to get him into childcare, but the biggest challenge is that he can't communicate, and sign language is not universally taught so no one can communicate with him. If he has a need, he'll be sitting there the whole day until I get there or if someone who understands ASL knows what he's saying." - Parent, Cumberland County*
    - *"The biggest challenge at the center is that we haven't had a lot of training on working with special needs children and we've had many of them come to the school and ask if we can provide care. And we've had to answer no because we don't have the training or knowledge to keep that child safe and*

meet their needs. It's not that we don't want the kids there, but it's not fair to bring the kids to the center not knowing what to do for them." - Provider, Cumberland County

- *"Special needs capabilities is needed, training, assistance are definitely needed. Just outreach to those parents so they know what programs do have those capabilities. And we need to train workers to work with those kids." - Provider, Cumberland County*

Families struggle with the lack of affordable childcare.

- Families struggle to keep up with childcare costs. They need to work more hours to earn more income, but the lack of childcare creates a never-ending cycle.
  - *"I was working childcare and couldn't afford childcare at the facility I was working at. So, I had to quit my childcare job. You can't afford to send your child where you work, even with employee discounts. If I'm paying more in childcare than I am working, I might as well stay home. I haven't had to forgo bills but had to ignore medical issues for myself." - Parent, Cumberland County*
  - *"I had to quit my job because of childcare, even with a voucher, I could not find the right hours at facilities that had an opening. I was no longer able to bring my kids to the morning route. Being without childcare, how are we supposed to work? You can't leave your kids alone because you have to think about their environment, their mental status. You always have to make a sacrifice. If you don't have childcare or family, you can't work." - Parent, Cumberland County*
  - *"I've had to turn down jobs because I can't afford reliable childcare." - Parent, Cumberland County*
  - *"I have Childcare Aware, but even $1400 a month after assistance is a lot of money. With the babysitter that comes occasionally, I've had 8 different sitters. You have to pay them so much money so the majority of my money that I make goes to the babysitters. After taxes, I'm making $3/hour. It's so unaffordable..." - Parent, Cumberland County*
  - *"I'm working three different jobs that allow me to bring him to work because the cost of childcare is not financially possible with the jobs I can get. So sometimes he comes to work with me and hangs out with me. That's the only way we've been able to make it work." - Parent, Cumberland County*

To combat the financial struggles that come with childcare and the lack of quality and maintained providers, parents and providers want local government to take action.

- Providers and families feel the solution to unaffordable childcare is through subsidization and investing more funding into grants and assistance programs for childcare in order to relieve the financial burden on families. With the current system, vouchers don't bridge the gap enough for parents. Many parents are using vouchers and still struggle to afford childcare, especially with the other life expenses they have.
  - *"We need more grants available. The current grants if you don't have anything, you're good. But if you have a little bit, then you don't qualify. They don't take into consideration all of that." - Parent, Cumberland County*
  - *"Childcare facilities should be treated like banks. They are federally funded, their employees are not paid by the customers who use the bank, I would push for more federally funded grants." - Parent, Cumberland County*
  - *"The ideal situation would be for a public childcare situation like public school funded by government and accessible to everyone who needs it. The government can do more to make it accessible. Not all parents know there are grants and programs for low-income families." - Parent, Cumberland County*
  - *"Open more state funded subsidized care that offered 24-hours. Help the middle-income families who make just enough but not much more. They are often overlooked." - Parent, Cumberland County*
  - *"I would have a sit-down and have more meetings with senators and congressman and city councilman and look at parent income level versus childcare and how you have families with little left without even paying bills and expenses and cost of childcare, even with vouchers you are left with large expenses. People don't realize until they see the numbers." – Provider, Cumberland County*

- Subsidizing childcare will also aid in maintaining quality providers from the increase in pay. Many facilities are short-staffed which creates burnout for providers and fear in families that their children are not getting their needs fully met.
    - *"A lot of daycares are unprepared and understaffed so there's not much they can do to keep him safe." - Parent, Cumberland County*
    - *"Short staffing is a big problem. Some days I can tell she hasn't been fed the amount of times she needs to be fed. She's an infant and can't say she's hungry. And because they are short staffed, she is only getting 2 bottles instead of 4. I would like to switch her but because of the shortage of infant care and there is no other place to send her so have to deal with what I have because that's my only option." - Parent, Cumberland County*
    - *"Staffing issues. And being properly trained with special needs kids. I don't know why staffing is a big issue, but it is." - Provider, Cumberland County*
    - *"In order for childcare workers to get paid, they have to charge a certain amount. If they don't charge enough, they don't get paid enough. I would like the state to subsidize childcare workers pay." - Parent, Cumberland County*
    - *"Subsidize workers' pay so parents pay less. If the classes and degrees to go into childcare are free. If you look at those who work in childcare, they are low income and interested so, many people can't afford to pursue their career in that. It would be ideal if the financial barriers going into childcare were removed." - Parent, Cumberland County*
    - *"I think the state and local government can make childcare more accessible by grants, funding, by treating preschool teachers like teachers in the school system. So preschool teachers feel like teachers and are teaching our youngest kids and setting the example and is the most important learning and pivotal in setting a child's life, path and future." - Parent, Cumberland County*

Providers would like a portal or a single point of contact to access information and resources for parents.

- If the facility doesn't provider certain services, they are often unsure where to send parents. Or they are not sure what grants / scholarships / vouchers exist. They wish they had a single portal where they could direct parents or find the resources to them tell parents about.
    - *"I don't know where to send people for training. Would love to have smaller class settings, but don't know where to go for that training, especially special needs. No central portal for parents who need respite care or mom's day out. We're scouring social media to find events to our parents or to refer them to a center with a half day program or special needs. We'd love to partner to send those parents elsewhere but no portal that provides that information we can provide. Everyone is using tech, but no one is using one central place for everything. If we had that, it would make it easier to parents to find options for whatever their needs are." – Provider, Cumberland County*

DURHAM COUNTY FINDINGS

Facilitating Organization	Date of Listening Session	Group Type	# of Participants
Equity Before Birth	February 26, 2022	Parents / Caregivers	13

All parents in the session identified as Black / African American.

Quick summary of Durham:

Parents / caregivers VALUE…	Parents / caregivers NEED…
• Reliable and trustworthy providers	• Affordable childcare options

• An environment where their children can thrive • More equitable system	• A voucher system that works with them, rather than against them

Affordability of childcare is a huge barrier to accessing childcare and a struggle for those who use it. And many see the voucher system as discriminatory and doesn't provide enough help for those who make just over the income threshold.

- The cost of traditional childcare is prohibitively expensive and precludes some people from using traditional childcare. As a result, they may piece together childcare from family and friends or choose to provide their own childcare.
    - *"I get the fact that people don't have childcare, even when you do have it, whether waiting on voucher or not, it's tough. Spending so much money, a big chunk of a paycheck on it. It's a lot of money out of pocket." – Parent, Durham County*
    - *"The cost of childcare is so high. It's hard to piece it together when my income isn't consistent. I have people that can pitch in, which I am grateful for. It's really hard to just to go on an interview. How are you supposed to get a job when don't have care? You don't want to put your child into just any facility. You want to be able to trust the facility." – Parent, Durham County*
    - *"There is daycare next to my house, but it's $1300/month. That's someone's rent, you know." – Parent, Durham County*
    - *"I had a premature baby who was in NICU for a while and didn't want to put him in daycare yet. My mom was helping but she is missing work. But now I am looking at the salary I get for nursing, and I can't afford childcare. If my mom can't do it because of work, I am out of options. it's crazy because it's a terrible situation but it makes me feel better that everyone is going through it." – Parent, Durham County*
- Many parents perceive the voucher system as working against them, rather than helping them. Many describe a Catch-22 where they need a job to qualify for the childcare voucher but can't go on a job interview without childcare. They feel that it is discriminatory against people of color.
    - *"If you're waiting on voucher, you still have to go out of pocket first before they're even willing to chip in." – Parent, Durham County*
    - *"If you are not working or doing something time-worthy, they assume you have time to watch your child, because there is nothing you're implying or doing to get the voucher. They will prioritize the people in school or with jobs over you. I was on a waiting list, applied in January, didn't get voucher until November / December. It took a year." – Parent, Durham County*
    - *"Before I had my little girl, was pregnant with my 2-year-old. they told me that they needed me to obtain a job before [getting the voucher] and I am like 'How am I supposed to go interview without daycare?' I think they need a 30-day probation to allow you to try to obtain employment. It felt like a catch-22 for me, trying to work prior to having little girl, put me back in same situation." – Parent, Durham County*
    - *"It's hard because they don't really understand what we go through. Everyone that has childcare is fortunate. A lot of jobs can't hire you because you don't have childcare. I have good job opportunities but can't take them without childcare." – Parent, Durham County*
    - *"One of my colleagues shared about the childcare subsidy, I applied and received it. My spouse finished school, very challenging finding a position during pandemic, he ended up getting a job 1.5 hours away. We were up for recertification of voucher, but we made $100 more than requirement and they told us we no longer qualify. It just wasn't worth the headache." – Parent, Durham County*
    - *"From the jump, they take us as black women, and black and brown people, they take us and put us in a circle. When you think of Section 8, or public housing, they shelter us in a box so we can't do no better or move. The whole system needs to be improved. They say, 'Oh, if you make this amount of money, you lose benefits, can't get food stamps or public housing or Medicaid.' But they want us to*

make money to improve ourselves. There is this barricade in the way to us improving. It doesn't start with childcare, it starts at beginning with taking black and brown people putting us in a box, and saying they are doing it to help us. No, you're not." – Parent, Durham County

- As a result, some would like to see the state implement a sliding scale for childcare vouchers, based on income, or a grace period which would give them childcare while they are job searching.
    - *For people who don't have jobs, give them a timeframe like even just a week or two, where they watch the kid, and you need to get job, or then they kick you off list. That should be allowed. We don't have family and friends to watch kids for 30 minutes, so I feel like that would be a really good option. If I had that, I would get a job in 2 seconds. Not everyone is trying to abuse the system; there should be more compassion for moms trying." – Parent, Durham County*
    - *"I saw something about a sliding scale with what people can afford. That's a great idea. They do it with apartment rent. We still have plenty of expenses, and people's incomes vary. And childcare just empties our pockets." – Parent, Durham County*
    - *"When things are subsidized, you put a cap on how much people pay for things. I do understand, someone has to pay, because running a daycare is expensive, whereas in other countries, the government is stepping in and providing more support in those countries. Here we see taxes go to a lot of things that don't really help, but then daycare is $13,000, $14,000, $15,000." – Parent, Durham County*

Beyond affordability, parents are looking for more childcare options in the county.

- Some parents run into issues with finding childcare programs that accept children under one-year-old or options that have enough staffing to care for their children and provide the proper level of oversight, safety, and education.
    - *"I was told that a lot of childcare places aren't taking small children, they are starting at 12 or 14 months, but she did say it was a few daycares taking small children. But it's kind of iffy out here." – Parent, Durham County*
    - *"A lot of parents do see the providers as a babysitter, but you're there to educate child, socially, emotionally, physically. If your child has a need, providers need to meet that. As mothers, you want the BEST for your child, monetarily or however. Best care, education, food, looked after." – Parent, Durham County*
    - *"I feel like childcare is a business transaction." – Parent, Durham County*
    - *"There are not enough providers, that's part of the issue, it's hard to monitor multiple kids. Personally, I don't like daycare providers. My first child I had to rescue from there, he had a box fall on his head, if I could avoid it forever I would." – Parent, Durham County*

Some parents, even those who used to be providers themselves, don't trust childcare.

- Some have had bad experiences in the past which have colored their perspective. Some describe (either firsthand or from word of mouth) bullying, neglect, abuse, and maltreatment of children.
    - *"I am a parent and a childcare director, I can see it on both sides. Being in childcare, I have seen things you shouldn't see, providers talking about kids they shouldn't say. Seeing things on cameras. I work in childcare but don't trust childcare either. But I am passionate about children myself, it's hard. My child stays at home with mom and grandma, but I know eventually my child will go to childcare. I know some facilities their cameras don't work. it's just a lot." – Parent, Durham County*
    - *"What I want for my child is for them to have childcare, a teacher who pays attention to them and their needs. Childcare teachers are going to jail for abusing kids, hitting kids, or just not being patient. We need teachers that care for our kids, love our kids, care about our kids being picked on. stuff like that does take a toll on kids, and it happens." – Parent, Durham County*

- Others find that childcare centers are not reliable with their hours; they close for COVID, sicknesses, or maintenance, which makes for inconsistent coverage and impacts parents' ability to work.
    - *"Daycare calls out for unnecessary reasons. It affects your job. How can you say you're dependable or reliable, even when it's not your fault?"*

FORSYTH COUNTY FINDINGS

Facilitating Organization	Date of Listening Session	Group Type	# of Participants
Boston-Thurmond United	September 20th, 2022	Parent / Caregiver	9
Boston-Thurmond United	September 24th, 2022	Parent / Caregiver	?
Boston-Thurmond United	September 27th, 2022	Providers & Parent / Caregivers	?
Boston-Thurmond United	September 28th, 2022	Providers & Parent / Caregivers	?
Boston-Thurmond United	September 29th, 2022	Providers	?

In the September 20th listening session, two participants identified as Hispanic and seven identified as African American. For the remaining listening sessions, demographic information was not collected, so it's unclear how many participated in each group and their demographic representation.

Quick summary of Forsyth:

Providers and parents / caregivers VALUE…	Providers and parents / caregivers NEED…
• Trust and a positive relationship so that they both are aligned on wanting the best for the children • Safety for the children at childcare centers	• Affordable childcare options so that parents aren't not forced to quit jobs to take care of their kids • Resources such as vouchers/STAR ratings to be distributed in ways that benefit the parents and providers • More training for providers to they are well prepared for the aspects of childcare including special needs

Parents feel that they are not able to afford childcare even with second jobs and vouchers due to the high costs associated with childcare.

- Affordability is a major concern for parents because there are many expenses that they have to manage.
    - *"I have twins so I pay $600 a month for childcare just so I can work. The cost of living is ridiculous, and childcare doesn't help!" – Parent, Forsyth County*
    - *"Do I have to sacrifice buying my child medicine or providing my child with after school care." – Parent, Forsyth County*
    - *"Le petite academy teaches sign language and I wanted that for my kids, but it was almost $400 even with my voucher!" – Parent, Forsyth County*
    - *"We have vouchers here, but they are hard to get. You may have to wait five years. And at one point they told me I made too much. $14 hr. is not enough but because I made over $2,500 a month it was too much." – Parent, Forsyth County*
- Many parents have expressed concern around having to quit their jobs because their salary is not enough.
    - *"I'm a stay-at-home mom. My youngest son is home with me. I've been out of work with him since he was born. Childcare for two kids was just going to be too much." – Parent, Forsyth County*
    - *"When I made the choice to stay home, race didn't play a part. My husband works but childcare for two kids was thought the roof. We didn't qualify for anything" – Parent, Forsyth County*

- *"I quit my job. I have four kids. It's hard for a woman to quit a job because it gives her independence. But I have to pay daycare, before/afterschool care. It doesn't work. That's the reason I quit my job." – Parent, Forsyth County*
- *"Sometimes you think it would be easier to quit you job and keep them at home, but I know early education is important for my children." – Parent, Forsyth County*

Parents and providers are looking for a sense of collaboration and trust in each other to provide the best care for the children.

- Providers want to see the children's growth and want to help the children, but their resources are limited.
  - *"If we (daycare providers) could have access to the same education and pay the teachers in the public school have." – Provider, Forsyth County*
  - *Been a provider for 31 years. – "My dream is to ensure that our children have the foundation they need to be successful in life. Working together we can make a change" – Provider, Forsyth County*
  - *"My main goal is to train them in their character. Education is very important but learning principals that will stay with them throughout their lives." – Provider, Forsyth County*
- Providers want parents to have trust in the care they are providing for their children.
  - *"It takes a village. We all need to collaborate and make sure our children are getting what they need. If we don't work as a team our children won't get anywhere." – Provider, Forsyth County*
  - *"I love the idea of having a good relationship with your parents so you can let them know what's happening with their child every day." – Provider, Forsyth County*
- Parents want their children to be safe, in the current climate they want a sense of security.
  - *"Safety. I've been here two years and I've already experienced two school shootings. They need to have metal detectors." – Parent, Forsyth County*
  - *"I didn't want my kids in childcare with covid and I didn't know if I could trust the teachers. I chose to stay home. " – Parent, Forsyth County*

Childcare centers want to be able to access funds and resources so they can provide better care for the children.

- Governments are favoring locations with higher STAR ratings making it harder for locations that aren't rated high to access funds.
  - *"The state caters more to the STAR rated centers. That's unjust because (religious based) facilities have to go through the same work, but we aren't granted the same privileges." – Provider, Forsyth County*
  - *"When they started the smart start program, they were going to cater to all children 0-5 but now it's only for STAR ratings. We don't get the star ratings to keep our rates low so all parents can afford us." – Provider, Forsyth County*
- This leads to a cycle of centers wanting to provide 5-STAR rated centers but not having the funds to do so.
  - *"I would be able to have better supplies and furniture. I would be able to make it look five STARS if money wasn't an issue." – Provider, Forsyth County*
- Family childcare wants access to resources so they can improve their services.
  - *"More funding and increase the market rates for our area. Give family childcare the same equality as the centers." – Provider, Forsyth County*
  - *"We are required to have the same education as those in the centers but are held at a different standard. We should be looked at equally, not less than." – Provider Forsyth County*

Providers want to have better training and education before starting at childcare centers so that they are aware of all the aspects including communication and special needs kid.

- *"I wish I had taken classes on how to communicate with parents." – Provider, Forsyth County*

- *"The business end of things. How to manage things like finances, lesson plans, menus. I would like to have more business classes." – Provider, Forsyth County*
- *"More education for our teachers would be better. One of the reasons we don't have children with disabilities is that we can't handle them." – Provider, Forsyth County*

GASTON COUNTY FINDINGS

Facilitating Organization	Date of Listening Session	Group Type	# of Participants
BCDI Charlotte	September 28th, 2022	Parents / Caregivers	14

All providers identified as Black / African American.

Quick summary of Gaston:

Providers VALUE…	Providers NEED…
• The impact their profession has on the community • Being able to provide meaningful impact on all children, especially those with special needs • Parent engagement with child growth and development • Free childcare for all children	• More acknowledgement and respect from the community and the state • More funds for staffing acquisition and retention • Raising the income threshold for voucher qualification

Providers feel that the community doesn't fully understand the impact they have on children, which contributes to burnout and need for mental health support for providers.

- This contributes to feeling underappreciated and undervalued, which can lead to frustration and burnout.
  - *"We need not just physical resources, but financial resources. Teachers never get paid what they deserve. This is our future. We don't respect our teachers. We have to change the mindset and ask the nation to put the resources out there so our children, national treasures can be strong." – Provider, Gaston County*
  - *"Society doesn't respect us. I had a parent come into my office and saw my degree and she said, 'Oh my god, I didn't know you had a degree." This is my profession. They don't respect me until they see that paper. I am here every day for your child. I come and show up so your child can succeed. That's what they should see. Not a paper hanging on a wall." – Director, Gaston County*
- Providers are committed to their profession, which often makes it difficult to separate personal and professional life. In addition, providers don't feel that parents are always engaged with the child's growth and development or understand the skills that providers are teaching children.
  - *"It's hard not taking things personally. I'm dealing with mental health, trauma, confidentiality. A lot of personalities in the room and you have to deal with that personality at that point without showing my emotions or giving the full context and keeping confidentiality of everyone involved." – Director, Gaston County*
  - *"If engagement from parents was higher, our job would be easier. I tell them the right way to do something but their mom or dad is not enforcing, the kids are confused." – Provider, Gaston County*

Providers want more access to training, and more support from parents, to better help children with special needs thrive.

- Additional training not only allows the provider to feel successful, but also helps with success of the child and parent in managing special needs. Providers are passionate about what they do and want to ensure that they have strategies in place to help their children and be the best teacher they can be.
    - *"I want to continue my education so I can teach my children best strategies. I like to engage with them and share the knowledge I have with them." – Provider, Gaston County*
- Many educators feel that parents have limited access to support and resources, and often don't know where to turn for information. As a result, parents often place blame on educators for not properly managing special needs or behavioral challenges.
    - *"More education to parents about childcare before conception and after. They get all their information from google and there is no information about how to take care of children, because they don't go through the hospital." – Provider, Gaston County*
    - *"I want to see someone who can come in and work with behavior problems with students and with teachers so we can better understand students. And to help the parents understand and anticipate why their children are acting out and not putting the blame on the school. So, the parents understand what's really going on with their children. We need to have that support, so we know what type of students we're dealing with." – Provider, Gaston County*
    - *"Most parents care but don't have the resources to take time off a job. Or the support system. But at some point, you have to make that choice or sacrifice. We don't require enough of them. And sometimes it gets to the point where it gets to a behavioral issue with the child, but they should have been involved when we told them and they weren't." – Provider, Gaston County*

Providers want more advocacy on their behalf, both from a change in perception about the value they bring to society, but also when it comes to addition pay and benefits.

- Providers want more voice and advocacy when it comes to pay, training, and overall understanding of their role in society. There is a feeling of a lack of respect and understanding of what kind of education they are providing to children and the service they are providing to society.
    - *"As a Director, I see bureaucracy, lack of respect, lack of support, love. We'd rally at the beginning, and you'd see the same people on the bus. People don't look at you as worthy or educators; they look at you as babysitters. We used to have a strong association in NC and there is nothing there now. "– Director, Gaston County*
    - *"The teacher association needs to be pushing more for the teacher. We can do all the picketing we want, but it comes from the top. How does the top feel about workers? They aren't pushing, fighting, and making sure they make good money. These teachers are teaching these kids. Your kids wouldn't be able to be a doctor, lawyer, fireman if it wasn't for the teachers teaching your child." – Provider, Gaston County*
- Additional pay would help attract and retain people to the field. And more money for childcare grants would ensure that those grants are sustainable for several years, relieving the stress of centers of having to reapply or find additional funding.
    - *"Increase pay. Make it attractive for people to come into the field." – Provider, Gaston County*
    - *"If I was governor for a day, I would ensure there was enough money in the budget to sustain childcare grants. I would make sure you have the programs for a number of years, so you don't have to worry about losing it each year." – Director, Gaston County*

The cost of childcare is becoming increasingly unaffordable, and it's especially difficult for parents who use vouchers.

- With the rising costs of living, providers see parents struggle to afford childcare costs.

  - *"Wages need to go up, people can't live off of $10/hour. Cost of living has gone up in Charlotte, but wages have not. Transplants are coming in who are used to a high cost of living and increasing it for those who are living here. It's creating a problem." – Provider, Gaston County*
- This is also true for those who have childcare costs subsidized. Some parents find that when wages go up by just a few dollars, it means they no longer qualify for subsidies, which provides an even greater hardship on these families.
  - *"I've heard that parents say they cut their childcare resource because they were making a dollar or two more. They need to revamp that. I look back and my children in daycare, I paid $25/week for two kids. I look at what some of these parents pay and I wonder how they can afford it." – Provider, Gaston County*
  - *"Even for those on vouchers, childcare is not affordable." – Provider, Gaston County*
  - *"Rent is going up, gas is going up, salaries are not going up. For you to continue, you have to cut things out. I work with a lot of subsidy parents and how many times 'I hear I can't pay this month.'" – Provider, Gaston County*
- Some providers would like to see universal childcare so that everyone has access to quality childcare. And some would like to all childcare in the county charge the same price to prevent providers from competing on price and making it more equitable for parents.
  - *"Make it universal so everyone has access to a quality program and in doing so programs have funding they need to provide a quality program." – Provider, Gaston County*
  - *"We make education a competition. We all need to be on the same platform. Childcare is competing based on price. Make it all on one platform so we charge the same and make it easier for us." – Director, Gaston County*

GRAHAM COUNTY FINDINGS

Facilitating Organization	Date of Listening Session	Group Type	# of Participants
Four Square Community Action Head Start	January 31st, 2023	Providers & Parents / Caregivers	12

Two parents participated in the group. Of the providers who participated, three were Directors, one was a Family Advocate for Head Start, and one was a Board Member of several agencies. Demographic information was not collected for this group.

Quick summary of Graham:

Providers & Parents / Caregivers VALUE…	Providers & Parents/ Caregivers NEED…
• Providing a safe space for children learn and grow • Early childcare so children can develop at a young age that is supported by the government • Government aiding the childcare system to make it more sustainable for both	• More affordable childcare • Better pay for providers so they can be valued for the work they put in • A more just STAR rating system so centers are not left behind

Providers feel gratitude for being able to make a change in children's lives, but do not feel valued due to their compensation.

- Providers want to see the children they work with grow and be a safe space for them.

- *"I like working with the little ones. You see them struggle and then a light flash in their eyes and it clicks." – Provider, Graham County*
- *"I like working with the families and helping them. It's a benefit for me when they go to school and stick with it." – Provider, Graham County*
- *"The most gratifying thing is knowing we have places for our kids to go in our county. And knowing that the families we serve, we serve well. We would like to serve more but I'm convinced that the teams that work in the childcare really care." – Provider, Graham County*
- *"Anything about kids. Especially kids that don't have their needs met any other place except the facilities we are working in. It could be the only care they get ins a 24-hour period. That you love the kids you work with and are keeping them safe." – Provider, Graham County*

- When asked what providers could change about their job, all mentioned pay as a pain point. Providers feeling inadequately compensated for the role they are playing in children's lives.
  - *"I would love to change the pay. I think that of the jobs that are in our community that childcare is a really important job. I believe that if and when we can, we need to pay our staff better." – Provider Graham County*
  - *"The pay. I don't think there is another thing I would change." – Provider, Graham County*
  - *"The pay because trying to find someone to work around here is very difficult. It was very stressful. I had qualified people who would interview but when I told them the pay, they would say 'you've got to be kidding me'" – Provider, Graham County*
  - *"This is a hard job with a lot of responsibility and the pay doesn't match." – Provider, Graham County*
  - *"You could go to Wendy's or McDonalds and get more money an hour and have less responsibility." – Provider, Graham County*
  - *"Pay. The way the world is now I can't live off my paycheck." – Provider, Graham County*

Providers find value in early childcare so that children can develop, and parents can be employed as needed without the burden of affordability.

- *"I strongly encourage early childcare. Birth to three years old. The reason being is there is a significant lack of resources. We do not have early head start and that's a really big gap for our community. Parents can't seek employment and can't afford daycare." – Provider, Graham County*
- *"More centers for early childcare." – Parent, Graham County*
- *"Making sure the children hit their developmental milestones. If the family needs something getting them resources." – Provider, Graham County*
- *"Early head start would be great for our county. It takes a huge financial burden off." – Parent, Graham County*

- The current Early Head Start program limits the children that can be participating based on parents' status.
  - *"Head Start is free if you qualify but if you don't qualify you can't have it" – Provider, Graham County*
- Providers mention that government vouchers could improve the situation for parents and providers.
  - *"I would like to see consideration of a hybrid voucher. It's for wrap around and summer hours. If we can write our funding for Head Start and get modifications on pay. If the state wants to have tax paying adults, you need childcare so they can be employed." – Provider, Graham County*
  - *"For the state to benefit on the tax end they need to invest in the vouchers. It's a win/win situation." – Provider, Graham County*
- Parents struggle with paying for childcare while maintaining jobs due to affordability.
  - *"It is economically easier for a family to not work and receive the benefits available than it is to work and not receive them. There's an element of despair and discouragement." – Provider, Graham County*
  - *"It's really expensive. It's hard to justify working and paying for that. Even when he's sick, I have to pay." – Parent, Graham County*

- *"If it wasn't so expensive it, would it us extra money to put other places. It would lift a huge burden." – Parent, Graham County*
- *"It's not affordable but we have no choice. It's almost impossible to operate on one income. I make a little more paying for childcare than if I wasn't working. That little bit helps."- Parent, Graham County*

Providers want the government to put more of their focus on early childcare because they see that as a need for the community.

- *"It's investing in those first five years of a child's life. That is the foundation. They need to support the voucher system." – Provider, Graham County*
- *"If the Federal government doesn't grant funds for Early Head Start then the State or Local governments need to step up. Pay for one or two full time staff!" – Provider, Graham County*
- *"Early childhood is one of those basic things the community needs." – Provider, Graham County*
- *"We should have as much emphasis on early childhood education as we do in public schools. So much money has to go into public schools to catch them up from what they didn't get." – Provider, Graham County*
- *"If we are required to have insurance, why can't we expect them to ensure the education of our children 0-21." – Provider, Graham County*
- *"I would prioritize early childhood education by making the state and local government cooperate. I would focus on the counties that are most in need and get them the funding." – Provider, Graham County*

- Having programs available for early childcare would lead to more satisfied parents with the trust that their children are achieving their goals.
  - *"I would be thrilled to know that we had the resources and accessibility to know I was able to get my child to graduation" – Parent, Graham County*
  - *"Being a self-confident person. I make sure they are at a reliable childcare where they are in good hands." – Parent, Graham County*

STAR Ratings are a source of conflict since providers do not feel they are supported by the government to get these ratings at the level they want them to be.

- *"It's an excellent goal and I understand the quality drivers that encourage it. But if you're going to require it you need to accommodate funding for the groups who don't have the ability to get the education for their staff." – Provider, Graham County*
- *"Provide funding and grants for us to get Star Ratings so the facilities that are struggling most have an opportunity." – Provider, Graham County*
- *"If the state is going to have requirements, they need to make access." – Provider, Graham County*
- *"Some of it you're not in control of. You can work hard and have a pristine setup, but you might miss a star because of something you can't control. That's concerning to me." – Provider, Graham County*

- Parents are not too concerned about star ratings.
  - *"I don't know the star rating of my child's facility. I've never asked." – Parent, Graham County*

GUILFORD COUNTY FINDINGS

Facilitating Organization	Date of Listening Session	Group Type	# of Participants
YMCA of Greensboro	June 30th, 2022	Mix of Providers & Parents / Caregivers	14

11 parents participated, 10 of whom identified as Black / African American, and one did not identify as BIPOC.
3 providers participated, two of whom identified as Black / African American and one as Multicultural / Multiracial.

Quick summary of Guildford:

Providers and parents VALUE…	Providers and parents NEED…
• Trust. And the provider relationship and the level of care provided to child is biggest indicator of trust • Preparing children for school	• Easy access to childcare resources • Longer childcare hours • More funding for teachers

Many of the providers in the group are part of Head Start and provide both in-home and in-facility care for children.

- Parents and provider appreciate the level of tailored care these educators provide, especially for those children who are developmentally delayed. There is a lot of respect for these providers and a high level of trust.
    - *"The services they provide are really preparing [my child]. Even though she's two, she knows how to put up her coat, clean up after herself. And the educators also help connect us with different resources like getting a car seat or food." – Parent, Guilford County*
    - *"We go into the family learning environment (home) and work with mom and child. Teacher is the facilitator and parent is the teacher. We provide different resources based on what the parent and child are working towards. And we help them keep up with things like wipes, food, etc. We're not just the teacher but also the family advocate, health specialist, anything they need us to be." – Provider, Guilford County*
    - *"It is amazing to have people in your life who are able to teach your child what you don't know. My child would start saying his alphabet when he was one year old. Made me want to go to school and want to learn with him. Look at what they are teaching you! Early learning so when they go to school they are on time." – Parent, Guilford County*

One of the biggest challenges is the limited operating hours of Head Start. Both parents and providers would like longer operating hours to benefit families.

- The childcare hours are typically from 8am-2:30pm and they follow the Guilford County Public School system calendar, which means they are closed during times of the year that are atypical for childcare to be closed.
    - *"One of our goals is to help parents get to a situation where they can be comfortable financially and it's a Catch-22 when we say we can provide childcare, but only until 2pm and after 8am. So, while it is considered a blessing, it's not really practical for our working parents." – Provider, Guilford County*
    - *"For working parents, you have to pick up by 2:30, so that can be challenging. They follow the same schedule as Guilford County, so they may be out for a week. So, it's hard to tell my employer that you're going to be out for a week for spring break, since that's not typical for someone at their age. If there was an option to stay open longer, it would help open up different employment opportunities to benefit the family." – Parent, Guilford County*
    - *"Having childcare that is outside of normal hours because some work 7am-4pm and having to drop off my kid or find someone to watch my kid before 8am or after 3pm is hard. I can't get off work." – Parent, Guilford County*

Relationship with a provider and reputation of a provider is among the most important factors when choosing childcare. Parents want their children to have a safe, nurturing environment.

- Parents want to know that their child is in a safe learning environment. Some parents choose to provide their own childcare because they do not trust leaving their child with other people.
    - *"I've got to know you in some way. I can't just sign [my child] in and leave. I'm going to talk, find out what's going on, see how my kid is doing. Got to feel like you have cared for my kid, or we'll go*

somewhere else. Tell me what's going on, if he had fun. Talk to me about it." – Parent, Guilford County

- *"I'm not using external childcare because of the trust issue. I just have a tough time trusting people outside of the house. And because we are one income, it's too expensive to send them somewhere else." – Parent, Guilford County*

- Because of this issue of trust, some parents choose to use kin-care.
  - *"I have a landlord who helps out with childcare, and I don't even think of him as a landlord, but someone who is an extension of our family." – Parent, Guilford County*
  - *"We work great together as a team - my family is not just my immediate family, but some of my friends who work half days to watch my son." – Parent, Guilford County*
- Parents of school-aged children would like a safe place for children to go after school. They often feel those options are limited in the county but are needed.
  - *"It's hard to find care for them after school. They are in the after-school program, and it's not always open when school is closed. I'm a single mom of five and Salvation Army is one of the more reasonable places that I can afford. Trying to find a place that fits my family's needs is hard." – Parent, Guilford County*
  - *"If I was governor for a day, I would create an afterschool building so students have a place to chill have a someone to talk to. Always have a safe place they feel they can come to." – Parent, Guilford County*

Not everyone is aware of the resources available in the county.

- During the group, there was a lot of information sharing about the services the county provides. Some parents did not know where to access information or were not aware of the services provided. Being able to find a centralized place to share this information is critical, especially for those parents who have children with special needs and may need more specialized or tailored resources.
  - *"Can the government not provide a place for special needs children like a daycare for special needs kids instead of a regular daycare? I know they need to socialize with other kids, but the government lets there be casinos on every corner. Can they not provide a safe place for these kids to go to with special needs?" – Parent, Guilford County*

Parents and providers want educators to be paid more, given the value they provide to the children and the community.

- *"Anyone going into education, they should at least get their education for free. Between teachers and daycare educators, we're not getting paid as much as we should. We need it. Teachers, educators, we need it in order to work and they are the ones who get paid the least." – Provider, Guilford County*

HALIFAX COUNTY FINDINGS

Facilitating Organization	Date of Listening Session	Group Type	# of Participants
A Better Chance A Better Community	September 13th, 2022	Parents / Caregivers	8
A Better Chance A Better Community	October 13th, 2022	Providers	3

Due to recording issues, the quality of one recording was too poor to hear the group. And another group didn't have a recording. Therefore, analysis is based on an outline of notes and is not as robust as other counties.

All parents who participated identified as Black / African American. All providers who participated identified as Black / African American.

Quick summary of Halifax:

Providers and parents / caregivers VALUE…	Providers and parents / caregivers NEED…
• Well-trained providers who are trained in working with children with special needs • Ability for teachers to speak same language as child	• Additional staff and training for staff

Providers are frustrated and burned out.

- They are experiencing a shortage of teachers: because of the larger class sizes, it is harder to find teachers who want to work in a larger classroom setting. In addition, centers are finding it more difficult to find quality teachers and ones who remain are feeling burned out.
    - Providers would like to enlist the colleges to help find people who love ECE and are passionate about this job. Parents also would like to see the community work with community colleges to provide training and provide incentives for those teachers who get extra training.
- Providers also find it difficult to address children's social-emotional needs and don't feel they are able to make as big of an impact on children as they would like. There is also a feeling that education in the classroom has become political and that education decisions are being made by people who haven't spent any time in the classroom. If education got back to basics, then it would mean children would have more growth, love, acceptance, and empowerment. And it would mean less burnout for teachers because these political pressures wouldn't be pulling their energy and attention away from the children.

Providers feel the biggest challenges are having providers who speak the same language, providers who offer mental health services, childcare offered during non-standard hours, and shorter wait times for childcare.

- One provider has an ESL child in her classroom and whose parents don't speak English. She uses the school-provided interpreter to speak with the parents.
- All providers have at least some children in their classroom who have learning or physical disabilities, or children with speech and developmental delays. Parents also expressed a need for having more providers who care for children with special needs.

HARNETT COUNTY FINDINGS

Facilitating Organization	Date of Listening Session	Group Type	# of Participants
Exceptional Children Assistance Center	July 25th, 2022	Parents / Caregivers & Providers	13

Within the group, six were providers and seven were parents/caregivers. Among providers, two identified as Black / African American, three as not being a member of the BIPOC community and one did not identify. Among parents, one identified as Latinx, one as Black / African American, four as not being a member of the BIPOC community and one did not identify.

Quick summary of Harnett:

Providers & Parents / Caregivers VALUE…	Providers & Parents / Caregivers NEED…
• The impact that they have on children's development	• More resources for teachers to care for and teach children with special needs

• Having a community that looks out for one another and supports one another • Providing equitable education for children with special needs	• Easier access to parent resources (centralized location) that both parents and providers can access • More affordable childcare • More facilities throughout the county to reduce wait times and transportation time

Harnett County is very large, which makes it extremely difficult to access childcare and childcare resources.

- Childcare services or facilities are not accessible: some services or facilities are located in parts of the county which take up to 45 minutes to access, which is not feasible for many families, especially with the cost of gas.
    - *"I live in Harnett County, but I do a lot of things in Lee County because everything is spaced out in Harnett County. Angier, Lillington is not near me. We did our Pre-K application but can't drive 40 minutes to get to a center." – Parent, Harnett County*
    - *"Everything is so spread out, so traveling to these places can be difficult. The area is not easy to navigate. A program may be available for two, three, or five days and short amount of hours (9am-12pm) but it takes 45 minutes to get there which is not feasible with the commute and traffic and gas for just a few hours of childcare. That has been the biggest hurdles to finding care." – Parent, Harnett County*
    - *"I wish we could divide up the county to help those who have an issue with distance." – Parent, Harnett County*
- Partly due to the way things are spread out and also partly due to there being a lot of military families, some feel there is a lack of cohesive community. They don't feel they a support system and often feel alone.
    - *"One of the biggest needs is trying to find resources for playtime, trying to find families who are in the same situation as ourselves. As a provider, I want to provide resources, services and outreach to others, so they know what's available." – Parent / Provider, Harnett County*
    - *"We need more activities for our children in the community. We need more splash pads, things for kids to do in summer and get together with other children and families, more parks. I know there are some activities, but it is such a big county, and the funds are just not there to reach everybody. As a provider, I believe in working for the child and parent. We all need to work together to do what's best for the children. Needs to be more support groups for military parents to meet new people and get together for playdates. More on social platforms." – Provider, Harnett County*
    - *"There are resources for military families, but I haven't figured out other ways to connect with all that's available for my children." – Parent, Harnett County*

Many parents and providers want more resources – both within the classroom and in the community – to better suit the needs of parents and tailored to children's needs.

- Some providers wish there were better resources available in the classroom to help them better teach children, especially for children who have special needs.
    - *"We need resources and funding for the classrooms. You have to have enough toys to switch them out and keep kids engaged. Or keep up with art supplies." – Provider, Harnett County*
- Both parents and providers want more access to parent resources, like workshops or information, to help them be better parents and to help continue the child's education outside of the classroom.
    - *"Our biggest need is more financial resources, more workshops and trainings available for parents. Parents are the child's first teacher and making sure parents have the right resources so they can provide for and advocate for their children." – Provider, Harnett County*
    - *"I see a big difference in the resources available between Wake County and Harnett County. The biggest struggle is finding the resources for my child who is disabled. It wasn't easy finding a social worker; I found out through another parent." – Parent, Harnett County*

- *"Our community could benefit from parent education courses. We can get all the books, but it's not tailored to our child. To have those courses to help teach you about discipline, create schedules, etc. Children don't have these things because their parents may or may not know to do that. I think that would help a child's development." – Provider, Harnett County*
- *"Need parents' workshop but also involved with the teachers and providers in the area and special groups for special needs, especially autistic kids. A lot of parents, unless their kids are severe, they don't have a lot of options and they need support and help with behaviors." – Provider, Harnett County*
- *"We need more support for the educator in the classroom. Sometimes when we have exhausted what we can do to serve the child, it would be great for this county to listen to us." – Provider, Harnett County*

Information about childcare services and resources need to be more centralized and connected and offered in Spanish. The current system feels disjointed, compounded by the large county size.

- Information is often not centralized or easily available, even for providers. This makes it difficult not only for parents to navigate the system (especially if they have a child with special needs) but also for providers to help them navigate. Resources are not always in Spanish, which is necessary for the large Hispanic population in the county. In addition, workshops or classes are not local, which makes it difficult for parents to attend if they are in another part of the county (due to county size).
  - *"I see that this is still something going on 20 years later, that there are still not enough resources for families that speak anything other than English, it's hard. One of the biggest populations is the Hispanic community. I would suggest any program offered is also offered in Spanish." – Provider, Harnett County*
  - *"If things were more localized to where parents reside, they would attend more workshops. Things need to be assigned based on location. The western part of the county is really big, so things need to be facilitated for parents who live in that area." – Provider, Harnett County*
  - *"I would like for parents and providers to have meetings with each other to decide what's most beneficial for the child. Provide a list of services in our pediatric offices, social service, put them there so they announce the NC Pre-K programs, other support services, daycare. Needs to be a generated list and easy access so people can get the information." – Provider, Harnett County*
  - *"There is a big difference in demographics, funding, and resources in this county compared to Wake County. Harnett County is not as populated, not as much resources or funding. I could tell that things are getting started and coming up, but getting that information out there is something we need help with." – Parent, Harnett County*
  - *"Sometimes me and the teacher I work with, we're on our own. We follow the rules, and they turned against us. We got no help, even though NC Pre-K says they are always there for you. We're doing the best to provide for them. I just want this child to get the help they need, and they deserve. When you have a NC Pre-K class, there are too many hands in the pot. There is no help from the partnership." – Provider, Harnett County*

Childcare affordability, childcare availability, and transportation to / from the facility are among the biggest childcare challenges.

- The cost of childcare is high, which means some families choose to forgo childcare and therefore, their goals and dreams as they are not able to work as a result. It also means that families are not able to create financial stability or wealth and contributes to feelings of burnout among parents.
  - *"Half-day programs are the only things that work financially, but findings jobs that work around that are difficult." – Parent, Harnett County*

- *"We now have a one income household instead of two, which causes financial difficulties. But we can't afford daycare." – Parent, Harnett County*
- *"I haven't been able to start work despite having graduated with my MPH and it breaks my heart because I love the program and I loved going to school. But I had him and the pandemic hit. It's not been easy and it's been a process of grieving because Id don't know when I can get back to me. I love being a mother and his caregiver, but I feel like a part of me died of who I was up to the point of becoming a mother. That's not fair to me, personally." – Parent, Harnett County*
- *"There were some great recommended facilities but at the time I was a single mom and there was no way I could afford $300/week for my two-year-old. It wasn't feasible." – Parent, Harnett County*
- *"I'm having to provide childcare myself. My husband is often gone a lot because of his military job. I do a lot on my own with no family and little community. I'm 24/7 attached to a toddler with just no break. I feel he would probably do better with some care outside of the home but finding something that works, that is affordable, is a challenge. I just need some mental time." – Parent, Harnett County*
- *"I have looked at working in a childcare center just to get my son into one. Grants and scholarships for a center would be great." – Parent, Harnett County*

- The voucher system doesn't work for all. Some families do not qualify for vouchers but find that they cannot afford childcare without it. And others feel that that vouchers are too limiting around who it covers for childcare. By expanding the use of vouchers to all ages, more families may be helped.
  - *"Having a certain income should not be a stipulation on whether families qualify for a voucher. I wish the government could make it so it accommodates all ages and not just Pre-K. Listening to the challenges moms face financially, it's hard. I don't know what I would do if I was in a situation where I can't find resources and I can't work to provide for my family." – Provider, Harnett County*
  - *"We can't afford childcare without the voucher system [but we didn't qualify], so we made the decision to stay home." – Parent, Harnett County*
- Because Harnett County has a large number of military families, many families do not have a strong community network in the area or one of the parents is not always available because they are deployed or working long hours. This means that traveling to and from childcare can be burdensome.
  - *"Sometimes, parents struggle to provide transportation to and from school for their children, especially if one parent in the home. Some children miss school if the parent cannot afford to bring the child back and forth five days a week. And our school does not provide transportation." – Provider, Harnett County*
  - *"Transportation and the cost of daycare is a big issue. I hear from teachers with both parents working and no family nearby. There are some lower income families who only have one car and it's challenging to juggle with work and daycare. It's hard to get the child to school and other functions that the school holds for the older ones. The county needs to work on that." – Provider, Harnett County*
- The long wait lists prevent parents from finding work, as they need childcare in order to find a job. Not having both parents work can create financial hardship for the family.
  - *"It's a major financial challenge because I'm not able to work because I can't find childcare. I don't have family here, and the dad works a lot so that leaves me to figure out how to provide care to the children." – Parent, Harnett County*
  - *"Lots of families are running into waitlists. I really need a job now and I can't wait six months to maybe wait for my kid to get a sport, but I don't want to just put my kid anywhere." – Parent, Harnett County*

Offering more financial and mental health support to teachers is needed.

- Providers give their all to children and their families and often feel that they are forgotten and underappreciated by the state and local government. They need more support – higher pay as well as emotional support and acknowledgment about the impact they have on the community.
    - *"I think the government should provide help for the teachers and providers. Children are with those teachers 8-9 hours a day. Sometimes teachers know more things about the child than the parent does because they are with them more throughout the day. If I was governor, I would make teachers have better pay and resources. If they had better resources they could potentially better help the parents with helping the child." – Provider, Harnett County*
    - *"When you have undiagnosed children [in the classroom] it can be very hard, especially if you're the only teacher in the classroom and dealing with your own emotions that come with that and the struggles. If we could have resources for mental health, it would create better stability and produce a better teacher for children." – Provider, Harnett County*
    - *"The providers in our community need emotional support. We've all been impacted by COVID and we need support for children, parents, and providers." – Provider, Harnett County*

HENDERSON COUNTY FINDINGS

Facilitating Organization	Date of Listening Session	Group Type	# of Participants
Children First	December 6th, 2022	Providers	17

Of the providers who participated, one identified as Latinx, four as Black / African American, seven did not identify as part of the BIPOC community and five did not give their racial identity. Some of the providers in the group are also parents themselves and so, at times, spoke from the point of view as a parent, in addition to a provider. Five participants were owners / directors of a childcare facility.

Quick summary of Henderson:

Providers VALUE…	Providers NEED…
• The impact they have on children's lives and their educational foundation • A more efficient system that encourages people to enter the childcare profession • Quality care at affordable prices • Free childcare and ECE for all children in the county	• More people who value the childcare profession and will make it a career • More respect, better pay, and better benefits for childcare providers • More sustainable funding to ensure staffing and center viability

Provider staffing shortages is one of the biggest challenges that childcare centers in Henderson County face.

- Because of the short staff, providers have to close rooms, which means they can take fewer children. This means waitlists have become even longer for parents, impacting their ability to work.
    - *"Staffing, I've heard a lot of centers have issues. More staff means getting more kids into childcare." – Provider, Henderson County*
    - *"The biggest need right now is staffing." – Provider, Henderson County*
    - *"I would like to go back to work but I can't because there's not a place for my son right now." – Provider, Henderson County*
    - *"The waitlist. I don't have openings for two years. That's one I can't do anything about but needs to be addressed." – Provider, Henderson County*

- *"We get our staff educated and they go someplace else. We need to find a way to keep that quality in the childcare center." – Provider, Henderson County*
- *"More staffing would mean more childcare is available for families and more stability for the family so they can continue to work." – Provider, Henderson County*
- *"I've been in childcare for 20 plus years. I had to close the infants' room because we are short of staff." – Provider, Henderson County*

- And with fewer staff, providers can't offer extended hours, which they know is important to parents.
  - *"Right now with the staffing I don't think anyone can provide non-standard hours." – Provider, Henderson County*
  - *"Childcare centers need more money to be able to open extended hours. This would help the parents." – Provider, Henderson County*
- The staffing shortages create a burden on providers.
  - *"Staffing since Covid has been such an issue. It's a lot harder to be a teacher. I've had to take on a lot more." – Provider, Henderson County*
  - *"Something has to happen. Teachers are doing twice the work." – Provider, Henderson County*
  - *"As a director, not having the staff in place to get things done. Or to have staff with no work ethic, they don't come in. It's affects everyone." – Director, Henderson County*
  - *"[If there were more staff] the staff would be less stressed, able to do their jobs better, and stay in their role longer and be compensated more." – Provider, Henderson County*
- Providers feel that the low pay and lack of benefits are contributing factors to the staffing shortages in the county. Some centers have relied on grants to cover the gap in funding and worry what will happen when that funding runs out (likely grants from COVID relief). They would like to see increased pay and benefits for providers, given the amount of work they do.
  - *"Many staff in this field are heads of households. There's a misconception that they women in this field are second income. Acknowledge that we are either the only income or the primary income. We need health insurance for us and our family." – Provider, Henderson County*
  - *"With stabilization grants winding down, we have given raises and bonuses, that money is going to be gone. Now what do we do?" – Provider, Henderson County*
  - *"A lot of people don't go into childcare because they can make more doing something that's not as challenging." – Provider, Henderson County*
  - *"I see employees quitting because they can't continue paying them raises when the grants run out." – Director, Henderson County*
  - *"We could do better with services like hearing, dental, medical." – Provider, Henderson County*
  - *"Give us healthcare and retirement." – Provider, Henderson County*
  - *"We should be giving state benefits." – Provider, Henderson County*

In order to solve the staffing shortage and childcare availability, many would like to see more streamlined and efficient licensing processes.

- Some believe that the paperwork and time required to be a provider is preventing many from entering the field. And the additional paperwork places even more burden upon the providers who are already practicing.
  - *"I would like to see more streamline and efficient rules for licensing. We have this huge list of things and everyone has a different timeline. Less redundant paperwork. Make it easier for us to stay in compliance." – Director, Henderson County*
  - *"For NC PreK there is so much paperwork it makes it so hard to get people interested in becoming a provider." – Provider, Henderson County*
  - *"There are too many details. They need to streamline." – Provider, Henderson County*
  - *"The state is requiring more education for teachers which is making it harder for centers to hire and keep them." – Provider, Henderson County*

Providers recognize that affordability of childcare is a huge burden for parents.

- In some cases, providers have tried to alleviate that burden by waiving tuition but have only been able to do that through the use of grants, which they realize are running out.
    - *"During Covid due to grants I was able to do free tuition if needed. I can't do that without grants." – Director, Henderson County*
- Some see parents having to make the tradeoff between cost of daycare and quality daycare because of the affordability factor.
    - *"Affordability, of course, some families it's super important, some take what they can get." – Provider, Henderson County*
    - *"We need more available, affordable childcare. The market rate needs to be looked at again. Many centers have to charge more than market rate to run a quality center but this is a burden for the families." – Provider, Henderson County*
- And many would like to see the parent fee for vouchers lowered or the state provide free childcare for all.
    - *"I would lower the parent fee. Sometimes that $100 is too much for some parents." – Provider, Henderson County*
    - *"Give more funding to childcare." – Provider, Henderson County*

Providers would like to see more support for children with special needs and for ECE younger children.

- They see a need to help children with special needs and provide more specialized support for them.
    - *"For special needs children to have special classes to be included and inclusive. Regular classrooms are too stimulating, they need to have a class of their own." – Provider, Henderson County*
    - *"More specialized schools and programs for children's emotional and behavioral wellbeing." – Provider, Henderson County*
    - *"Our community needs funding to get more staff in and being able to reach children earlier for all families in all areas." – Provider, Henderson County*

Providers love what they do and want to continue to provide care and education for children in their county.

- They have a passion for their field and understand the dedication that is needed to practice.
    - *"I've seen many years of gender discrimination (female workforce) around the world. There have been allowances for that that are not expected in other professions. It's profoundly disturbing. The field of teaching needs to be lifted up, honored, and respected." – Provider, Henderson County*
    - *"We're brain builders. We are preparing them for kindergarten next year." – Provider, Henderson County*
    - *"I'm hoping centers won't close so I can work and continue to support children." – Provider, Henderson County*
    - *"Is your heart in it? Financially you will never be a millionaire. You have to love what you do." – Provider, Henderson County*
    - *"Learn about the industry and understand fully about being a servant to others." – Provider, Henderson County*
    - *"I see this career as a worthy way to give purpose for my life." – Provider, Henderson County*

HERTFORD COUNTY FINDINGS

Facilitating Organization	Date of Listening Session	Group Type	# of Participants
Hertford Northampton Smart Start Partnership for Children	August 29, 2022	Parents / Caregivers and providers	8

Hertford Northampton Smart Start Partnership for Children	August 30, 2022	Parents / Caregivers and providers	8

The first group consisted of two parents and six providers. One parent identified as Black/African American, and the other's identity was not recorded. Among the providers, four identified as Black/African American and the other two provider's identity was not recorded. The second group consisted of three parents and five providers. Two parents identified as Black/African American and one as Multicultural/Multiracial. Four providers identified as Black/African American, and one did not identify as a member of the BIPOC community.

Quick summary of Hertford:

Providers & Parents / Caregivers VALUE…	Providers & Parents/ Caregivers NEED…
• Coming together as a community / support from others • Qualified providers to ensure safety of their children • Strong parent-teacher relationship and communication	• More affordable childcare • Better financial assistance and voucher programs • Better training and support for providers to avoid burnout

For families and providers, trust is the most important currency in childcare.

- Parents must feel that they trust the provider because they are leaving their child in another's care.
  - *"Parents have to trust you. These are their children, especially when it's their first child. They have to trust you." – Provider, Hertford County*
  - *"Has a lot to do with the workers and how they meet and greet those parents. You have to forget about the kind of day you're having. If the child is crying and the worker is quick to comfort the child, that builds trust. Have to have good teachers and staff." – Provider, Hertford County*
  - *"Before my kids started at daycare, I knew the childcare provider." – Parent, Hertford County*

Families struggle to find childcare that they can afford. Several families are forced to stay home from work or sacrifice health / other expenses.

- While vouchers can certainly help some families access childcare, others continue to struggle to afford childcare even when receiving vouchers. They need better financial assistance to ensure that they can receive care without sacrificing other necessities.
  - *"I finally got a voucher. Prior to that was paying $450/week. That was high. So the voucher was a blessing." – Parent, Hertford County*
  - *"It's hard to be middle class and childcare being $2,000 a month. So, I stayed home and struggled. I didn't work, there was no point. With the voucher, I'm able to work now. It's easier to be poor or to be rich. It's hard to be middle class." - Parent, Hertford County*
  - *"I put what I owe for the month, I don't touch it and I use whatever is left. I'm behind a lot for medical bills, and I just let it go to collections." - Parent, Hertford County*
  - *"Some parents still struggle to pay the parent fee even with the voucher." - Provider, Hertford County*
  - *"It's hard to find childcare. I'm out of work because couldn't get voucher because I'm unemployed" - Parent, Hertford County*
  - *"Help more families who need childcare. A lot of families are receiving vouchers who are not doing anything. Those families who need vouchers or assistance can't get it." – Provider, Herford County*
- Many providers try to accommodate families so they can afford childcare but there's only so much they can offer without affecting the small amount of funds they already make. Providers want more support from the government to ensure they can set affordable prices without impacting their own business.

- *"We are unfortunate to be a state that couldn't care less. NC is harsh when it comes to looking out for childcare providers and teachers. You could go across the state line and make double what you can make right here. When you have working parents, it's hard to charge for all the money I don't see. Think about families in our area, if they were able to bring home their gross, how many would need assistance with childcare or food and nutrition. You would have more than enough. But given that we're in a government that makes sure their pockets are padded, they could care less for the little people. That makes it hard for an owner. You know what it means to be a parent, but your hands are tied. You're between a rock and a hard place. It's difficult where the leadership of the state thinks that way." - Provider, Hertford County*
- *"The providers don't set the price. You have to charge what the private people are paying." - Provider, Hertford County*
- *"The parent fee has to be paid; we have lost children because their parents are not able to pay that fee. A lot of the parents work, but with all the other obligations they have, the parent fee is too much sometimes. If they get a month behind, then it snowballs...if they can't pay one month, then they won't be able to pay two or three. The daycare providers are not in the position to say we can waive the parent fee. It's a Catch-22." – Provider, Hertford County*

Providers are overwhelmed and overworked. They feel a lack of support with high demands and low respect from their community and local government.

- Many providers wish they understood the high expectations and skills required from the job. They feel burnt out because of the lack of proper training. They need more support to ensure they can be successful in their role while also maintaining their own mental health.
  - *"Some days I wish I could find help. When I have a doctor's appointment, I don't have anyone to come in, so the majority of my appointments I have had to close the facility. Which puts parents in a bad spot who had to go to work." - Provider, Hertford County*
  - *"I wish I knew about the responsibilities. Once you get into it, you learn more about it. It's a lot for us, as well. After 23 years, stress and burnout. It's a field that will create burnout." - Provider, Hertford County*
  - *"I'm an educated for 15 years now. It's a challenge in dealing with different temperaments and behaviors. No matter how much training you get the first day, it's still a challenge." - Provider, Hertford County*
  - *"Most of the time when you see high turnover, it's the pay. I wish I knew that and knew more about having more training. I had some workshops but not in-depth and your chances of running into a disability back then was rare, but now it's more prevalent. We need more training so you're better equipped." - Provider, Hertford County*
  - *"When you have someone with no patience, children can feel your energy. When you have someone on edge and constantly yell, then you don't know what's wrong with your child when you pick them up, it rubs off. Training with attitude and personality but also CPR training." - Provider, Hertford County*
- Families and providers both believe childcare providers should receive an increase in salary. Not only would this increase reflect the amount of work they put in, but it would also create an incentive for more people to join the field.
  - *"I wish I knew about the pay scale. I love children and I'm not in it for the money, but our providers need to be more encouraged in the dollar area. That's why there is high turnover." - Provider, Hertford County*

- *"I would pay the providers. If they aren't taken care of, they can't take care of anybody else. If they are taken care of, they will put their all into their work. Take care of them and everything will fall into place." - Parent, Hertford County*
- *"Increase pay for teachers. We struggle and don't really make it. I need to provide diapers, formula, everything." - Provider, Hertford County*

Families value a strong sense of community but feel that it is lacking in Hertford. They want to feel connected to providers, so they feel comfortable leaving their children in their care.

- Caregivers and providers want strong communication and relationships with one another to ensure trust. For families, they want to feel confident providers are meeting all of their children's needs. For providers, they want parents to trust them in doing their job well.
  - *"Ensure that the parents and childcare providers work together and not against one another and help one another out. Have parents respect the teachers more and give them insight." - Provider, Hertford County*
  - *"Let parents know they can trust you. When you open those doors each day, you need to let them know they can trust you. In today's world you don't know who to trust." - Provider, Hertford County*
  - *"How I've stayed in business is because of my reputation. If you've got the reputation, I've had people come from other counties because of the reputation." - Provider, Hertford County*
  - *"Parents have to trust you. These are their children, especially when it's their first child. They have to trust you...That parent-teacher rapport has to be good." - Provider, Hertford County*
- Families feel a lack of support from the community around them. The values of coming together to raise one another have disappeared leaving each family to 'fend' for themselves.
  - *"We don't have a village no more. Everyone is looking out for themselves. Back in the day, we all looked out for each other. If we came home from school early and my mom was out, my neighbor got us. We didn't have to be family. We don't look out for one another anymore." - Parent, Hertford County*
  - *"We need more people to get involved, to get the community involved in raising the child." - Provider, Hertford County*
  - *"We need more recreational activities. Have more ways for families to have a good time and do family-oriented activities." - Provider, Hertford County*

JACKSON COUNTY FINDINGS

Facilitating Organization	Date of Listening Session	Group Type	# of Participants
Big Brothers Big Sisters of Western North Carolina	April 2023	Parents / Caregivers and Providers	15

Within the group, nine were childcare providers / directors. Two identified as Latinx and the remaining did not identify as part of the BIPOC community. Of the six parents / caregivers who participated none identified as a member of the BIPOC community.

Quick summary of Jackson:

Providers & Parents / Caregivers VALUE…	Providers & Parents/ Caregivers NEED…
• Trustworthy and passionate childcare providers • More access to childcare facilities • Representation in the classroom • Universal Pre-K	• Affordable childcare options and more access for vouchers • More childcare facilities • Training on how to care for children with special needs • More funding for ECE

Providers love what they do and recognize the impact they have on children and their lives.

- Not only do providers have a real passion for what they do, but they also recognize that the relationship with the child and parent creates an environment of trust and impacts childcare quality. And this sentiment is echoed by parents in the session.
    - *"What I love about my job is the hugs I get. It just brightens my day." – Provider, Jackson County*
    - *"I love working with parents and getting to know them." – Provider, Jackson County*
    - *"When the lightbulb goes off and you see it click [with children]. It makes all the hard work and planning worth it." – Provider, Jackson County*
    - *"A teacher that has patience and education that can tend to every child's needs is a sign of quality childcare." – Provider, Jackson County*
    - *"Quality childcare means knowing that every child is going to be safe and well-cared for." – Parent, Jackson County*
    - *"To know she is being cared for by someone who loves her and wants to keep her safe, means it's quality." – Parent, Jackson County*
    - *"We need to be able to provide love and care for these kids. Some of them don't get it anywhere else." – Provider, Jackson County*
- As such, parents want to have consistency in childcare providers, as it strengthens the feelings of trust. And providers recognize that finding quality childcare providers is often difficult.
    - *"It would be ideal if my child could be with the same people in the same place all day." – Parent, Jackson County*
    - *"Our biggest challenge is having staff who can handle all these kids. A lot of them are young and don't want the responsibilities." – Provider, Jackson County*
    - *"I think they should help us fund our staff since we've had to raise pay to keep them. If we had more money I could have better educated teachers." – Provider, Jackson County*

Parents and Providers would like to see more representation in the classroom. And providers would like additional training to help them better care and educate children with special needs.

- Parents want to make sure that their children see other children who look like them and are treated fairly.
    - *"My child is biracial. It has a huge say on where I take him for care. I do look to see if he have access to children from all backgrounds. The diversity has to be there." – Parent, Jackson County*
    - *"For a while my child was the only one in the room with Hispanic blood. Thankfully that has changed but I worry he will not get equal treatment." – Parent, Jackson County*
    - *"My nephew has ADHD and the teacher always singled him out. Why can't he just fit in? Thankfully the principal pointed us to some resources, and he got medication." – Parent, Jackson County*
- Providers want easier access to training for those children with special needs.

- *"There's a lack of education when it comes to special needs children. We don't have the resources. You have to travel an hour + each way to get it." – Provider, Jackson County*
- *"There was no in-depth training in school on how to deal with difficult or special needs kids." – Provider, Jackson County*

Childcare affordability is a huge barrier to access. And in many cases, vouchers do not help or further limit options in an area that doesn't have a lot of childcare availability.

- Lack of childcare options and affordable options is a key barrier for families.
  - *"We need more daycares. Parents are having a hard time finding affordable care for their kids." – Provider, Jackson County*
  - *"We serve 100 children in Highlands. There's another center that serves 15-25. Tha's it." – Provider, Jackson County*
  - *"It's heartbreaking seeing the parents of looking at the cost of a 8-5 program. It's as much as a car payment. Parents ask me every day 'How am I going to afford this?'" – Provider, Jackson County*
  - *"I pay out of pocket. Every bit of it. We had to cut back on the number of days because of the expense." – Parent, Jackson County*
  - *"Some parents don't know if they will be able to afford childcare next week. Maybe their hours got cut or mommy and daddy got separated. We see it a lot." – Provider, Jackson County*
  - *"We pay out of pocket. It's a big chunk of your income. You have to budget everything else. I say to my kids this weekend we can't do anything because I have to pay for childcare." – Parent, Jackson County*
  - *"I've heard of parents who have to give up their jobs. There's no point in working if your salary is less than the cost of full-time childcare." – Provider, Jackson County*
  - *"It's a struggle. There are so many families where they can't afford both parents to work but they can't afford one to quit either." – Provider, Jackson County*
- And vouchers don't adequately cover the cost of childcare, or forces parents to travel long distances in order to find a center that accepts vouchers.
  - *"Some parents got raises, maybe $15-$18 an hour. But now they are bumped out of subsidy. It's not right." – Provider, Jackson County*
  - *"We see a lot of parents working as hard as they can. They don't qualify for subsidy so they work so much they barely see their kids. It's a vicious cycle." – Provider, Jackson County*
  - *"We've had parents ask their employer to pay them less so they can qualify for subsidy." – Provider, Jackson County*
  - *"We accept vouchers because it helps the parents out. We don't tack on any fees." – Provider, Jackson County*
  - *"One of the hardest things is to connect parents to resources for subsidy. We have to send them 30-50 minutes away." – Provider, Jackson County*
  - *"They need to raise the threshold." – Provider, Jackson County*

More resources are needed for the Hispanic community.

- These resources include Spanish-speaking providers and more flexible childcare hours.
  - *"What I'm seeing right now that is breaking my heart is that the Hispanic people coming in. They are barely making a living but they still need care for their child. They also need wrap around hours to be able to work." – Provider, Jackson County*

- *"We are getting more inquiries from Spanish speaking families. But we often can't help them because we don't offer full day care and can't speak their language." – Provider, Jackson County*

Universal Pre-K is valued by the community and many would like to see it expanded.

- *"Universal PreK is not a crazy idea. We all have kids and we all need to go to work." – Provider, Jackson County*
- *"If kids could be in a PreK classroom they were be better prepared for Kindergarten. So when the county says they don't need PreK it burns me up. The teachers, students and parents all need it." – Provider, Jackson County*

Along those lines, providers would like to see more funds allocated to childcare and early childhood education.

- *"I would allocate more funds to early childhood education." – Provider, Jackson County*
- *"There should be UNRESTRICTED funds given to childcare." – Provider, Jackson County*
- *"If I was governor for a day, I would have universal PreK for kids birth through Kindergarten." – Provider, Jackson County*

LENOIR COUNTY FINDINGS

Facilitating Organization	Date of Listening Session	Group Type	# of Participants
The Gate of Lenoir County	October 12th, 2022	Parents	4

Of the four parents who participated, one identified as Latinx and three did not identify as a member of the BIPOC community. One parent uses a childcare facility (did not know the STAR rating of the facility), one uses NC Pre-K and has the oldest child watch the student when not in school, and two provide their own childcare and also use drop-in childcare centers.

Quick summary of Lenoir:

Providers & Parents / Caregivers VALUE…	Providers & Parents/ Caregivers NEED…
• Trust in a provider. Trust looks like a safe learning environment, well-trained providers, respect for parents and children of different races • Childcare affordability • Access to parent resources and childcare options	• More childcare options to reduce transportation time • Childcare options that provide broader and more flexible hours to account for non-traditional working hours

The most important factor in a childcare facility is trust between the parent and the provider.

- Those who provide their own care do so because they do not trust that the local childcare facilities will provide the level of care and safety that they feel comfortable with. A few parents have had bad experience with childcare facilities, which have colored their experience.
    - *"I have personally seen things in some daycares that concern me. My kid's after-school program is run by the same lady who watches my 2-year-old. When I first got there, I noticed a lot of yelling at the children. It felt like boot camp, not after-school care. I raised concerns and people got mad at me at the daycare. Their job is to care for the children and keep them safe but they are angry at me because I'm concerned about someone abusing my children." – Parent, Lenoir County*
    - *"I pulled my oldest out of daycare because she broke her arm and they accused me of doing it. My son was getting bit. It was the mom's child who worked there, it was her child who was biting my son and when I raised concern about it, they brushed me off. The teachers are all friends with the director, so our concerns are dismissed." – Parent, Lenoir County*
- Parents want to know that their child is safe. Knowing their child is safe creates a level of trust with the provider and center. For some, having a provider come to the child's home to provide care increases the feeling of safety and trust.
    - *"I will pay more for the trustworthiness. If I don't know who is watching my child, you're not going to have access to my child. If I have to pay more, I don't like it, but I will do it. It's like maternal instinct." – Parent, Lenoir County*
    - *"Creating a welcoming place, where the child wants to go to daycare. Creating a real family feel. Where they like their teachers." – Parent, Lenoir County*
    - *"The facility has vetted everyone, and you could sit there and watch at any time. They have a good security system, they have to check my ID before they release my kid, even though they know who I am." – Parent, Lenoir County*
    - *"I want to know my child is well-taken care of. Part of this is safety. Want to know my child is safe. I know they will be safe in my care but want to make sure they will be in someone else's." – Parent, Lenoir County*
    - *"I want the state to maintain a level of safety for my kids. When something comes up that needs to go to the state, there needs to be an investigation so that children don't get hurt. If we are going to trust childcare providers, we need them to be as close to us as possible and need to care about other people's kids. It needs to be more than just a job for them." – Parent, Lenoir County*
    - *"If I had to pick a provider to care for my child, I want someone who comes to my home to watch my kids." – Parent, Lenoir County*
- Trust also is created by having providers who are well-trained in childcare strategies and early childhood education. They are frustrated because they do not feel that the providers in their county are well-trained and are looking for providers – either in-home or at a center – who are passionate about being a childcare provider. Parents also want providers to be paid more for additional training.

- *"I want to know they know what they are doing. That they know what they're doing wrong. That they should be trained with state standards, CPR, etc, etc. If it was too much when they were trained, it should have knocked some of them out (of being a teacher)." – Parent, Lenoir County*
- *"I'll drive further to pay a little less if they are reliable and well-trained." – Parent, Lenoir County*
- *"In my other facility, they had a lack of discipline. They would let them do whatever they want. They would just color or lay for naptime." – Parent, Lenoir County*
- *"They should up their pay for daycare providers. In some cases, they don't pay providers enough to look after kids. They should offer incentives that they get appropriate training. They should get paid more for training. And start paying workers more and offering training programs. Incentives to encourage providers to enlist in those training programs." – Parent, Lenoir County*

- Trust also is created by providers respecting all parents and children, regardless of race or ethnicity. While race and ethnicity are not driving factors for finding a childcare program, they do want to know that they are respected and seen.
  - *"I want them to be respectful of each child and who they are, but I'm not going to search out someone who is Spanish or who celebrates everything I do." – Parent, Lenoir County*
  - *"I look very Hispanic and I'll be approached, asking if I understand English. (Spanish not used in facility). Unfortunately, there are a lot of people who don't know that New Mexico is a state, which becomes an issue in the school system saying they can't get transcripts from out of country, so there are barriers that really aren't there. It felt like racism." – Parent, Lenoir County*
  - *"My first two kids are half Hispanic; the others are Filipino. So people will come and say something about 'your Mexican kids.'" – Parent, Lenoir County*
  - *"My kids, their dad is Black. So people will ask if they are my kids." – Parent, Lenoir County*

Those who provide their own care enjoy the safety and affordability of the arrangement but acknowledge the negative impact it can have on the child and other family members.

- Using kin for childcare often means additional strain and sacrifices for other family members. One parent relies on her eighteen-year-old daughter to help provide childcare when needed, which impacts the teenager's social and academic life. And another understands that their older children are unable to engage in as many extra-curricular activities because they are relied upon for childcare.
  - *I don't have the cost of daycare because I have my children to help watch my kids. My 18-year-old daughter is not happy about watching her 4-year-old sister. So that can be a negative, but she doesn't need to leave the house, she's at home with her own toys and in her own safe space. But she doesn't have socialization because she's around her older siblings and they don't always want to be around her. So it takes away from her and my other kids to have that freedom. It almost feels like a burden upon my other children to watch their younger sister." – Parent, Lenoir County*
  - *"I don't want to disrupt my older children's daily life - sports, school." – Parent, Lenoir County*

Childcare affordability is a heavy burden for parents, and one of the key reasons they do not seek outside childcare options.

- Parents struggle to afford childcare, either at a facility or having someone come to their home. Some find the drop-in childcare centers affordable, which is one reason why they use them.
  - *"I physically can't afford childcare which is why my children are not in daycare." – Parent, Lenoir County*
  - *"If I want someone in my house, it's $10/ hour. Drop in is $6.50/hour. I have to think about stopping here or here [during my job], it's going to be several more hours. How is that going to affect the cost and that impacts job performance." – Parent, Lenoir County*
  - *"That was a big push to work from home before COVID because of the multiple children and affordability of daycare." – Parent, Lenoir County*

- The cost of childcare means that parents and families must make sacrifices. Some find that they cannot have additional children because of the cost or that they can't enroll their children into enrichment classes.
    - *"I have to choose between daycare and other things. Have to pay daycare and can't put my children into activities, like ballet. Have to choose between ballet classes or daycare. And that sucks." – Parent, Lenoir County*
    - *"Affordability of daycare impacts my decision to have additional children. Was having issues with findings availability for both of my children and having to drive to different sides of town to use two different daycares so that I could work." – Parent, Lenoir County*
- As a result, parents want to see more state funding towards childcare and would like to see employers offer childcare or childcare fast f to help with this burden.
    - *"The state can appropriate more funds towards better programs. Right now, it doesn't seem like they are taking state budgets and focusing on issues that we don't support. It's the everyday person who is dealing with stuff like this but not seeing effective change." – Parent, Lenoir County*
    - *"More funds available for families who otherwise cannot afford children. Not have a two-year wait list for funds. The quickest way to get help with daycare is to have a DSS case opened up for you, and that's sad. That they would only want to help you when there are enough issues. There is not prevention; just fix it when it's already broken." – Parent, Lenoir County*
    - *"There should be an included benefit from employers. Offering incentives to big companies for having childcare facility onsite." – Parent, Lenoir County*

Having childcare options with more flexible hours would help parents tremendously with being able to work and provide financially for their family.

- Several parents work shift work and having childcare options with flexible hours, longer hours, or non-traditional hours would allow them to take on more work and better provide for their family. Often, families are piecemealing childcare together to make things work.
    - *"A big barrier to childcare is timing. Depending on the opening time of the facility, I can't schedule anything around that time." – Parent, Lenoir County*
    - *"I work third shift. If I don't have the ability to have anyone watch her, I have to schedule around my older kids to watch her. Because I don't have anybody to watch after her. When it's my turn to have her, I do what I can to have her with me." – Parent, Lenoir County*
    - *"There is no third shift childcare available in my area. One of the sacrifices I have to make in order to provide income for my family." – Parent, Lenoir County*
    - *"The reason I don't work third shift is because there is not a third shift daycare available in my area." – Parent, Lenoir County*

Transportation to and from facilities is also a burden on families.

- Many find that the drive can take at least 15-30 minutes each way and this is partly due to the way childcare centers are located throughout the county. Parents would like to see a more even distribution so that drive times are shorter.
    - *"I have to go from one side of Greenville to the other side, so it takes time to drive to / from the facility. Without traffic, takes about 15 minutes, but I live off a highway, so I have to go into the town and then come back out to go where I need to go. It can add 20-30 minutes onto my drive." – Parent, Lenoir County*
    - *"There needs to be smarter locations for facilities for daycare for their residents. Or if you have children who have school-age, have children who ride the bus together to the facilities (i.e., large apartment complex within school systems)." – Parent, Lenoir County*

Parents need a way to access information about childcare resources and community activities / events.

- Some did not know about programs until they stumbled upon them when they needed them. And others want a way to better access parent resources.
    - *"There's not google search where you find specifically what you need in your community. A better parent resource list." – Parent, Lenoir County*
    - *"I didn't know the home visiting program existed until I started having issues financially with being a single family. I found out about the program from the doctor during the check-up. He's the one who reached out and connected me with the program. That was a godsend but not the only way to know how to find you. Not a lot of families are willing to talk about personal issues. Should be something outside of just going to doctor to find something." – Parent, Lenoir County*

MADISON COUNTY FINDINGS

Facilitating Organization	Date of Listening Session	Group Type	# of Participants
Madison County Smart Start	November 29th, 2022	Parents / Caregivers	17

Among the group, one parent identified as Multiracial / Multicultural, and the remaining did not identify as part of the BIPOC community. Of the participants in the group, one had a child with special needs, and another was a foster parent.

Quick summary of Madison:

Parents / Caregivers VALUE…	Parents / Caregivers NEED…
• Sense of community • Work / life balance • Universal Pre-K • Well-trained providers and safe places for their children to learn and grow	• More childcare options in the county, including in-home care • Affordable daycare options • Better access to program information and resources

There seems to be a lack of childcare options in the county. Many parents are cobbling together childcare from a variety of sources, even if they primarily stay home with the child.

- Parents struggle to find childcare options in the county. Most do not have a single source for childcare; they either share duties with the other parent, rely on family and friends, find part-time centers, or a combination of all three.
    - *"It feels like we are all cobbling together care out of scraps. The elephant in the room is the economy. " – Parent, Madison County*
    - *"There is a hole in the community for care for children under 3 years old." – Parent, Madison County*
    - *"I provide childcare for other children but am struggling for my own childcare." – Parent / Provider, Madison County*
    - *"I stay home with my son full time during the week. We go to playgroups. His dad watches him on the weekend while I work." – Parent, Madison County*
    - *"My son goes to a program in Barnardsville, my husband and I switch off on the weekends." – Parent, Madison County*
    - *"I work three days a week and when I'm working my son is with his dad. When my partner is working, I watch him." – Parent, Madison County*
    - *"I work part time and when I do the grandparents look after the children for us." – Parent, Madison County*

- Finding childcare options take up a lot of mental space for parents and can impact how much or how often parents can work.
    - *"My wife and I are half and half working and with our six-month-old every day." – Parent, Madison County*
    - *"I work two days a week and I'm with him the rest of the time. My husband is with him when I'm at work." – Parent, Madison County*
    - *"We have a sitter that comes two days a week and a family friend that helps out. I work while she's napping." – Parent, Madison County*
    - *"We have a horrible work life balance. Our kids should be a priority." – Parent, Madison County*
    - *"It's been a struggle needing to work and finding somewhere to send them. I tried finding a nanny, but no one would come to Madison County." – Parent, Madison County*
    - *"The childcare is the single most difficult thing I've dealt with. For children of all ages." – Parent, Madison County*
    - *"My husband and I both work full time. We were both teaching and trying to pass off a 5-month-old. After a 1.5 month wait, we were able to get into a public daycare." – Parent, Madison County*
    - *"We tend to feel isolated sometimes." – Parent, Madison County*

Because there are so few childcare options in the county, transportation time to and from facilities can be burdensome.

- Most parents are driving 20 minutes or more (each way) to access childcare. The additional transportation time adds to the stress of balancing work and family and makes childcare options unattainable for some.
    - *"We are driving 30-45 minutes each way to get our kids to childcare and my child is only there three hours. The resources are not abundant within Madison County." – Parent, Madison County*
    - *"I would love to have a center within 10-15 minutes of my house." – Parent, Madison County*

Parents want daycare options that are affordable.

- Some parents have chosen not to use daycare options because they are unaffordable. Even those who provide full-time childcare themselves would like an affordable option for a mental break from time to time.
    - *"The reason we chose to alternate taking care of our child. What we would spend on childcare was what we made with our paycheck. It's a wash." – Parent, Madison County*
    - *"Some of the nannies want $25-$35 an hour but the experience (like having first aid) wasn't there." – Parent, Madison County*
    - *"I went on care.com but I was so shocked at home expensive it was." – Parent, Madison County*
    - *"I feel very unsupported being a full-time mom. I don't have family here so some affordable help would be nice." – Parent, Madison County*
- And other parents rely on vouchers in order to afford daycare.
    - *"We are super dependent on vouchers. Without them childcare is way out of reach." – Parent, Madison County*
    - *"Daycare is affordable now that I'm on the vouchers but I had to get a part time job to get the vouchers." – Parent, Madison County*
    - *"I feel like all I do is work and we are still trying to figure it all out. If funds could be put in the voucher system to make it more accessible so a parent can just get a break." – Parent, Madison County*
- Many parents mention wanting universal Pre-K, a Head Start program, or placing Pre-K within the public school system.
    - *"There are a couple of models I read about where they put in through the public school system. It makes sense for parents of multiple children." – Parent Madison County*

Parents value providers who are trained in early childhood education and who are trustworthy. For many, this looks like in-home care.

- During the sessions, parents did not mention STAR ratings. Rather, they define quality childcare as one where the providers are well-trained and where they feel their children are safe and well-cared for. Many parents are interested in smaller, in-home providers because they feel their children will be treated more like an individual in those settings and they feel more trustworthy.
    - *"I need a smaller facility where my child's needs can be attended to. Ideally someone affordable that can come into my house so I can get things done." – Parent, Madison County*
    - *"I want the providers to be really trusted." – Parent, Madison County*
    - *"Stay away from the politics and just provide my child with safe and basic care." – Parent, Madison County*
    - *"Outside of this country there are programs for children 0-school aged with providers that are trained. In this country it feels like there is no universal place that people can count on." – Parent, Madison County*
    - *"I wish I had the opportunity to drop my kid off with a friend or other kids they know in a safe home." – Parent, Madison County*
- As a result, parents would like to see more of investment made into training people to become providers, especially as a provider who could operate a childcare program out of their home. Some are even willing to create a co-op with other parents to help with the lack of childcare in the county. Both of these options make parents feel like they are leaving their children in safe, trusted environments.
    - *"Having a co-op with other parents would be amazing." – Parent, Madison County*
    - *"I would love to see the government create a training session for people in the county who want to take on a few kids to get set up as a childcare home." – Parent, Madison County*
    - *"Want the government to put money towards and investing in people who want to start an at home childcare center." – Parent, Madison County*
    - *"I would like to see 'rent-a-grandparent' because we don't have family here. We depend on our neighbor. Getting a relationship with older people in the community so my kid can have an experience with an elder." – Parent, Madison County*
    - *"Childcare, especially for the kids under 3. Places that are local. Perhaps small in-home centers. Something high quality, full days, affordable." – Parent, Madison County*
    - *"Smart Start is a great support system but there must be parents out there who are struggling and want to stay home with their kids and it would be great if they could start an at home program." – Parent, Madison County*

Outside of childcare specifically, parents need more affordable, public spaces which allow them to meet other parents and for children to have safe places to play and learn.

- This creates a stronger sense of community, which parents feel is missing in Madison County. Especially for those who provide childcare themselves, this gives additional resources for children to socialize and exercise and allows for parents to meet ones another and create a social support system.
    - *"If I had a million dollars, I would create an indoor climbing gym for adults and children. I would also have a drop off daycare center with a playground inside. Something cool and community oriented. We could even take voucher. That's my dream." – Parent, Madison County*
    - *"Can we get a YMCA in Madison County! We have no place to drop our kids and work out. That would be a game changer." – Parent, Madison County*
    - *"An affordable public pool with flexible hours that's affordable." – Parent, Madison County*
    - *"A well-equipped, well-staffed, indoor/outdoor place that people with all different schedules could drop off their kids." – Parent, Madison County*

- *"I would love a center with a small area for kids with special needs or infants." – Parent, Madison County*

Parents would like more access to community information and resources.

- Currently, parents find it difficult to access information and often don't know what is available. They would like more communication about events or resources, or a more central location to access this information.
  - *"There are parents not on social media. Would like a booklet with different resources and classes." – Parent, Madison County*
  - *"I've found it difficult to find information about activities within the county. I wish there was a government website that could be updated with events." – Parent, Madison County*
  - *"I find out about events after they happen. How do people find this information? It would be nice to have an email newsletter." – Parent, Madison County*
  - *"Put announcements in with our electric bill so people can know more." – Parent, Madison County*
  - *"You can't just google things around there. It's really hard when you move to this area without family." – Parent, Madison County*

MCDOWELL COUNTY FINDINGS

Facilitating Organization	Date of Listening Session	Group Type	# of Participants
Bear Closet of Marion	February 2, 2023	Parents / Caregivers	12

Nine of the participants identified as white, one identified as Black, and one as Multicultural / Multiracial. Demographic information was not collected for one of the participants.

Quick summary of McDowell:

Providers and parents VALUE…	Providers and parents NEED…
• Alternative school options • Transparency of funding and initiatives for the county's school system • Well-trained and educated providers	• Guidance for accessing support and resources • More funding towards the school system • Non-traditional care hours

Families struggle to find affordable and quality programs for their children.

- The lack of affordable care leaves many families desperate with some unable to put their children in the quality care programs they need.
  - *"A lot of the preschools don't have vouchers. A lot of parents have to work but they can't afford to send them. $700 a week is pricey. My mortgage is $850." - Parent, McDowell County*
  - *"Why would I work full-time to get all my money to daycare? I'll just stay home with my child and be broke." - Parent, McDowell County*
  - *"It's hard to give them the best when you're struggling to make ends meet." - Parent, McDowell County*
- Parents see the value in alternative and specialty schools but the lack of options in the county creates barriers from getting their children enrolled in them.
  - *"We need an alternative preschool for kids in our community. I will be leaving this county to take my child to Montessori school." - Parent, McDowell County*
  - *"I would like Montessori school, but they don't have it in this area, and they are very expensive." - Parent, McDowell County*

- *“I wish this county had a Montessori school. I plan to drive my son to another county for Montessori school." - Parent, McDowell County*
- *“I pay $5400 a year per kid for private school. To get my kids what I think is a better education." - Parent, McDowell County*
- *"There is no resource for private school. It's all out of pocket." - Parent, McDowell County*

Parents and providers see the gaps in the amount of funding and resources available in McDowell County compared to the bigger counties around them.

- People in the county are frustrated and feel overlooked. They notice the resources and more quality school systems in counties around them and want law officials to invest in those opportunities for their children as well.
  - *“It makes you angry when you see all the communities around you have access to what you don't." - Parent, McDowell County*
  - *“Just because we aren't massive doesn't mean our children shouldn't have access to the same education that bigger cities do." - Parent, McDowell County*
  - *"There are a lot of studies that show the preschool age schooling sets you up for life in general. We aren't setting up our community for a better foot forward." - Parent, McDowell County*
  - *“It's incredibly sad to live in an area that feels forgotten. I would try and pay a little more attention to the small counties. There are families here that matter.” - Parent, McDowell County*
  - *"If you want people in our community to give back to society and there to be less crime it isn't about one new program. This whole area has been neglected and left to rot." - Parent, McDowell County*
  - *"I've heard so many people who say, ‘this sucks’ so they just move away.” - Parent, McDowell County*
- The small amount of funding put into schools leaves little room for growth and improvement of the education system in McDowell. This creates burnout for providers and parents feeling a lack of quality education for their children. There is just one Head Start program and four private program to service 50,000 residents.
  - *"There’s not enough quality educators in the classroom." - Parent, McDowell County*
  - *"I worry that even if I'm out for once, my classroom won't be cared for. There aren't enough subs." - Provider, McDowell County*
  - *"Most public-school workers are so underpaid that they are burned out. I have a degree and there are people at McDonalds making more money than I do." - Provider, McDowell County*
  - *“They say our county pays low and then we have lower quality. You can't grow the quality of the system without better pay. It's a catch-22." - Parent, McDowell County*
  - *“[We need] enough staff to make every child feel like they are cared for. Not that their basic needs are met but that they are cared for." - Provider, McDowell County*
  - *“In any circumstance that you work with children, you aren't doing it for the pay. I would like to have a better pay but I'm there for the children.” - Provider, McDowell County*
  - *"More pay would make us feel like real people." - Provider, McDowell County*
  - *"The internet needs to be improved. The Wi-Fi is not reliable, and students are missing out on the opportunity to learn." - Parent, McDowell County*

Families living in the county want transparency and awareness of the government’s action plan for their community. They want to be involved and have their voices heard.

- Families feel desperate to have their voices heard but get discouraged from the lack of action from the government.
  - *“The saddest part of this area is you just get to play a giant game of telephone. You call the school system, and they send you to another office." - Parent, McDowell County*

- *"Our school system is not teaching people how the government works to make change in our area." - Parent, McDowell County*
- *"They say, 'have a voice and make your opinion known' and then you call them, and they tell you you've called the wrong people." - Parent, McDowell County*
- *"Most of the people in our area are sick and tired of trying to affect change here because it feels like a giant mountain to overcome" - Parent, McDowell County*
- *"I feel like the school system doesn't want you to call and get change" - Parent, McDowell County*

- Parents want to see action and change from the local government starting with transparency on where funding goes.
  - *"People are growing up in a school system that doesn't feed them lunch. It's a broken system." - Parent, McDowell County*
  - *"I would meet with people in Wake County and see how they are able to create budgets for such large populations and they could teach us how to run our town." - Parent, McDowell County*
  - *"Our funding is being misused on every level. Why is our county so broken?" - Parent, McDowell County*
  - *"I would sell all the new buildings and put the money back into the school system." - Parent, McDowell County*

Parents and teachers want more direct guidance on where they can access support and resources.

- Despite having resources available, families have trouble navigating them. Having a more organized and streamlined approach to sharing resources would take the burden off teachers to assist families in finding them.
  - *"My son is 17 months old. I haven't signed him up for preschool yet. I wish there were more resources and access to programs." - Parent, McDowell County*
  - *"Letting people know what their options are. We don't have anyone to tell us." - Parent, McDowell County*
  - *"I get asked all the time what resources there are, and I have to educate." - Provider, McDowell County*
  - *"The DHSS website is very difficult to navigate, even as a teacher." - Provider, McDowell County*
  - *"I can't do all the online researching. There's too much information. I talk to the person at the DSS office." - Parent, McDowell County*

Families need flexibility and nontraditional hours to align with their work schedules. They struggle to find time in the day to provide and care for their children.

- Parents struggle to drop off and pick up their children on time with the current hours of care. Although there are after-school programs available, several are out of budget for families.
  - *"We need more programs for before and after school for parents who can't afford $100 a week at the YMCA to be able to finish their work schedule." - Parent, McDowell County*
  - *"We really need to get something in here for kids. Flexibility of hours and more teachers and teacher's assistants" - Parent, McDowell County*
  - *"I pay $10 a day for 15 minutes of daycare for after school care because I don't get off work on time." - Parent, McDowell County*

MECKLENBURG COUNTY FINDINGS

Facilitating Organization	Date of Listening Session	Group Type	# of Participants
Charlotte Bilingual Preschool	February 21st, 2022	Parents / Caregivers	7
Charlotte Bilingual Preschool	February 23rd, 2022	Parents / Caregivers	8
BCDI Charlotte	February 24th, 2022	Parents / Caregivers & Providers	3
BCDI Charlotte	February 25th, 2022	Parents / Caregivers & Providers	3

In the session conducted by Charlotte Bilingual Preschool, all parents identified as Hispanic / Latinx and were Spanish-speaking. In the sessions conducted by BCDI, each group consisted of two parents and one provider. All participants identified as Black / African American.

Quick summary of Mecklenburg:

Providers & Parents / Caregivers VALUE…	Providers & Parents/ Caregivers NEED…
• Providers who value, respect, and nurture children (especially true for those of Hispanic origin) • Flexible and accessible childcare options • A community that works together to educate and nurture the child • Parent resources • Affordable childcare that is also QUALITY childcare	• More affordable childcare options or more financial assistance for childcare • Childcare options with longer hours or more equitably spaced across the county • Centralized location with resources and information for parents to access • Strong correlation between affordable childcare options that also provide a nurturing and supportive environment

Trust in the provider is one of the key factors in parents deciding whether to use a childcare provider or if they provide childcare themselves.

- Some families, especially those from the Hispanic community, have heard horror stories about the way children are treated and so provide their own childcare to protect their children from those situations. Some parents like the ability to spend time with their child and feel they are providing an educational foundation for them. And some families from black and brown communities also worry about how their child may be treated by providers or others in the classroom.
    - *"I have my mother with me. And I trust her very much. It is the best option I have. I have heard stories of people dropping their children off at daycares and being treated badly." – Hispanic Parent, Mecklenburg County*
    - *"I don't work. With my oldest child, I worked and it was difficult. Not working now allows me to take advantage of different opportunities in the community." – Hispanic Parent, Mecklenburg County*
    - *"I would want to know what is a [center's] approach to care and education? What do they do to ensure that kids get a good education?" – Hispanic Parent, Mecklenburg County*
    - *"I would like to look into daycares or childcare centers more, but I would really like to know that they offer good security." – Hispanic Parent, Mecklenburg County*
    - *"I have bad experiences leaving my children. When she started to walk and learn new things she didn't have a good experience - it was traumatic. What the government can do is provide classes for mothers at a low cost to be able to take care of their kids as well as possible and maybe help other mothers. Can we treat stay-at-home parenting as a profession, where we train parents to do it and do it well and make sure their children are learning? My son is learning so much and now that I get to, I*

am getting my certificate to be a teacher assistant for young children and I like kids so I can learn how to care for children and maybe work as a preschool teacher in the future." – Hispanic Parent, Mecklenburg County

- *"Security is most important. I want him to be somewhere he feels protected and safe. We hear about a lot of violence - physical and verbal / emotional. It is so important to work on security for kids." – Hispanic Parent, Mecklenburg County*
- *"Although this country is very safe, it is very unsafe as well. For preschool, I looked at 5, 6, 7 different schools and I wanted to make sure they were going to learn. It is difficult to be here as an immigrant and only have your husband working, but it is worth to provide the very best for them. When I put my child in CltBP it was because I had friends whose children were there as well." – Hispanic Parent, Mecklenburg County*

- Trust means that parents feel that their child is safe. And that providers are well-trained, love children and are passionate about what they do, and provide educational, emotional, and social support and opportunities for their child. And those who have found a childcare which they trust are willing to drive longer distances for that care.
  - *"I haven't felt enough trust to leave my children in a daycare. There are people who sometimes don't have the love or the preparation. It would be better to leave them somewhere where the teachers love what they do." – Hispanic Parent, Mecklenburg County*
  - *"It always makes me afraid to leave my kids with other people, but I don't know if that is going to be the best thing for them. And you never know if the care providers are going to have the same patience, especially when your kids can be difficult. If I were looking for a daycare, I would want to see how the kids are doing. I want to know that my kids like it and are safe there." – Hispanic Parent, Mecklenburg County*
  - *"We didn't use childcare services before because of the fear of how they would treat our kids. I would want to be there with them to see what happened. Now both my husband and I have to work. I want to know more about the people that are going to take care of the kids." – Hispanic Parent, Mecklenburg County*
  - *"In looking for a school, what do you look for – I want to know the teacher and know that they are well trained and well prepared to take care of the kids and teach the kids. And I need to feel sure that my child will be safe at the center or at least well taken care of. Because things can always happen, but that they will be there to take care of them." – Hispanic Parent, Mecklenburg County*
  - *"There are options that are close to home for me. His school now is 20 mins away, it's not close. We take him there instead of somewhere closer because of the relationships we've built there. I'm willing to travel however far for him to feel comfortable." – Parent, Mecklenburg County*
- And trust means having well-staffed and well-funded childcare providers.
  - *"The program I used to use had tutoring, they even practiced dances. This current one seems understaffed. My child was being harassed, I had to follow up on it." – Parent, Mecklenburg County*
  - *"I don't have to worry about paying the bills or paying staff, but I can see it becoming a worry. What we make is based on the number of children we see. If one family moves, that could be 3 kids we lose." – Provider, Mecklenburg County*

While trust is the primary filter that parents use to decide on childcare, or whether they will use an outside provider or not, affordability is also an important input into the equation.

- Some parents have opted not to work – and to provide their own childcare – because the cost of childcare is too high and would negate any earnings.
  - *"I know that if I worked and left my child in a center, almost all the money I made would go to the daycare. And I want to be able to raise my kids how I want to raise them, so I like being able to be*

home with them. If the government could make the cost more accessible that would make it more possible." – Hispanic Parent, Mecklenburg County

- *"Give better accessibility to programs. All of the programs for kids his age are very expensive or have a long wait list. Sometimes you have to wait 5-6 months." – Hispanic Parent, Mecklenburg County*

- Others find that the cost of childcare places undue financial strain upon the family.
  - *"I look at parent's payment towards tuition. My job is to meet their financial demand. I notice most of my parents get a new vehicle when their child is getting ready to leave preschool, they can finally afford that second car. They sacrifice a lot." – Provider, Mecklenburg County*
  - *"The costs are a barrier so addressing that would help. I have a full-time job and I had to pay half of what I made for childcare." – Hispanic Parent, Mecklenburg County*
- Families would like to see more financial assistance for childcare, including making it free for all families and additional resources for providers, as this would help create equity for all children entering school.
  - *"The government should help the centers and providers so that they can add staff and offer more services. They could have funding to help parents too. All kids should be on the same playing field." – Provider, Mecklenburg County*
  - *"I think there should be assistance for all levels of school regardless of income level, not just for those with demonstrated need. The distribution of resources needs to be better." – Provider, Mecklenburg County*

Having childcare options that offered longer hours would help parents with job opportunities.

- Some parents have had to forgo childcare options that they really wanted because the hours weren't amenable to the needs that the family had. Parents really appreciate childcare options that provide longer hours.
  - *"He is at that stage where it is so important for him to play with others and learn, but the program is only four hours, and I couldn't do that and work. For me, it would be better if it were from 8am-2pm so that I could work for 6 hours. I know there are probably other programs that have hours that would work, but they are expensive. If there could be a longer program or a program with after-school options." – Hispanic Parent, Mecklenburg County*
  - *"The 3-year-old classroom at CltBP were incredible for my daughter, but I wish they were a little longer. That would be much better." – Hispanic Parent, Mecklenburg County*
  - *"For our center, it's open 6:30am-6:30pm which works for our work schedules. It's convenient." – Parent, Mecklenburg County*

Parents also want childcare options that are closer to where this live / work to reduce the time it takes to get to and from the providers.

- When deciding on childcare – or whether to use childcare, parents must balance trust and affordability with distance.
  - *"We used to go to a program at a church that was just 3 hours for one day. And it was 20 minutes away, which was too far for only 3 hours, and it was more expensive than a 5-day program that I later found." – Hispanic Parent, Mecklenburg County*
  - *"My son goes to a preschool at a church. I would take him to CltBP but we are too far away." – Hispanic Parent, Mecklenburg County*
  - *"There should be centers in every area that are of high quality and safe." – Hispanic Parent, Mecklenburg County*

Parents expect childcare centers to provide a solid academic, social, and emotional education for their children. In addition, they are hungry to further their own education and look to centers and other resources to provide that information.

- Childcare is more than a babysitting service: it is expected to be a nurturing environment where children are learning the foundational skills that will help them in school and beyond.
    - *"I used to care more about the cleanliness of it and the academic aspects, now I wish I focused more on the emotional piece, I'm still dealing with these issues." – Parent, Mecklenburg County*
    - *"My kid is 4years old. He goes to a preschool program. They have a creative curriculum; we do yoga and Zumba. They get homework packets. I like having open communication with the teachers about what they're learning. He's around other kids like him. You don't want them singled out, as a young black kid. I think this program will benefit him when it comes time to transition to actually going to school, instead of if he was just sitting around. He goes every day." – Parent, Mecklenburg County*
    - *"My child started out speaking only English and that was an issue because we only speak Spanish. In this program (ParentChild+), she has improved her home language a lot and has also improved in other areas like social-emotional development." – Hispanic Parent, Mecklenburg County*
- Parents are also looking for resources that can help them become a better parent, which connect them with resources for children with special needs or with other community resources.
    - *"My hope is that I am working with my daughter on her tantrums. The classes that we* take *together through ParentChild+ have been the best way for me to work with her on those tantrums. I am learning different ways to ask her to do things and get the response that I want." – Hispanic Parent, Mecklenburg County*
    - *"I have really liked that CltBP that programs aren´t only for the kids but that motivate parents to really be part of their children´s education. Sometimes in this country, parents get so busy with work that they don´t get involved in their kids' development. I would say that there should be more programs where parents engage and learn with their children. My goal is that my children finish college and be professionals. As Hispanics, our children have these rights to achieve those goals as well." – Hispanic Parent, Mecklenburg County*
    - *"Teach parents how important it is to be involved in the education of their children. I am more involved than ever now because of what I have learned at CltBP and it has changed the way I look at my role of playing and spending time with my kids. It creates a strong connection between child and parent and it is so important. As a community, we should involve parents and make sure they can engage effectively." – Hispanic Parent, Mecklenburg County*
    - *"From the beginning, we wanted to educate ourselves and prepare ourselves to raise children. We are always looking for more information to guide us. We develop in one way, but maybe there wasn't all of the information, so we look for the best information that helps us. And every child is different and we learn from each experience." – Hispanic Parent, Mecklenburg County*
- However, parents don't know where to look for this information and wish there was a centralized location to access resources and information.
    - *"There's a huge disconnect, speaking as a provider. There isn't always the right family support. There are so many organizations, but nothing connects. Parents don't know how to connect the dots. It's not that they don't care, they just don't know." – Provider, Mecklenburg County*
    - *"There are not enough resources for moms with physical disabilities. I started in a wheelchair; I have a walker now. I had to have people come out to my house, and it was different people every time. It's too personal, there needs to be more consistency. In my situation, I didn't qualify for a program. I had an injury, my income was well below what I used to make. I had no idea where to look for services, I didn't have a case manager." – Parent, Mecklenburg County*
    - *"Provide more information about daycares. I almost never hear about daycares. It feels like programs don´t exist that make it easier to pay for daycare." – Hispanic Parent, Mecklenburg County*

- *"There should be a one stop shop for all of the possible services that are available, like a resource pool." – Parent, Mecklenburg County*
- *"They need to get the information out to the public. Put it on the city bus or something." – Parent, Mecklenburg County*
- *"If you are already getting services, then that's great. But if not, then you don't know where to start." – Parent, Mecklenburg County*
- *"Families don't always know about the proper resources, especially when they have a special needs child. They don't know where to go or what to do." – Parent, Mecklenburg County*

Parents believe there is discrimination in the childcare system based on cost and quality of childcare.

- They see more affordable options as not always correlating to higher quality, which discriminates against providing quality care to those who cannot afford it.
  - *"Sometimes I have heard that family daycares are more affordable, but I have entered and I would never leave my child there – there are too many kids for the teachers and the teachers don´t have the training to do it well. I know the government gives a lot of financial support for families to access daycare. There are many families who leave their kids somewhere because they have to and they leave them at the cheapest possible place, but the quality is low. So not just giving support to put kids in daycare but giving enough financial support to put them in a high-quality place." – Hispanic Parent, Mecklenburg County*
  - *"As immigrants, we don't have as much access to childcare because in many cases, the children have to have some type of health insurance. For others the family needs to be at a certain economic status to be able to pay for the services. Also, in many cases they only offer care during standard work hours, not for alternative schedules. Help with a subsidy or paying the center so that immigrants can receive services would be really helpful." – Hispanic Parent, Mecklenburg County*
- And some parents and providers don't believe that programs cater specifically to people of color or underrepresented / underserved populations or different cultures.
  - *"My priority was finding a program for young, black men. These programs weren't thinking about me and my situation. For the schools, it's all about the title 1 money, not the kids themselves." – Parent, Mecklenburg County*
  - *"They should focus on more activities, emphasizing cultural resources for children. I wish we had access to the materials that would benefit the kids. We need books, storytellers, people that play instruments. We need to introduce our culture first, then introduce them to others." – Provider, Mecklenburg County*

Having a village of family and friends to help raise a child and provide children emotional and academic support is crucial to parents and caregivers.

- This is especially important in the Hispanic community who often don't have a support system in the area. They often don't know where to turn for additional support or help when it's needed. And if they do have family in the area, they are usually the ones parents turn to first for help, especially if they are not using an outside provider.
  - *"I don't have family here, but my husband has siblings here. We would use family members to help provide support." – Hispanic Parent, Mecklenburg County*
  - *"We don't have family here. I don't know who I would leave them with if we really had to leave them with someone." – Hispanic Parent, Mecklenburg County*
  - *"I depend a lot on babysitting. If something comes up, I can call the babysitter. We don't know many people here other than the babysitter. Just one friend." – Hispanic Parent, Mecklenburg County*

NEW HANOVER COUNTY FINDINGS

Facilitating Organization	Date of Listening Session	Group Type	# of Participants
New Hanover County CAN Hub (Resiliency Task Force)	August 23rd, 2022	Parents / Caregivers	3
New Hanover County CAN Hub (Resiliency Task Force)	August 24th, 2022	Providers	9

Among parents, one identified as Black / African American and two did not identify as BIPOC.
Among providers, two identified as Black / African American and seven did not identify as BIPOC.

Quick summary of New Hanover:

Providers and parents VALUE…	Providers and parents NEED…
• Trust. And the provider relationship and the level of care provided to child is biggest indicator of trust • Affordable and well-staffed facilities • Shorter wait lists • Diversity and representation in childcare setting	• Easy access to childcare resources • More funds for staffing and retention • Raising the income threshold for voucher qualification • Free Pre-K for all children

The relationship between parents / child and the provider defines quality childcare.

- Parents want their children to be in an environment where children are learning and growing, and not just being babysat. A proxy for this positive environment is loving and passionate teachers.
  - *"You're leaving your kid there and you need to be able to trust them [the providers]. Knowing that my child is learning and not just being there but are learning every day." – Parent, New Hanover*
- A trusting relationship with the provider means that parents know their child is safe and in loving hands.
  - *"If my babies are going to be with you, you better believe I'm going to know you. It's important with my kids are going to be with someone, I need to know who the person is. And I want them to be on the parenting team with us. We like to have our providers a part of our life in some capacity." – Parent, New Hanover*
  - *"Parents want their childcare to be a safe place. And tell people where they are going and feel comfortable sharing that. Parents want to know that their child attends a place that is known for being positive and safe." – Provider, New Hanover*
- Providers, themselves, are passionate about what they do and love caring for children and their parents. However, they don't always feel that parents realize or appreciate the impact providers have on the children they care for.
  - *"You've got to love what you do in this business. That shows so much with everyone involved in this business. That's what's going to preserve and make everyone continue doing it. Because we know we're doing it for the future." – Provider, New Hanover*
  - *"I have seen the change in the public's perception in how important we are. People in the pandemic have realized how essential we are and how valuable we are. We are coming up on running out of government funding and that will impact our industry across the board in NC. That's my biggest concern in our community. Feel we were supported during the pandemic and hope that support continues because without it we'll be in a lot of trouble." – Provider, New Hanover*
  - *"I wish parents were aware of what we actually do and how helpful it is for children to be in a setting like ours or a preschool setting." – Provider, New Hanover*

For these parents, in-home care is preferred because there is a higher level of trust, given the close relationship they have with the in-home provider.

- Parents like the sense of community, the relationships they build with the provider and other parents, and the ability to feel closer to what their child is learning that in-home care provides.
- However, parents struggle to find in-home providers who have availability in the county, and often face long wait lists. Parents attribute the shortage of in-home providers to stigmatization and, therefore, lack of resources to support providers who want to open in-home childcare.
- They would like to see the government support in-home providers in a more meaningful way so that parents have the choice of in-home care. And in-home providers need additional support, especially when they are the only ones providing care.
    - *"I'd like to see something that's close to incentivizing small daycares in a way that minimizes liability. When I hear people say I couldn't do this, it's terrifying. If there is a way that the government is involved that provides licensure, resources, and protections so people have more options to daycares." – Parent, New Hanover*
    - *"I think childcare gets shadowed or stigmatized about the types of folks who should or could do childcare and then you don't have a large group of people who pursue that track. And the ones that do don't have a lot of additional resources to get through their learning and open up an environment for learning. There are people with an incredible desire to serve as a provider but not a ton of support to do that well. I think there is a lot from a government standpoint to support people like that. Could we make it extremely accessible for lots of folks to get an education on how to support kids with early learning? They are not doing it for the money; they are doing it because they love children and it's such a gift as a parent to have someone who cares so much for our kids." – Parent, New Hanover*
    - *"I love having the flexibility of providing care in my home. But if I have things to do, like go to the dentist, I don't have anyone to help me. I don't think people realize how hard it is to do childcare and to do it alone. I don't complain because it's a passion. To know I am making a difference with small minds. The struggle is juggling a variety of needs for different ages and not being able to meet the needs for yourself." – In-home Provider, New Hanover*

One of the biggest struggles among providers is staffing shortages which directly impact availability of childcare in the county and impacts the kind of care children receive. Lack of funding and pay for teachers is the reason for the shortages.

- Facilities can't find the kind of staff needed: whether it's the right kind of person who is also passionate about caring for kids, or a person with the adequate training or education to provide care.
    - *"Having shorter wait times is because of staffing. I have nine classrooms in my buildings and only four of them are open because of staffing." – Provider, New Hanover*
    - *"I love seeing my kids develop and doing things they never done before and thinking things they never have before. The hardest part I feel is not getting enough for the staff. They need more. They deserve more, but I can't get it." – Director, New Hanover*
- Staffing shortages impact the long waitlist times that parents face and facilities want to make sure they hire the right people because reputation, reliability, and relationships with parents are paramount to running a good facility.
- Some worry about the grant funding that will run out in April. Without that funding, facilities are not able to continue to survive and hire teachers, which spells a crisis for the state in not being about to hire adequate staff.
    - *"I love my role as Director because I get to play with all the kids. But the stress of this job is something I didn't anticipate in terms of teacher retention. That's my biggest challenge. The COVID money has helped but we are hurting. The teacher turnover rate is a constant stress. Hiring new qualified*

teachers, who take this seriously and is their passion. Those people are hard to find, and we can't afford them." – Director, New Hanover

- The staffing shortages and low pay create stress, which then impact the kind of care that providers give. And some feel that children can sense that stress, which impacts their mental well-being and behavior.
    - *"If a teacher is feeling appreciated and valued, they come to work with a different attitude, and it affects the entire room. It affects the children's well-being. If there is a behavior problem, it's usually something to do with the staff. To create a workplace that appreciates you and values you for what you do makes a world of difference. It trickles from the top down and back up again. It creates an overall healthy environment for everyone." – Provider, New Hanover*
    - *"If our needs were made, everyone would be happy and we would retain staff. People would have peace of mind and the atmosphere will be better. If people are stressed - either parents or teachers - children absorb that and their behavior mirrors their environment around them." – Provider, New Hanover*

Affordability of childcare impacts parents' career decisions.

- Childcare makes up a significant portion of families' budgets and parents often weigh career or job decisions in the context of childcare cost and affordability.
    - *"It's not super affordable. From an income standpoint, we do fine but we have to be aware of where every dollar is going. It certainly helps that I work part time and our kids only go to school part time. But it's a huge expense for us and we take that into consideration each month." – Parent, New Hanover*
    - *"The pressure I feel is do I stay with something I love or do I try to get a high-paying job. It's less of the decision of if I work or not, but what kind of job I get." – Parent, New Hanover*
- Those with family nearby or who have a dual income have more flexibility.
    - *"With the third child coming, I was looking at other part time jobs to see if I could afford childcare. We do have my parents nearby which is helpful and a wonderful neighbor who we trust. The other thing is that the husband works full time from home, so it gives us flexibility." – Parent, New Hanover*
- Providers also understand the impact of childcare costs on family budgets. And they often must balance the needs of facility staffing with childcare affordability. There are many people in the county sit just above the threshold to qualify for vouchers, and they feel the impact of childcare costs even more.
    - *"It's not just whether or not parents can afford it. But people who can afford it are still on a budget and still struggling based on their lifestyle and they expect to get their money's worth." – Provider, New Hanover*
    - *"When centers raise the price, that impacts the private pay parents. And they can't all afford that. I feel that raising tuition prices every time you need more money is not the answer," – Provider, New Hanover*
    - *"Half of the families are private pay and I feel bad when there is a rate increase because a lot of families are just above the threshold where they don't qualify for any service. So, it's a struggle for families these days." – Provider, New Hanover*

Diversity and representation are important to parents and children.

- Having providers who look like the child is important to families, especially those who are historically under-represented. Otherwise, parents feel that their children may be unfairly treated, which leads to feelings of mistrust.
    - *"Sometimes there is an assumption in the community that just because I'm black then I can't afford something, or I need supplementing. At school, I had a teacher chastise my kid and she treated him very poorly and it stood out to me that he's one of two black kids in the class, so it was important for*

me to advocate on his behalf. Feels good to have a provider now who is also black and that we both can identify with." – Parent, New Hanover

- Among those parents who are not from under-represented communities, they want their children to be around children who do not look like them, to help them build genuine relationships and to learn new perspectives. Therefore, having lack of diversity in the classroom is a concern for parents.
    - *"At our old school, she was the only white kid, which we thought was special and helpful as we shaped how we viewed the world and being part of a community. With our current preschool, our biggest hang-up is that it's predominantly white, which is really hard. We want our kids to have real friends who look different than she does. I have missed the diverse environment to learn genuine relationships." – Parent, New Hanover*

Parents do not always know how to access childcare resources.

- Parents often do not know where to look for childcare information and resort to doing online research themselves. The process of finding childcare is often anxiety-ridden already, and not having clear direction or resources adds to the anxiety. Parents wish there was a centralized place to help them sort through the information and to provider direction on what to look for.
    - *"I wish I knew how important it was to be proactive. I didn't know what I should be thinking about and how the different facilities all measure up compared to one another. I went online to get agency reports and did my own thing. But would have been nice to have some of those things and guidance during pregnancy and direction for what to check out and resources there were. Knowing that wait lists were a year long, knowing about Head Start, would have helped manage my anxiety." – Parent, New Hanover*
    - *"I worked with Head Start in another state so had a good idea of what the system looked like. And my job was to help find placements for kids, so I know the struggle and knew there weren't enough childcare sites available. Moving to a new community [New Hanover County], I didn't know anything about the community and didn't even know where to go to ask a question." – Parent, New Hanover*
- Providers also see that parents aren't aware of the resources available to them until they enter the childcare setting. Therefore, providers see part of their role as connecting parents with resources so children can get the support they need to thrive.
    - *"Many parents are unaware of services and often the preschool setting is the first place where they are hearing that something is atypically developing, and a lot of kids have seen their pediatrician virtually so lots of things are falling through the gaps." – Provider, New Hanover*
    - *"Ever since COVID children are developing in a different way - potty training coming later, language skills are coming in later. Some parents aren't aware this is happening. Trying to help parents get services is important but parents aren't even aware of the services out there and it's important we get that out to them." – Provider, New Hanover*
    - *"A lot of our families don't have family support or are single moms. They don't have health resources, can't get to the doctors. They don't even have time or the inclination to fill out forms to get their child the next bit of help they could get." – Provider, New Hanover*

Parents and providers alike would like to see NC provide more funding and support for ECE.

- Parents would like to see childcare offered free of charge to all children up to school age.
    - *"So, from an equitable standpoint, maybe we could bridge the gap on what's income based. There is a large majority that sit above the income guidelines but also strapped when paying so much out for childcare. Maybe bring that guideline up a bit. The pre-school education is a privilege that we can pay for. It would be incredible to think they could go to preschool, and it wouldn't cost our family what it does." – Parent, New Hanover*

- Providers would like more fundings to pay and retain teachers (i.e., providing more robust benefits, childcare for teachers), which would help with morale and, ultimately, better care for children.
    - *"Childcare should be offered to all 3–4-year-olds free of charge. Should be part of the school system." – Provider, New Hanover*
    - *"If the government finds the funds to support our industry, then we will be open and be able to meet the needs of all families. Not having classrooms open is a common theme. We can't do our jobs of having fully opened classrooms if we don't have the workforce to man them. We can't get the workforce without the funds. We were already at crisis level for staffing, but then if that [COVID grant] money disappears, we're going to hit a new crisis level. And it's going to get the attention of the state.* ***But we have the chance to have our voices heard right now. Someone needs to have these conversations, and someone needs to hear it.****" – Provider, New Hanover*

PITT COUNTY FINDINGS

Facilitating Organization	Date of Listening Session	Group Type	# of Participants
AMEXCAN	August 6th, 2022	Parents / Caregivers	5

All parents in the group identified as Hispanic. Groups were conducted in Spanish and translated to English. Analysis took place on the English transcripts and quotes below are the English translations.

Quick summary of Pitt:

Parents VALUE…	Parents NEED…
• Hispanic traditions and Spanish language • Ability for children to pursue their education and dreams • Knowing their children are in the care of well-trained providers who value and love them • Ability to access resources for the parent and children who need them	• Resources in Spanish and knowing where and how to access resources and information • More affordable childcare options and subsidies that consider expenses of large families • Providers who value their children, are trained in special needs, and who honor different culture and customs

Trust is the primary driver of childcare choice.

- Some parents choose to keep their children at home because they don't have a strong relationship with the person looking after their child. They feel the provider is not able to provide the same level of care, attention, and oversight as parents can. There is also a sense of pride of being able to care for their children themselves.
    - *"You do not often do not know the person that will look after them. You do not know if they are looking after them well. They do not give them what you send them to eat. My middle daughter is more of a rebel, and it was caused by the care she received outside. It is important to look after your children because you know what they need and what they like, and you give them attention to what they want and need. When you use childcare, they do not always have attention." – Parent, Pitt County*
    - *"For me, I am proud to have brought them up, although we did not have much money. I am proud of having looked after them. I did not have to work, so I looked after my children, and I am proud of it. I have a good daughter and a good son." – Parent, Pitt County*

- Others use an outside provider because they are working and need childcare resources. But they did research to find a facility where they would feel comfortable leaving their child. This is especially true for those parents of children with special needs.
    - *"It is a question of knowing the type of nurseries available because there are many types. I did some research on the ones close to me to see which one I thought was better for me. Used nursery for 12 years. Drove to and from. For me, they fulfilled my expectations. They had a play area. They did not speak my language, but we understood each other. They were patient with me, and my child was well there. I feel they were fair because it was based on my earnings, and since I did not work many hours, they did not charge me much. I feel that since my child is autistic, I think he was in the right place because they treated him according to his needs, and he learned well. I think there was an impact because they taught him to go to the bathroom, which, although I taught him as I knew, I do not think we had the education to teach him according to his needs." – Parent of child with autism, Pitt County*
    - *"We need to take our time and do some research. The resources are available. There are places where you can take them, and they adapt to our schedules. It is just a question of getting information and finding the best place for our children." – Parent, Pitt County*
    - *"You have to select the person with whom you leave your children because they can be good or bad." – Pitt County*

Parents also define quality childcare as one with well-trained providers, one where providers speak the same language / value culture and customs, and ability to provide specialized services to children who need it.

- Parents want their children to learn new things and want providers to be able to teach them.
    - *"With our children, it is their expression and learning. If you see they are learning new things or things you did not know how to explain, how to help them with their needs? So, you see that it is a place that prioritizes your child, and they are teaching them in a way you cannot do." – Parent, Pitt County*
    - *"For me, any childcare service in the United States is good compared to our country. They are people that have been trained for this. There are exceptions, but I feel they are better prepared than in our country." – Parent, Pitt County*
    - *"For me, a well-trained provider is if they have patience with the child, that they understand them." – Parent, Pitt County*
    - *"Bad quality would be if they do not give them the appropriate attention. For example, if they do not change the babies when they need it. I know that in some situations, they let them cry more than necessary. That type of thing." – Parent, Pitt County*
- Parents want to be able to communicate with providers about their children and be able to access resources in Spanish, so they are well-informed. They also want a provider to honor different culture and customs, not just the Hispanic culture.
    - *"We need more bilingual people, because some children are used to living with their families and they are a bit shy. They do not want to participate because they do not know what they are doing." – Parent, Pitt County*
    - *"If teachers were qualified in different cultures, I think learning would be easier for children, because they would somehow feel identified and they would learn even many more things, because it would be more diverse. It would not be just what there is here, but they would be bringing things from other countries, not necessarily from ours. Different languages, not only Spanish." – Parent, Pitt County*
- Often, parents do not know where to go for additional help with children who have special needs. Being able to access that information, especially through the provider, is important.
    - *"If they need professional help, you need to find it. I think that, they should eat, play, run, and be happy, but if they need professional help, you need to look for it." – Parent, Pitt County*

While affordability of childcare options wasn't a main driver for keeping a child at home, it is a contributing factor.

- Parents are often juggling childcare expenses with other household expenses like electricity, water, and rent. These are things they feel the government does not account for when deciding the amount of childcare subsidy. This is especially a hardship for larger families, who have more expenses. It wasn't clear from the transcripts how many parents were using vouchers.
    - *"Some families have a good salary, but they do not have enough to pay for certain things, but [the government] does not see this." – Parent, Pitt County*
    - *"I think it is not fair sometimes because sometimes we earn a lot, but that is not enough and we do not get any help. We do not keep the whole salary because we have expenses: food, water, electricity, etc." – Parent, Pitt County*
    - *"Some places only pay attention to how much you earn and not how much you spend and what is left for you. They might say, 'Since you earn a lot, we will charge you this, and if you earn a little we will charge you what you earn.'" – Parent, Pitt County*
    - *"If you are paid a certain amount, they should know that a certain amount is taken from you. However, they always consider the first amount, but that is not true, because they are not considering what is already taken from you." – Parent Pitt County [interpreted as gross versus net income]*

Several have had positive experiences with The Boys and Girls Club and point to that as a model for how childcare could look in the county.

- The Boys and Girls Club is affordable and doesn't require documentation, which means it is open to all. It also acts as a resource of homework / furthering education and exposes children to different activities and experiences. It also provides transportation to and from school, which is helpful for parents, and is a safe place where children can speak Spanish. It also provides additional resources and training for parents.
    - *"In the Boys and Girls Club, I have never heard that documents are required." – Parent, Pitt County*
    - *"In Boys and Girls, they also go from an early age, from 5 until teens. They have separate rooms. They are divided by age and sometimes they also teach language. They have activities during the day. They have their own timetable. Sometimes they go out, to the gym, or with the computer. Sometimes they also have a classroom where they have a specific art room, they also speak in Spanish, they learn different things and parents have also been given lessons outside children hours." – Parent, Pitt County*
    - *"This program is outside school hours. Parents can leave children in school and from school, they take them there. It is an additional service outside school hours." – Parent, Pitt County*
    - *"It is accessible because the last time it was $120 per year. For the whole year. It is paid in February, and you pay again the next February, but this is everything after school hours. I think they have a good timetable, because before they closed at 7pm. I think it is at 6 now." – Parent, Pitt County*

Parents often do not know where to access information and resources about childcare options and parenting resources.

- Some parents recognize that it takes intention on the parents' part to find these resources, but often do not know where to start. Or the resources are not offered in Spanish.
    - *"Parents do not know how to access or see information. It might be there, but we do not know how to surf there correctly. So maybe parents also need training." – Parent, Pitt County*
    - *"In one school, they told me many parents did not go to meetings because of the language." – Parent, Pitt County*
    - *"All services could be offered in Spanish, because it is accessible. The problem is the language." – Parent, Pitt County*
    - *"Would like to have an office where there was general information. From there, they could be distributed in different areas. They should be given adequate information. People should be able to*

say if they need a school with certain requirements or which meets my children's needs. It would be ideal to go to a place where they could tell me the options and information about where to go." – Parent, Pitt County

Parents want their children to thrive in this country.

- They want their children to continue their education and to achieve their goals. And they see their role as parents as supporting that quest for education, especially since some did not have those opportunities in their country growing up.
    - *"I would like them to graduate, to have good studies, to have a good job. I would not like them to have a job they do not like. If they graduate and study well, they will have a good job." – Parent, Pitt County*
    - *"They should feel satisfied. I would tell them about my expectations, but I would also take into account what they really want, because I might have an idea about things based on how I was raised, but they are already living in a different situation, where their things are different, so we could guide them, but they should ultimately do whatever they want, not what I want." – Parent, Pitt County*
    - *"They should do whatever they wish. It is very important for them to study, but they should decide what they want. We do not want them to suffer or feel that their job is shameful. They should be outstanding. We should support them in whatever they decide to study." – Parent, Pitt County*
    - *"I would tell her to achieve her dreams, she should keep going. There are no limitations. She might not have enough resources at the moment, but she will find them if she looks for them. It might be easier to achieve for other people, and it might be more difficult for others. If this is something that she wants, she can do it, regardless of people saying different opinions. I think traditions also play a role here, as well as the education we have received, because people tell her that she is a woman, and she must do certain things. I think that this does no longer apply. She could do whatever she wanted. Anyone could." – Parent, Pitt County*

POLK COUNTY FINDINGS

Facilitating Organization	Date of Listening Session	Group Type	# of Participants
WNCSource	September 13th, 2022	Parents / Caregivers & Community Organizers	10

Two people in the group were community organizers who are interested in providing a daycare option in the county. Both of them did not identify as a member of the BIPOC community. Of the remaining eight parents, one identified as Black / African American, one as Multiracial/Multicultural, and six did not identify as members of the BIPOC community.

Quick summary of Polk:

Providers and parents VALUE…	Providers and parents NEED…
• Being able to spend time with their families away from their busy work life • Well-trained providers that can help educate their children • Convenient hours in the childcare centers they're using	• Affordable childcare options • More childcare centers in the area • Improvements in the star / rating system

There are no childcare centers (one in-home provider) of childcare centers in Polk County making it extremely difficult for families.

- The lack of centers drives up demand in surrounding counties, which means that families are stuck on waitlists. Without access to childcare, families' jobs and careers are impacted. And in some cases, it also impacts employers because their employees don't have access to childcare.
    - *"There is no childcare in Polk County. There is one lady who does it from their home." - Parent, Polk County*
    - *"Even the surrounding counties are full. So, we're on the waitlist and not expected to get off before the end of the year. We've been on the waitlist for a year in Henderson County." - Parent, Polk County*
    - *"Our child in kindergarten, even the after school is full. So, my wife is working remote, so she has to take off early to get them" - Parent, Polk County*
    - *"I've witnessed multiple clients calling dozens across several counties and every single one had a list that was a mile long." – Community Organizer, Polk County*
    - *"My wife and I had to go on and off work in order to have childcare for our children. So we've had to sacrifice and sacrifice our careers for childcare." – Parent, Polk County*
    - *"I hear from others that it's constant decisions between how can we pay the bill this month because I can't work. Or they are looking in all centers and even those in surrounding counties, and they are all full. They are asking friends to keep them. Asking people they don't even know that well to watch them. It's not an issue for me personally, but it is because it's affecting my clients and all the people I'm working with." – Parent, Polk County*
    - *"Once we find childcare, my wife can take on more clients and she can work more and advance her career more." – Parent, Polk County*
    - *"I had a fantastic job offer but daycare is 30 miles away. We're having to make those kinds of decisions or tradeoffs." - Parent, Polk County*
    - *"Being an employer in the area, it's challenging when I have employees who have childcare issues and can't come into work. I have to be understanding of that, but also it impacts me. I'm stuck between what's right for the family and the policies. Am I going to fire them and that child has a parent who is not employed? I have to bend the rules to allow employees to bring in their child if they need it." – Parent, Polk County*
- While a few parents choose to say home to provide care, most do it out of necessity. If given the choice, they would prefer ECE options for their child, as they want their child to be educated, not just babysat. As a result, they are looking for childcare providers who are well-trained and passionate about what they do.
    - *"The teachers are trained to educate my children and they provide that consistency. I'm not trained to do that. I can't provide the same level of education for my child that they can. I can't do that and have a full-time job." – Parent, Polk County*
    - *"Not just dropping off your child to be babysat all day. But consistency and having providers who are teaching them." – Parent, Polk County*
    - *"The biggest needs are to prepare children by meeting their needs and show them, you know, the love and affection that you want them to have." – Parent, Polk County*
- Despite the lack of childcare centers, the local government has restrictions and regulations that make it difficult to open daycares in the county. As a result, parents and community members feel that the situation may be hopeless for Polk County.
    - *"The regulations for childcare that the state puts up (DCD) puts additional strings and red tape that puts up barriers...There is no childcare in the county. I feel the pain for our families who are struggling in Polk County for childcare." - Parent, Polk County*

- *"We are trying to provide childcare for ages 0-3. And it is a barrier everywhere we go. But the Forbes Foundation cannot let anyone operate it other than the schools and they are not interested in leasing the building. We have to create a non-profit organization separate from the church in order to create a daycare." - Parent, Polk County*
- *"[We need] quality daycare without the hoops... the DCD should stop checking off the boxes making it impossible to find good teachers due to requirements" - Parent, Polk County*

For some parents, racial representation in the classroom is important to build trust in a childcare provider / facility.

- Parents want to see providers who look like themselves or their children and to ensure that their children are interacting with people from different ethnicities.
  - *"Being a mother and grandmother of biracial children, the need for multiple races for children is key. You need to have that component in childcare. And we don't have many African American teachers who want to go into childcare and it needs to happen. To have a well-rounded child, it has to happen. As a result, the trust factor is not there. With so many biracial children, they need both of those components to build that trust." – Parent, Polk County*

The cost of childcare is an issue for families. Several parents feel they have to resort to less ideal options for childcare and feel they need more financial assistance to help them afford the better options.

- Some families are in the gap and don't qualify for vouchers. This adds an additional financial burden on them. And some families just don't use childcare because it's unaffordable, creating the strain of juggling jobs and family.
  - *"The cost of childcare is an issue. Most childcare is in need of subsidies. Most of the private pay were part-time because they supplemented with family to keep the cost down." – Community Organizer, Polk County*
  - *"My son makes too much to qualify for a voucher and they are struggling to pay, and they need more income. There is a gap. My son would not have been able to afford daycare if he did not have grandparents (us) to watch them and subsidy. We need childcare for all families in Polk. Not just the families who can work and afford it or the people who are eligible for the programs. We need it for the families in the middle." - Parent, Polk County*
  - *"Childcare is not affordable, whether you're two or one income. So the best thing to be able to provide food for our family is for us to trade off our jobs so we don't need childcare." - Parent, Polk County*
  - *"We use childcare once a week, but it really needs to be three times a week. Because then it would mean less time working at night to try to get work done, which is so tiring." – Parent, Polk County*
- Because childcare options are scarce, families sometimes resort to using providers who are expensive (and not always qualified in their eyes).
  - *"I resorted to going on Facebook to try to find childcare. I had someone lined up but then they were in an accident. On Care.com you have to pay for the membership and then you pay $20/hour which is very expensive." – Parent, Polk County*
  - *"Being new to the area, who do you trust and what quality is it going to be? I love having the quality time with them [by staying home with the children], but at the same time when you need that help, it should be there." – Parent, Polk County*

Families feel that the STAR rating system in place creates further inaccessibility and is almost pointless in a county with almost no childcare options.

- With the lack of options for childcare, having the STAR system in place creates more walls in terms of affordability of what is available.
    - *"So many families who have moved here say 'I wish I would have known there was no childcare, otherwise I would not have moved here.' The more stars the more expensive. At this point, it's so scarce the rating systems doesn't even matter. You want to believe that all childcare provides quality childcare. I know someone who provides in-home who didn't have the time or money to get the five-star rating. There has to be something done at the higher level because we don't care about stars anymore. You're talking about families who are already looking and don't have the financial resources and then you're saying in order to get quality you have to pay way more" - Parent, Polk County*
    - *"I had a daycare that I loved [in a different county]. It's hard to find the same kind of care here. I don't care about ratings. I care about my child being taken care of." - Parent, Polk County*

RICHMOND COUNTY FINDINGS

Facilitating Organization	Date of Listening Session	Group Type	# of Participants
Richmond County Partnership for Children	July 25th, 2022	Parents / Caregivers	9
Richmond County Partnership for Children	August 11th, 2022	Providers	17

Demographic information was not collected for all participants. However, among the childcare providers, four identified as Black / African American, one as a Person of Color, one as White, and three did not identify as a member of the BIPOC community. Two of the providers were Directors.

Quick summary of Richmond:

Providers and parents / caregivers VALUE…	Providers and parents / caregivers NEED…
• Childcare support that models a core and close-knit community parents can trust • Connections to other families and childcare to both provide relief for parents and activities for children	• Further education and training on special needs children for parents and providers • Increased pay to help avoid high provider turnover and burnout.

Supplying tax credits and accessibility to vouchers is noted as a strong improvement that would ease affordability concerns.

- *"Childcare should be deducted from our taxable income." – Parent, Richmond County*
- *"There needs to be a statewide voucher system." – Parent, Richmond County*
- *"I love the idea of childcare costs being deducted or being a credit." – Parent, Richmond County*
- *"To give a permanent tax credit of at least $600 a month. Minimum wage is no longer a livable rate." – Parent, Richmond County*
- *"The daycare and teachers still need to get paid so a childcare tax credit." – Parent, Richmond County*

The lack of affordability in turn impacts the feasibility, and for some the motivation, of parents to stay in the workforce.

- *"There is the basic rate and then they charge more for snacks and stuff. $1280 a month for two kids. It's not worth it to go to work." – Parent, Richmond County*
- *"If I was to send both my kids, I would be paying $1600 a month. It's extra for all the activities. That's way more than my house payment."- Parent, Richmond County*
- *"My kids don't always get my full attention especially when I'm working. I have to work but feel guilty my child is left in front of the TV." – Parent, Richmond County*
- *"It would be nice if we still have the child credit again. Even if I could only send them once a week so I could work or clean the house." – Parent, Richmond County*

To the majority of parents, "support" looks like a community-centric childcare environment that they can trust.

- *"I have lived in a trailer park and that community supports everybody. When my parents couldn't raise me the trailer park raised me." – Parent, Richmond County*
- *"Community has gone away now. Neighbors used to help. We've got to have trust." – Parent, Richmond County*
- *"There are regular, periodic kid activities and events. There's a village." – Parent, Richmond County*
- *"Neighborhood groups that are promoted so we know who everyone is and that it's safe." – Parent, Richmond County*
- *"This generation is a real change. We want our children to be able to connect with each other and show love. We want them to have love from everybody." – Parent, Richmond County*
- *"A co-op to trade off childcare. It takes a village." – Parent, Richmond County*

A need exists for special education training for providers and parents to support children who need more attention in and out of the classroom.

- *"Our teachers need hands on training for students with disabilities." – Provider, Richmond County*
- *"[Our biggest need is] a self-contained special needs class." – Provider, Richmond County*
- *"We work with low-income families and families with children who have special needs." – Provider, Richmond County*
- *"We have staff that needs a lot of trainings. We are getting more children with challenging behaviors and disabilities and our staff is not prepared." – Provider, Richmond County*
- *"We need help from the state or daycare is going to suffer. You're going to see more investigations because staff isn't getting the proper trainings." – Provider, Richmond County*
- *"You ask and literally cry for help (in the classroom, specialized instruction, mental health) and you aren't given it." – Provider, Richmond County*

This, along with low pay, contributes to high employee turnover and burnout, which many cite as their biggest challenge.

- *"Hourly Pay. They want us to give our teachers an extra $2/$3 an hour. What do I do when the money runs out? We are competing with fast food restaurants. How do we compete when the grant money runs out?" – Provider, Richmond County*
- *"Help wanting to stay. At Walmart they can make $15 an hour. We are not going to be the breadwinners of our families. It's hard to find that person who can just come in and love what we do." – Provider, Richmond County*
- *"The way turnover is with employees now; I can barely learn their names before they go." – Provider, Richmond County*
- *"How are we going to remain a five-star daycare when we can't keep the staff and can't pay them. If we pay them good, we can keep them. Everyone is getting raises except in daycare" – Provider, Richmond County*

- *"It's hard for me to tell a parent with tears in their eyes that I can only take them 3 hours a day (because that's all the government will pay for)" – Provider, Richmond County*

ROBESON COUNTY FINDINGS

Facilitating Organization	Date of Listening Session	Group Type	# of Participants
Robeson County Partnership for Children	September 1st, 2022	Mix of Providers & Parents / Caregivers	14
Robeson County Partnership for Children	September 20th, 2022	Mix of Providers & Parents / Caregivers	5

For the September 1st group, among parents, two identified as Asian and one identified as Multiracial / Multicultural. Among providers, seven identified as Black / African American, two as Indigenous, one as not a member of BIPOC and one chose NA. Demographic information not available for the September 20th group, and the group consisted of one parent, three teachers / providers, and one who was both a parent and teacher.

Quick summary of Robeson:

Providers and parents VALUE…	Providers and parents NEED…
• The impact they make on children's lives • Mental health and specialized support	• Higher pay, benefits, and respect • More staffing to increase facility capacity • Specialized support in the classroom

Ability to attract and retain qualified childcare providers in the county is a huge challenge, due in part to a lack of appreciation for the profession and being an underfunded profession.

- Many providers feel that the profession is not valued by the country or the state.
    - *"We need to prioritize childcare in this state. It is not where it needs to be." – Provider, Robeson County*
    - *"Our pay is reflective of how we are valued in society. Childcare is one of the hardest professions. We are a specialized field. Not everyone can do what we do. And yet, we are paid less than what they pay people at McDonald's." – Provider, Robeson County*
    - *"I would want to the lawmakers to come and work in a childcare facility. If you're going to make rules, you need to work in it and see it." – Provider, Robeson County*
    - *"Why isn't there more support for childcare since it's the groundwork for higher education?" – Provider, Robeson County*
    - *"There is a not a commitment to this field like there used to be. I'm not sure where the breakdown was. I think I could run a retail store with less turnover and burnout than I can a staff of 21 at a daycare. You have to have a love for this field and want to make a difference and I don't know if that's a passion anymore." – Director, Robeson County*
- Providers would like higher pay and access to benefits like healthcare and retirement. Especially providers who are in a single income household struggle to pay their bills at the rate they are currently paid. They have an enormous passion and love for the profession, but also need a living wage to take care of their own needs. This would not only have an impact on the providers, but also on the children they care for.
    - *"We do need more pay. It doesn't make sense to have to work two jobs to make a living. If you don't have dual income, it's hard to make a living. I work all the time. I beg for extra hours. I have to keep my house going. It don't make sense that you have can't get health care, benefits, retirement. They*

don't even pay you enough to save. Single incomes struggle more. I can't go to another job because I LOVE this job. But it just don't pay enough to run my house." – Provider, Robeson County

- *"We're adults. People at McDonald's is making $11/12 dollars. We went to school for 2-4 years and they make more than us. We do struggle." – Provider, Robeson County*
- "*It's like Maslow Hierarchy of Needs. If you have a provider who is obsessed with providing these things for themselves, they can't achieve. The state could come in and equalize it and put us on the same scale as public school. And get rid of need and fear and enable us to be the best professionals we can be." – Provider, Robeson County*

- Some would like to see providers brought under the benefits umbrella for public school teachers, giving them access to benefits like health insurance, paid maternity leave, and retirement benefits.
  - *"I am losing all my workers to the school system. Some of them took advantage of the teach program. In Pre-K most of them want to go to the school system. They have benefits and a retirement plan and health insurance." – Director, Robeson County*
  - *"I don't have the revenue to support the staff and pay them the value of their work. Every person who has a degree or credits towards a degree have left to go to the school district." – Director, Robeson County*
  - *"What I would like is the state to umbrella private daycare into something that helps us as a private owner to give to our staff the things like health insurance, paid maternity leave, IRA / retirement. I wish the government would stand strong in what they have witnessed over COVID and step in and help umbrella us into those things that the school system gets. Even though we're private or corporation, we are the foundation of care and education for the child. Doesn't matter your education or experience, you know how hard it is. It is hard to get staff who want to be in this field and stay in this field." – Director, Robeson County*

These staffing shortages mean that many daycares in the county have either had to close, limit their hours, or limit their capacity.

- This contributes to long wait lists and ability to help families who need a childcare option.
  - *"Some daycare centers have closed down infant rooms. They struggle to keep it staffed for parents to pick up. I was kept up at night worrying about staff calling out and being able to function the school." – Director, Robeson County*
  - *"Since COVID, we have closed at 4:30 every day. We are barely able to stay open long enough for parents to pick up the children. Told staff that when the stabilization grant money is gone, it's gone. We went from 60+ children to around 30. I am going to have to not have a baby room and just have two one-year old rooms because I don't have the staff. A teacher she had hired, worked for 3 weeks, and then turned in her resignation." – Director, Robeson County*
  - *"We were told there were no options for newborns in the county. The issue isn't just for Robeson, it's for the whole state. We were fortunate to have him placed with a nanny. At some point he'll go to an outside childcare." – Parent, Robeson County*

Providers need more specialized support in the classrooms.

- In particular, providers would like translators / providers who are bilingual, more time with specialists (OT, speech, PT) in the classroom, and more interventionalist help to better prepare children for kindergarten (i.e., reading help).
  - *Wish we had someone who was bilingual. That's a challenge. Children need more time with interventionalists. Parents need to be more involved with the therapy for their children, where parents can come and interact with therapist and their children and be in that environment with the children. Some of the therapists don't do what they are supposed to do." – Provider, Robeson County*

  - *"Speech, OT, PT, play therapy. I don't think they should be coming from outside and rotating. The state should provide each center with their own staff. And interpreters as well. Our state could do a lot more and give more opportunity to children." – Provider, Robeson County*
- Providers would also like mental health resources for both themselves and their children.
  - *"Mental health is a big thing we need assistance with. I see it more with the younger children and the staff would also benefit if they had programs for childcare providers." – Provider, Robeson County*
  - *"The government should provide mental health services for both children and staff. Send someone out once a month or have someone accessible to us. That would be a great thing." – Provider, Robeson County*

Providers do not feel that STAR-ratings are important for the majority of their parents.

- Use of the STAR system is mixed based upon the socio-economic and education level of parents. Providers find that some parents may use it as a reference point when starting their childcare search, but that most parents aren't aware of the STAR-rating or what it means.
  - *"The STAR rating is important for different people based on certain populations. If you don't understand the STAR rating, it's because you haven't been educated on it." – Provider, Robeson County*
  - *"You can have a five STAR rating and be the worst of the worst or can have the worst of the worst operating like a five STAR. You can be run however and just that day you got lucky, and everyone knew to wash their hands and all that stuff. It's a jumping off point for some people. 'Let me look at all the five stars, then let me visit the four stars, then whatever.'" – Director, Robeson County*
  - *"Some parents don't even know what a STAR rating is. A lot of university parents, that's what they are looking for because to them that covers all this other stuff." – Director, Robeson County*
- Providers feel that what is more important to parents is the relationship with the provider, having well-trained providers, and a clean / sanitary facility.

Childcare affordability is a challenge in the county, especially for those with subsidized childcare.

- In-home providers can give more flexibility to parents around when payment is due or what fees to charge or waive. They feel that their parents appreciate that and that relationship they have with parents has resulted in low child turnover.
  - *"I don't charge registration fees at all. They have a month to pay within the month. I don't have you have to pay by this day. Every parent has bills. As long as we have that communication when you can pay me before the month is out, that's fine. All of my kids have been there since birth, so don't have a high turnover with staff or kids. So just try to make sure that everyone is satisfied." – In-home provider, Robeson County*
- However, many providers struggle with being empathetic to the needs of the parents and making sure they can keep their facility running and paying staff.
  - *"When I charge a registration fee, let them know it goes towards their first month's payment, regardless of subsidized or not. That's one way I try to be a blessing to parents. I was a single parent needing childcare back in the day. I know what it is to struggle and to have childcare and not have anyone to help you. I try to work with my parents and give them options to pay, but you have to communicate. Making sure I have a good line of communication with parents when it comes to my money. I have to pay my staff and the bills." – Director, Robeson County*
  - *"It's helpful when the state pays the parent fees or gives more funding to the daycares like they did with the COVID grant. During COVID the parent fees were waived, and that was helpful. Some parents still haven't started paying parent fees. I'm still waiving those because we have some grant money left and I'm helping parents out." – Director, Robeson County*

The Link Group

RUTHERFORD COUNTY FINDINGS

Facilitating Organization	Date of Listening Session	Group Type	# of Participants
WNCSource	December 8th, 2022	Parents / Caregivers	11
WNCSource	December 11th, 2022	Providers	8

Of the parents who participated, seven identified as Latinx, one as Hispanic, one as Black / African American and two did not identify as part of the BIPOC community. Of the providers who participated, two identified as Latinx, three as White, and three did not identify as part of the BIPOC community.

Quick summary of Rutherford:

Providers & Parents/Caregivers VALUE…	Providers & Parents / Caregivers NEED…
• Childcare centers to be located in rural areas and better transportation for the children • Good relationships with families • Resources for children who speak multiple languages	• Better pay for providers and more affordable childcare for parents • Safety for the children • Early Head Start programs to be more accessible because they find value in children learning life skills early

Providers want there to be more centers in accessible areas because driving long distances for good childcare is a pain point for families

- More centers in rural areas would make it easier for parents to access childcare.
  - *"To have more day care centers around the rural areas that are hard to reach." – Provider, Rutherford County*
  - *"There are not enough day care centers in the areas outside of the city." – Provider, Rutherford County*
  - *"We need more centers in rural places. We also need help with transportation- parents need help getting kids to school." – Provider, Rutherford County*
- Better accessibility to transportation options would make it easier for parents to send their kids for childcare.
  - *"Some parents have to travel 15-30 minutes each way." – Provider, Rutherford County*
  - *"I have some that come from South Carolina just for the reputation of the program. They drive 45 minute each way to put their child in daycare for 3 hours." – Provider Rutherford County*
  - *"Consider the location you are opening in. There's a great need for schools outside the city but there is a transportation barrier. Some parents don't have cars or reliable transportation." – Provider, Rutherford County*

Providers want the best for the children and want the families to know that.

- Providers value helping the children and maintaining good relationships.
  - *"Building a close relationship with the families. Seeing them happy when their child is thriving." – Provider, Rutherford County*
  - *"Valuing culture and customs of child and I think that plays into having a good relationship with the child." – Provider, Rutherford County*
  - *"I like to help children set their goals and reach them." – Provider, Rutherford County*
- They aim to provide a good bilingual setting so that children can feel comfortable.
  - *"Providers that speak the same language so the children would feel less scared." – Provider, Rutherford County*

- *"Teachers are really good with children who don't speak the language. We have signs all over the room with bilingual signs. We have tablets with translation apps too." – Provider, Rutherford County*
- *"We could improve with providers that speak the same language. We have children/families who speak Chinese. We are trying to work on getting our materials translated to help them." – Provider, Rutherford County*

Parents have varying feelings about the Early Head Start Program.

- Some parents find Early Head Start to be beneficial for children allowing them to learn many skills.
  - *"Early Head Start is more like a school program where the children learn. I looked at daycare, but I didn't like how the children were treated like a number." – Parent, Rutherford County*
  - *"I use early Head Start and have used it for all our children. It has been very helpful. It gives the kids social skills and language skills. It helps us (parents) so we can work and provide for our family. We are in a year-round program." – Parent, Rutherford County*
  - *"My baby is only 12 months, so I haven't thought about it. My 6-year-old went to early Head Start, and it helped her a lot." – Parent, Rutherford County*
  - *"It is (being a stay-at-home mom) but at the same time I would like my kids at early Head Start because they would be more prepared for elementary school." – Parent, Rutherford County*
- Some parents are not able to enroll their children into the program because of qualification issues.
  - *"Early Head Start is really hard. Its income based. Only one of my 5 kids made it in. The criteria is very difficult. You have to be working but can't be making a lot of money." – Parent, Rutherford County*
  - *"I didn't qualify for early Head Start so I had to quit working until my children could get into the preschool program." – Parent, Rutherford County*

Parents value their children's safety and ability to learn in an affordable childcare setting.

- Affordability is a major concern for parents
  - *"Affordability. Because of our income I was going to have to pay for part of early Head Start and we couldn't afford it." – Parent, Rutherford County*
  - *"Affordability, well trained providers, and providers that offer mental health services." – Parent, Rutherford County*
  - *"Accessible and affordable childcare. It needs to be easy to register and understand that's expected of them and their child. We also have a shortage of quality childcare providers." – Parent, Rutherford County*
  - *"More affordable with additional services to providing to children with a transparent explanation." – Parent, Rutherford County*
- Parents look for safety for their children in a location where they can thrive.
  - *"The biggest thing with my kids is safety. I look for well-trained providers but also to make sure the place is safe." – Parent, Rutherford County*
  - *"I went to a lot of daycare centers that I didn't feel comfortable with." – Parent Rutherford County*
  - *"I want to make sure that my six children stay safe. That the places they are going they will be well taken care of." – Parent, Rutherford County*
  - *"I value the safety. I feel very comfortable when my daughter is there." – Parent, Rutherford County*
  - *"For my children to help others and grow up in a safe environment they can learn. It doesn't have to be perfect but a place where children can be children." – Parent, Rutherford County*

SWAIN COUNTY FINDINGS

Facilitating Organization	Date of Listening Session	Group Type	# of Participants
Southwestern Child Development Commission	September 28th, 2022	Parents / Caregivers	7
Southwestern Child Development Commission	September 29th, 2022	Providers & Parents / Caregivers	9

In the September 28th listening session, all participants identified as Latinx. Questions were translated into Spanish from English during the groups and the responses were recorded in English (translated back by the translator). In the September 29th listening session, three participants were providers, all of whom did not identify as a member of the BIPOC community. Of the six parents / caregivers, one identified as Latinx, one as Indigenous, one as White and three did not identify as a member of the BIPOC community.

Quick summary of Swain:

Providers & Parents/Caregivers VALUE…	Providers & Parents / Caregivers NEED…
• Providers who are valued for what they are offering the children • Children being taught good values by parents and providers	• More accessible funds for providers trying to enhance their care • Better wages so the staff retention improves

Providers are feeling frustration and are not satisfied in their current position leading to burnout and lower staff retention rates.

- *"I don't think anything is working because there is a lack of support in many different areas. I don't think our voices are heard that we need help, we can't do it alone." – Provider, Swain County*
- *"Energy, funds, when I was a teacher, I bought everything out of pocket." – Provider, Swain County*
- *"If my wages decrease, I will have to find a new job there is no way my family could make it." – Provider, Swain County*
- *"We have had to turn lots of students away because we don't have the staff to take care of them" – Provider, Swain County*

Parents want children to be able to learn good character traits and providers to be a positive source of influence, but there are limiting factors.

- *"My goals are to be nice humans, to have empathy, to learn and teach" – Parent, Swain County*
- *"I would like to see more men in childcare. Kids so desperately need male influence not just women. Sometimes they don't have male influence at home." – Provider, Swain County*
- *"Sometimes I feel stuck - I love my job. It is because of the kids and the families I have met along the way. I see kids I had as babies and now they are 9 or 10. I have seen them grow up. That is what keeps me there I am trying to make a difference." – Providers, Swain County*

Some parents are choosing to stay at home to take care of children instead of sending them to childcare.

- *"We just are old fashioned. We wanted a mom and dad family unit, we are based on faith, we wanted to raise our children for the word in a strong family unit and have a strong community, so my wife had to stay home." – Parent, Swain County*
- *"I used a little bit of childcare. My wife was a housewife, so we did not need childcare. And I was homeschooling" – Parent, Swain County*

The Link Group

WAKE COUNTY FINDINGS

Facilitating Organization	Date of Listening Session	Group Type	# of Participants
North Raleigh Providers Network	July 22nd, 2022	Providers	18

Among the providers who participated, 15 identified as Black / African American and three identified as Multicultural / Multiracial. Six of the providers were also childcare Directors / Owners.

Quick summary of Wake:

Providers VALUE…	Providers NEED…
• Being able to provide a nurturing and caring environment for children • Providing support for parents • Equity on in-home care with center care	• More equity in the voucher reimbursement for in-home care • Easing of restrictions on number of children in-home care can take

Many of the providers in the group started their own childcare centers because they felt the current opportunities did not adequately care for, or cater to, children.

- These providers have a calling for their profession and a passion for educating children. They saw a need in the community that wasn't being filled and so took the initiative to fill that need themselves. They bring years of experience in the field, which helped them open their own centers and create a loving, trusting environment. And for some, they saw this need especially for children of color in the community.
    - *"I started in day care after I retired from The Federal Government. I wanted to do something. I've been in the business almost 15 years. I'm at a small center on Capital Blvd. I like helping people. My main objective was to motivate the kids." Provider, Wake County*
    - *"I've been doing day care for over 25 years. I got into it because of my kids. I was working third shift at the post office. I decided I needed to do something because I didn't want someone else raising my kids." – Provider, Wake County*
    - *"I worked in Head Start for 8 years and wake county schools for 5 years. But I realized there were too many kids and they were getting left behind. I wanted to help kids on a more personal basis, so I decided to open my own childcare." – Provider, Wake County*
    - *"I went back to school because I never wanted anyone to take anything from me. I have an in-home childcare business. It's the best thing I've ever done." – Provider, Wake County*
    - *"They are so quick to label our children, but they are just children. My big thing is to give one on one attention for our black and brown children. So they can get that leg up in Kindergarten." – Provider, Wake County*

Affordability is a big issue for parents.

- Providers understand that childcare costs are often a barrier for parents. As providers, they try to help the parents with this as best they can. This often means that in-home providers sacrifice of earning more in order to help parents with costs. While this feels like a calling for many of the providers in the group, it also means that these providers deal with the burden and financial stress of providing for themselves, as well as for others.
    - *"A lot of parents can't afford the high rates the centers have. It's important we help the parents as much as we can." – Provider, Wake County*
    - *"People are not going to be able to go back to work if there isn't affordable and accessible childcare." – Provider Wake County*

- *“A lot of parents will call for pricing to make sure it's within their budget." – Provider, Wake County*
- *"I kept my prices the same since the day I opened in 2011." – Provider, Wake County*
- *"I'm not making a lot of money. I would rather have a little money and fill the need. You go up $5 and you might be pushing a family over the brink.” – Provider, Wake County*
- *"The mom gets WIC but there are limitations. She's going to the store all the time for formula. If I see it, I buy it for her." – Provider, Wake County*
- *"You worry about not having enough money to pay your costs." – Provider, Wake County*
- *"I budget as if I have three kids. So if I get five, I can help a family who is struggling out." – Provider, Wake County*

- Providers are thankful for resources that do help, whether they are vouchers for parents or stabilization grants for providers.
  - *"The income is not there. People are struggling. Thank God for subsidies." – Provider, Wake County*
  - *"Receiving the stabilization grant has helped me help families." – Provider, Wake County*
- However, they ultimately would like to see free childcare for all.
  - *“I would make early childcare free.” – Provider, Wake County*
  - *“Get rid of the parent fee.” – Provider, Wake County*

Providers would like state restrictions for in-home providers eased so that they could take more children under their care.

- Providers feel that current restrictions for the number of children in-home providers can take are too limiting, which both prevent parents from accessing childcare (i.e., not enough childcare capacity to fill the need) and providers from earning more income.
  - *"Why are there zoning laws that you can't have more than 8 in a home?" – Provider, Wake County*
  - *"In other states the ratios are higher. Here it's higher in a center than a residence.” – Provider, Wake County*
  - *"Allow us to have more kids in residents so we can get more income and then be able to give out scholarships." – Provider, Wake County*
  - *"In home childcare should have the same ratios as the centers." – Provider, Wake County*
- Related to this, providers would like voucher reimbursement to be equitable between in-home care and center care. As in-home providers, they feel they are bearing the burden of cost more so than childcare centers which adds to their financial and mental stress.
  - *"We should have the same voucher reimbursement at in home centers. A child is a child. We should be able to take are of everybody." – Provider, Wake County*
  - *"I would increase subsidy every year. They say they don't want subsidy children to get less care, well than pay us. In home providers are absorbing those costs. I've lost money to help the kids." – Provider, Wake County*

Providers would like to see more resources available for parents.

- Whether it’s information about vouchers, parent workshops, or classes about personal finances, providers would like to see more information and resources available, so parents have the additional support and help they need.
  - *“We should teach our parents how to budget.” – Provider, Wake County*
  - *"People should have a mandatory class to know about childcare options and subsidy. We need to be taught." – Provider, Wake County*
  - *"Have a class on how to parent. Teach them to cook a chicken so they can stop with the fast food." – Provider, Wake County*

The Link Group

WATAUGA COUNTY FINDINGS

Facilitating Organization	Date of Listening Session	Group Type	# of Participants
Children's Council	July 13th, 2022	Parent	5
Children's Council	August 9th, 2022	Provider & Parent / Caregiver	2
Children's Council	September 13th, 2022	Providers / Directors	8

In the July listening session, one parent identified as Black / African American, one as Latinx, and three did not identify as a member of the BIPOC community.
In the August listening session, the provider identified as White, and the parent did not identify as a member of the BIPOC community.
In the September listening session, none of the providers identified as members of the BIPOC community. Four of the participants were Director / Owners.

Quick summary of Watauga:

Providers & Parents/Caregivers VALUE…	Providers & Parents / Caregivers NEED…
• Opportunities to socialize – for both parents and children • Trust established between the provider, the children, and the parents	• Flexible accommodations for new parents still trying to work • A reliable way to find and vet childcare providers

Trust is a big factor in being open to and selecting daycare.

- Parents want to feel secure in their own assessment of the provider.
  - *"I don't know how it all works, obviously the people in childcare are people that would be trusted. It's a lot of the media and news that's scaring me… maybe a first-time mom thing. That could be just something in my mind. I don't trust people right now. You have to be able to trust them." – Parent, Watauga County*
  - *"[I'd be likely to use outside childcare] if I can see who is taking care of my child. I want a way to get to know them, to get that confidence, but not sure how it all works since it's brand new to me. If I could get comfortable with the person taking care of daughter, my likelihood would be a 10." – Parent, Watauga County*
  - *"I met with all of them, they showed me their backgrounds, training, etc. and that is why I picked that one specifically. All these people are trained." – Parent, Watauga County*
  - *"You can walk in anytime you want, which was important to me - access. And that's been a blessing. I can understand feeling nervous, you want to know they're taking care of kid. I asked if they had live video cameras I can watch, and they were like, 'no.' They were super-sweet, I sat down with them because I was nervous, they gave me great info, were patient with me. Let me look around, it eased me a bit." – Parent, Watauga County*
- Word of mouth is important but not always available or a reliably way of vetting a provider.
  - *"Word of mouth is strong, in these circles, and Google reviews. And having professionals say they're trusted, and to hear those stories or reasons they're reputable. We all want children safe. We get to hear everybody else's story and their opinions." – Parent, Watauga County*
  - *"There is a huge gap of when last generation had kids. So they can't give us these resources, because they did it already and it's been 20-30 years. It's kind of brand new for everyone, distance aside. Luckily, husband's mother knows many places she recommended. But they're good, which is why the long waits. Just actually knowing people is really helpful." – Parent, Watauga County*

Access to and availability of childcare is a consistent challenge.

- Parents hypothesize that compensation for providers may contribute to the shortage of options.
  - *"Helping train new providers so they have training and experience to support children and their development. I know some places provide funding to educate the providers more, that's helpful. Or provide subs for providers who need to go to school." – Parent, Watauga County*
  - *"[There should be] better pay. And recognizing they have tons of experience, and so pay should match that. It's a huge gap. Pay those who have been in field for years and years good money." – Parent, Watauga County*
- Wait times can pose a significant barrier, and even adequate foresight may not be enough.
  - *"We go through Child Development Center at ASU. Put him on the list when I was in my second trimester. And he didn't get in until he was two months old. It's free, because I go to ASU." – Parent, Watauga County*
  - *"We are on a lot of waitlists but haven't gotten in anywhere. Got approved for childcare subsidy but doesn't matter because I can't get it." – Parent, Watauga County*
- Frequently, parents aren't sure where to even begin the search.
  - *"One of the things we need more of is resources, more info. I do get a lot of info from parent and teacher groups, but still find myself wanting to Google a lot. So I never really know what to do with him to help him develop. More resources would help." – Parent, Watauga County*
- For parents that can find childcare, frequently they stumble upon it.
  - *"[I found my provider through] the woman in charge of it, who is my stepdad's best friend." – Parent, Watauga County*
  - *"I was given a list of places, called around, they were all so sympathetic, but "it's a daycare desert" is what I kept hearing. I said, 'oh my gosh, what am I gonna do?' But we just kept doing our thing, I would call back, and it just so happened the lady was on the phone with me and got a text that someone was moving. And we were able to get him into daycare fulltime. It's been a godsend." – Parent, Watauga County*

Many mothers want to work, but only some feel they can.

- Mothers who become a stay-at-home parent frequently lament not being able to afford the same quality of life they had as a two-income-household.
  - *"If I had someone to trust to take care of [my child], it will increase my confidence in working more, increase income, which will help me do other activities with her. Which cost a lot of money - pools, gym, all that. I was just used to a lifestyle before, and it's hard going." – Parent, Watauga County*
  - *"After I had my baby in Dec 2020, I went back to work for 4 months, trying to do same job, working from home and fill in with help from others. My mental health was declining - felt like a terrible employee, mom, wife. Husband and I had lots of long talks, decided I could quit my job and it would be OK. Thought it would be temporary, but 13 months later and not sure when I will go back." – Parent, Watauga County*
  - *"10/10 likely to use childcare [if I could find it], would love to be able to work more." – Parent, Watauga County*
  - *"I didn't want to be a stay-at-home mom, decided to go back to work and had a good recommendation for the child development center, since it was free, figured I would go back to work and let him do his thing at daycare." – Parent, Watauga County*
  - *"Since we don't have the option not to work, most people don't. It's hard. If you do make that decision, making a lot of cuts, having to really budget. If I am mayor of the city, I would make childcare government sponsored. We could have curriculum, hire more people... It would be great,*

knowing that most Americans need a 2-family income, so it would be reasonable." – Parent, Watauga County

- *"The childcare has been hard - to trust people with my baby. If I can find childcare and someone I trust, I can go back to work and work a bit more." – Parent, Watauga County*

- Those who are still able to hold jobs struggle to find accommodations.
  - *"I am the one taking care of her most of the time, husband works that 9 to 5 job, I basically take her everywhere with me. At [my job] I work from 10-3, so I take her to work with me, which is amazing. Sometimes we'll ask my husband's family to help but it's rare. I feel it's so hard to ask for help as the person I am. So I have to learn to be able to do that." – Parent, Watauga County*
  - *"Right now I am still technically on mat leave, I will go in 1 day on weekend. But I am breastfeeding and have to pump every 2-3 hours. I am in food and beverage, am a food and beverage manager at hotel in Boone. It is fast paced. And when I set aside time to pump, it can be really hard, can be the worst timing. So hard to keep that job. That's really it, I am the one taking care of her." – Parent, Watauga County*
  - *"I would love for there to be more child-friendly employers. Having flexibility to bring kids in or work from home. And maybe building it into your salary and offering onsite childcare." – Parent, Watauga County*

Socialization is often an irreplaceable benefit to external childcare providers.

- Socialization can be just as important for the parents/guardians as for the children.
  - *"We're here with no family, so that is a bit tough. My struggle, and what I have loved Children's Council for, is trying to build that community for [my grandson]. You know, I wasn't in that world 8 months ago, my biggest thing is building that community, socializing him. When you go in groups, younger parents with new babies, I won't say I don't fit in, but it's not as easy, so just making sure he has a community is important to me. I do have childcare, couldn't do it without it." – Parent, Watauga County*
  - *"We don't really get out much, don't know a lot of people here, so socialization is an issue. Also a single mom and doing it all yourself can be hard." – Parent, Watauga County*
  - *"If it weren't for programs like this, meeting other families would be hard. And then socialization can't happen. So having more socialization and events. Also, anything to help children learn other languages. I speak Spanish but don't want to be the only one to do it. More language programs." – Parent, Watauga County*

WAYNE COUNTY FINDINGS

Facilitating Organization	Date of Listening Session	Group Type	# of Participants
Wayne Action Group for Economic Solvency	August 9th, 2022	Parents / Caregivers	19
Wayne Action Group for Economic Solvency	August 9th, 2022	Providers	30

Attendees in the parent group consisted of parents of young children (including guardians, and grandparents) enrolled in early childhood education and childcare programs, and community partners who provide childcare information, referrals, and resources to parents. Within this group, 14 identified as Black / African American, four as not a member of the BIPOC community, and one as Multiracial/multicultural.

Attendees in the provider group consisted of early childhood educators in Wayne County who provide early learning services to develop infants, toddlers, and pre-school children to prepare them for kindergarten readiness. Within this group, 17 identified at Black / African American, three as not a member of the BIPOC community, three as Asian, three as White / Caucasian, and four as Latinx.

Quick summary of Wayne:

Providers & Parents/Caregivers VALUE…	Providers & Parents / Caregivers NEED…
• The education that childcare facilities provide • Specialized training and facilities for children with special needs • Having parents involved in their child's education	• Specialist training to help educate children with special needs • Additional pay for teachers that reflects their value • Childcare options that have extended / flexible hours, are affordable, and provides transportation

Parents recognize the value of education that teachers provide in the childcare setting. And providers love their job and are passionate about teaching children.

- However, educators acknowledge the stress of the job, especially given that they are not paid enough for what they do. They would like to be compensated for the value that they bring to the community.
    - *"All parents are not teachers. Facilities provide an education for children." – Parent, Wayne County*
    - *"The most satisfying thing is when a child grasps the idea of what you're trying to teach them." "The most dissatisfying thing is not getting the raises. Not being paid for what you know you do." – Provider, Wayne County*
    - *"I love the job but it's a whole lot of stress on the veteran teachers." – Provider, Wayne County*
    - *"If I was governor for a day, I would give $10,000 bonuses to teachers every year." – Provider, Wayne County*

Both parents and providers want teachers in the classroom who are trained in caring for special needs children.

- This is a gap in the classroom, currently. Teachers feel they are unable to provide the kind of care and special attention that children with special needs need in order to grow and develop. And parents feel that their children with special needs do not have the teacher resources available, which erodes trust in leaving them with a childcare provider.
    - *"Facilities do not meet the needs of special needs children." – Provider, Wayne County*
    - *"Special needs parents have no confidence in providers. The teachers could be more educated in how to care for children with special needs and following the IEP." – Parent, Wayne County*
    - *"The children with special needs should be together because they learn different, instead of being in the room with children who learn the normal way." – Provider, Wayne County*
- While teachers are sometimes given documentation to track a child with special needs who is placed in their classroom, they are given little direction on how to do that. And they often lack the staffing to help in the classroom of children with special needs.
    - *"We have no training on autism. We have to bring someone in to show us how to handle these behaviors. The child is just placed in our classroom and we are told to 'track' the child." – Provider, Wayne County*
    - *"The children with special needs should be together because they learn different, instead of being in the room with children who learn the normal way." – Provider, Wayne County*
    - *"You want to reach all the children, but you just can't put a third person to teach in the classroom." – Provider, Wayne County*

Parents often do not know where to turn to learn about childcare resources.

- They often rely on friends and family to share information. This is especially true for resources like early Head Start or for children with special needs.
    - *"Parents of children with disabilities don't know what kind of centers specialize in that care." – Parent, Wayne County*
    - *"Information about early head start could be provided at the pediatrician so that caregivers with babies could learn more." – Parent, Wayne County*
    - *"Information about early head start could be provided at the pediatrician so that caregivers with babies could learn more." – Parent Wayne County*
    - *"I asked friends and family first. They were able to give firsthand knowledge of how it worked." – Parent, Wayne County*

Both parents and providers would like more parental involvement in the classroom. Parents would also like extended childcare hours, more affordable childcare, and transportation to / from childcare.

- Providers want parents to have better insight into what benefits children, like getting to school on time, being involved with daily activities, keeping children home when they are sick, and getting a good night's sleep. Parents would like to volunteer more in the classroom (limited due to COVID) and would like more parent trainings.
    - *"Maybe we should have required training for parents." – Provider, Wayne County*
    - *"Open the doors back to volunteering." – Parent, Wayne County*
- Extended hours, more affordable childcare, and transportation would ease the burden on parents. Caregivers often need extended hours to account for medical appointments, distance driving to / from the center, working hours, or cost of gas.
    - *"We need more funding and resources for transportation." – Parent, Wayne County*
    - *"If you're not there at a certain time to pick up they will take your child away somewhere." – Parent, Wayne County*
    - *"My sister pays more in childcare than she does her rent." – Parent, Wayne County*

WILSON COUNTY FINDINGS

Facilitating Organization	Date of Listening Session	Group Type	# of Participants
AMEXCAN	August 13th, 2022	Parents / Caregivers	9

All parents in the group identified as Hispanic. Groups were conducted in Spanish and translated to English. Analysis took place on the English transcripts and quotes below are the English translations.

Quick summary of Wilson:

Parents VALUE…	Parents NEED…
• Hispanic customs and culture and the pride in providing childcare themselves • Additional education and resources for both themselves, as parents, and to help their child succeed when entering school	• Spanish-speaking providers • Access to information about support and resources • Affordable childcare options or help in accessing vouchers / free Pre-K • Removing barriers and stigma to increase access to resources

All parents provide their own childcare, primarily because they do not trust others to provide the same level of care, education, and cultivation of culture that they can.

- While not explicitly stated, parents may be feeling a lack of belonging or a fear of discrimination that may preclude them from entrusting their children to an outside provider.
- Parents have a strong desire to preserve their Hispanic culture while living in the US. For example, some find that the food offered in childcare facilities is too "American" and does not offer fresh fruits and vegetables or the variety of options that they would provide in the home. Almost all parents in the group chose "honoring culture and customs" as one of the top three factors when choosing a childcare facility, which is more than any other county who participated in the listening sessions.
    - *"Because the children are used to eating something, and then they are given something else that they don't like. Latinos have different food customs. People colloquially known as gringos eat more bread, spaghetti, that sort of thing." – Parent, Wilson County*
    - *"Yes, in that respect food is very poor. Before my child started pre-K, she used to eat vegetables. I would cook vegetable soup for her or rice with vegetables. As soon as she started on pre-K, she doesn't want my food anymore. She is now used to eating that food." – Parent, Wilson County*
    - *"The Hispanic culture tends to get lost when living here in the US." – Parent, Wilson County*
- Parents want providers to speak Spanish, both for the parents to better understand how their child is doing and to help with preserving Spanish fluency for their children. However, finding trusted providers who speak Spanish is a challenge.
    - *"No, [providers] do not understand Spanish. In school, everything is in English. They will learn English there, but now, they need to learn Spanish, because otherwise it escapes them." – Parent, Wilson County*
- A few parents have had their children in an outside childcare facility at one point but felt that they children were mistreated or not treated to the same standards that they would have as parents. It is unclear from the groups if this was because of racial or ethnic discrimination.
    - *"With me, are well cared for; we can tell them what is good and what is bad. When they are in childcare, sometimes they are not paid attention. If they pay attention to one kid, they do not pay attention to the other, they are not so watchful of all of them." – Parent, Wilson County*
    - *"It already happened to me that my children were badly treated. I only realized it because later, when the moms noticed that the person who was looking after them was horrible to them." – Parent, Wilson County*
- These parents have the ability to stay home and provide care for their parents. If both parents were working, then they may explore outside childcare options, but only as a last resort.
    - *"Obviously, [outside care] is never going to treat them like we do, but if I was working or a working single mom, then at that point there is no other option than to take them to childcare." – Parent, Wilson County*

Some also find outside childcare expensive or the hours too limited for their needs.

- Especially for those who are in a single income family, the high cost of outside childcare means it's more economical for them to provide childcare themselves.
    - *"If I took them to childcare, it would cost a lot. I would have to work just to pay for the childcare. So I do not work and care for them myself." – Parent, Wilson County*
    - *"My child was not accepted there [free pre-K] just based on those requirements. You have to be a family on a really low income for the child to be able to study or be accepted." – Parent, Wilson County*
- Underlying the trust and affordability issue is the fact that parents often have to provide documentation for vouchers or enrollment. This documentation prevents a barrier to access to outside childcare. While some

parents are aware of vouchers, they are not enough to cover the cost of childcare, when considering the other expenses families have.

- *"For example, I went to apply, but I was asked for tax papers, and it depends on the income. So, for that issue, they didn't call me. They should not have too many requirements. I think my child would have enrolled, but since they asked for the taxes, they didn't call me." – Parent, Wilson County*
- *"Electricity, clothing, insurance, gas…what money do you have left? If you have more than one child, the expenses are much higher." – Parent, Wilson County*
- *"Clothing and sometimes food is really expensive. Everything is super expensive. Here, if you don't have a car, you are nothing. You have to be able to move. If we live far away from the kindergarten or wherever we take our kids, we spend money on gas. The government is not considering that." – Parent, Wilson*
- *"You have to earn $200 a week. There are places where if you earn $500 a week you no longer qualify." – Parent, Wilson County*

- In addition, parents need childcare that is more accommodating to the hours that they need. Some need non-traditional hours (either earlier or later hours) or a place that offers just a few hours a week, both of which are hard to find. And some would like childcare for children who are four or five years old.
  - *"I am looking for some place where he will be accepted for just three days. I was offered something, but it is too much time. They want to charge more than $200 for an entire week, $155 for just three days." – Parent, Wilson County*
  - *"There are programs that help with children, but these are programs from the 1st to 3rd year. Children that are already in their 4th year can no longer access. So help for kids who are in their 4th and 5th year." – Parent, Wilson County*

However, parents do want and need additional resources to allow them to be a more active participant in their child's education and which allow them to be a more informed parent.

- Parents would like resources that could help them with their children's homework or help them be better parents. However, parents often do not know where to look and rely on word of mouth to learn about programs or opportunities.
  - *"I think there are services that do support children, only sometimes parents do not know about it, because I didn't know." – Parent, Wilson County*
  - *"I like attending meetings like these, because they allow you to learn more. So these meetings are very helpful for us to better understand the education for our children." – Parent, Wilson County*
  - *"We need something for the children's learning and development. For some children are born in October or November. For those children, something like a kindergarten center, something that can help them for when they enter kindergarten, as they start late, right? Like a helping center. Because, for example, I have heard her story - her child needs to find a kindergarten but the cost to help him is very high. So, I feel that in the kindergarten he is going to be kind of behind, so I feel a center should be provided for children who cannot access at a younger age." – Parent, Wilson County*
  - *"Also the English language, because we don't speak so much English, also to be able to teach them with homework. Sometimes we need help." – Parent, Wilson County*
  - *"Sometimes there are [options] but we, the parents, don't look for them, or we do not know where to look." – Parent, Wilson County*

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