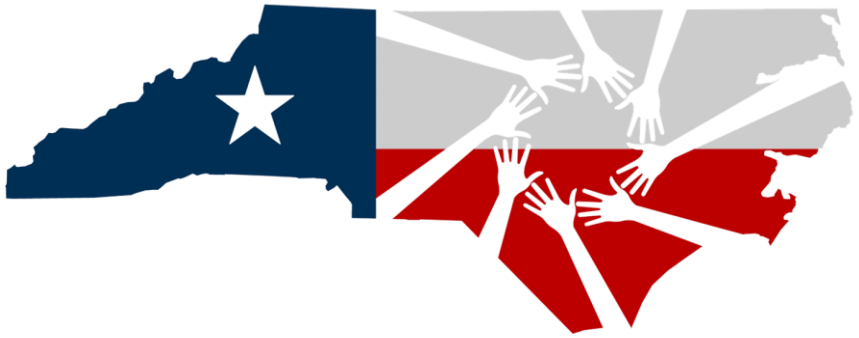


NC Listening Tour Data Release

Amplifying the voices of NC's parents and childcare providers

NC Child, CANDL, & TLG | May 2023

The Link Group

Smarter Research. Better Service.

Program Objective:

CANDL and NC Child would like to move towards a publicly funded system in NC, where education (ECE) is a public good and is equitable, culturally responsive, and early childhood relevant to parents, teachers, and providers.

To ensure that the voices and needs of parents, teachers, and providers are heard, a listening tour will be 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.

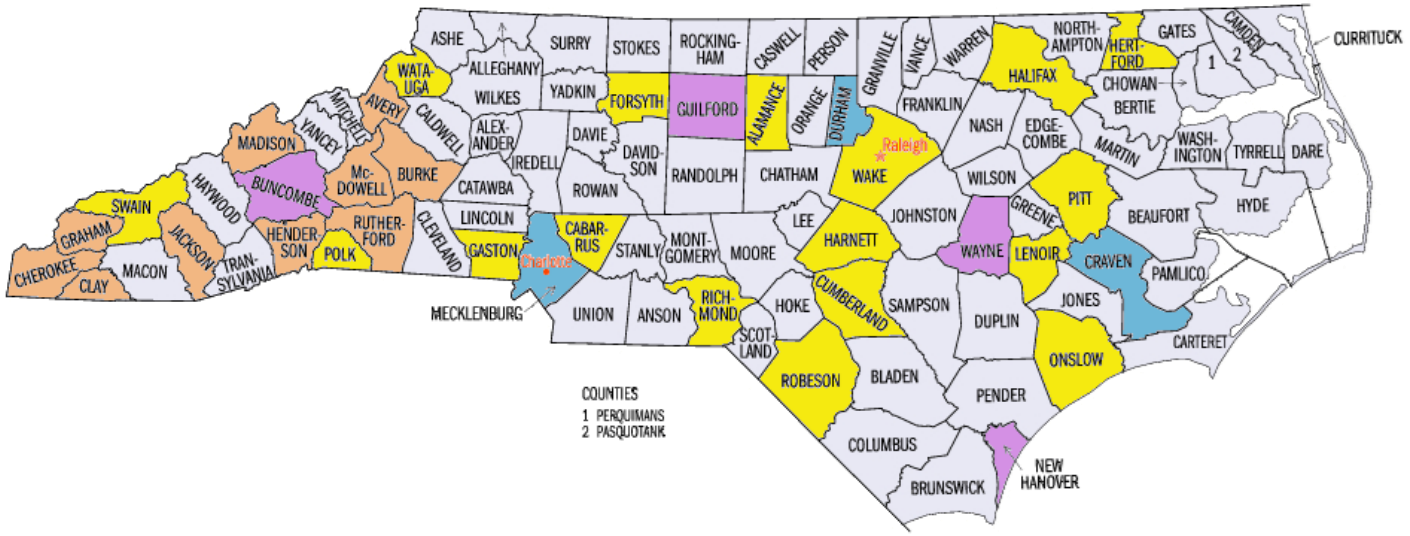
Methodology

Six Pilot Sessions Across 3 counties: February 2022

49 Listening Sessions Across 30 counties: March 2022-February 2023

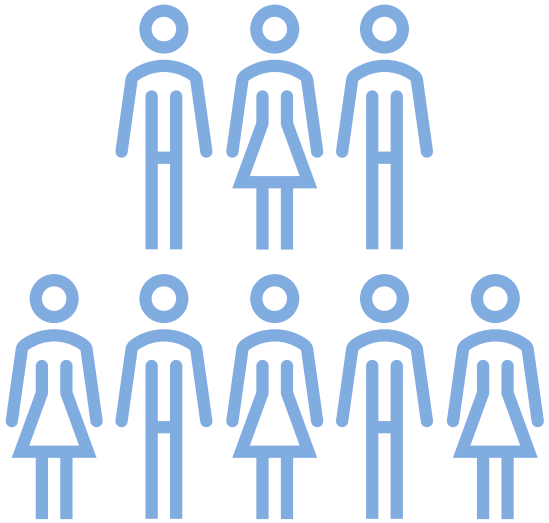
Gather preliminary findings & understand how discussion and logistics could be optimized before rolling out throughout rest of state

- Each session facilitated by experienced facilitator from community
- Discussion tailored based on needs of group
- Conducted either in-person, virtually, or a hybrid and recorded
- Each participant received an honorarium and typically provided a meal in appreciate for their time and perspective



Number of Respondents

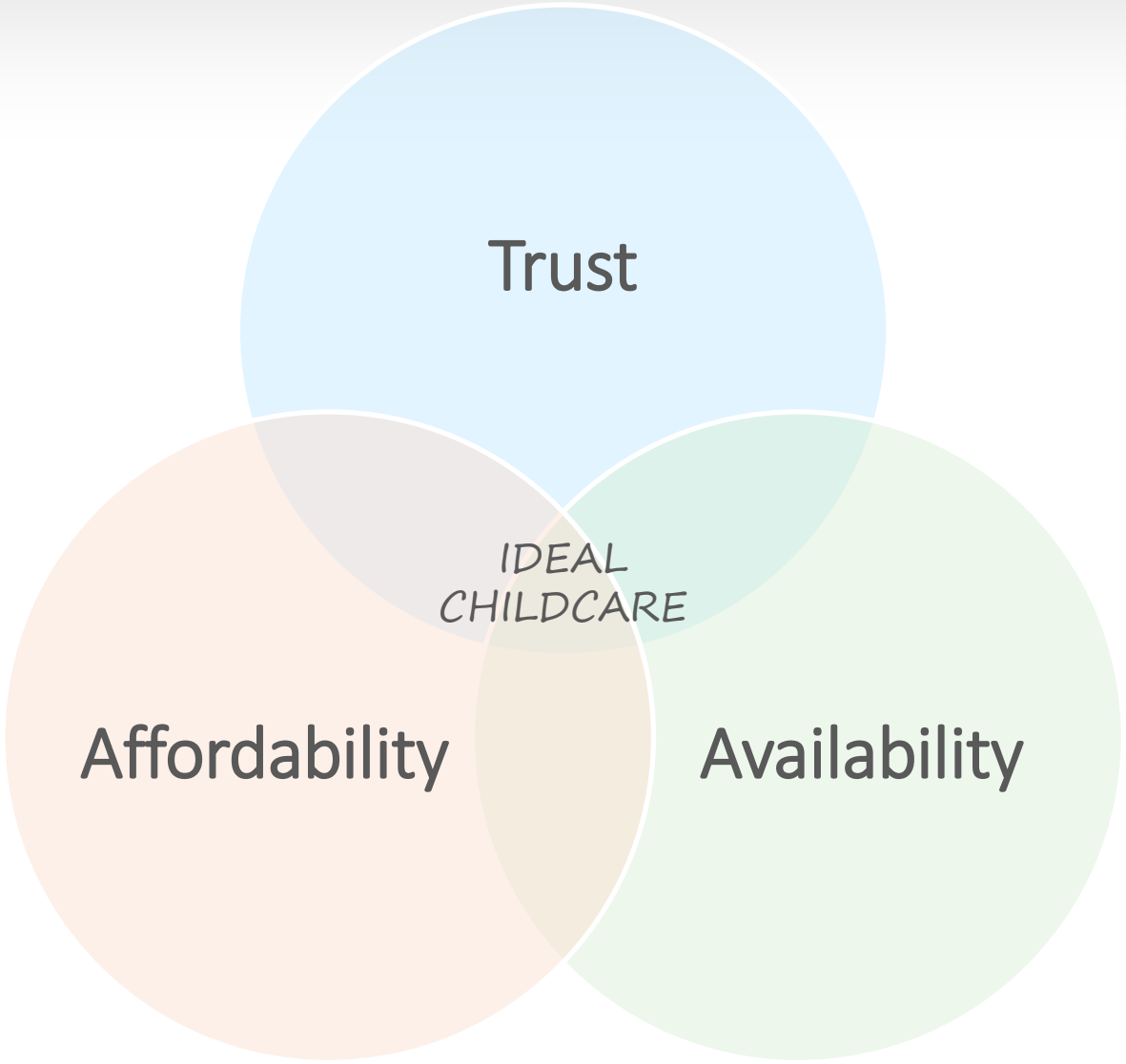
Respondent Type	Base Size
Parents / Caregivers	302
Childcare Providers	212
Total	514



Race	Base Size
Asian	6
Black / African-American	191
Indigenous	5
Latinx / Hispanic	83
Multiracial / Multicultural	9
Person of Color	11
Not part of the BIPOC community / White	123

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



Across all counties who participated in the listening sessions, parents and providers define QUALITY CHILDCARE as a three-legged stool.

Without one of these legs, childcare is closed off to parents, or parents must settle or make hard sacrifices.

Providers aim to provide these same three factors to their parents and are frustrated when they cannot.

Trust

Passionate, loving teachers

Well-trained providers

Provider reputation

Childcare reliability

Representation & Diversity

Affordability

Vouchers

Free or low-cost childcare options

Provider grants and funding

Availability

Well cared for providers

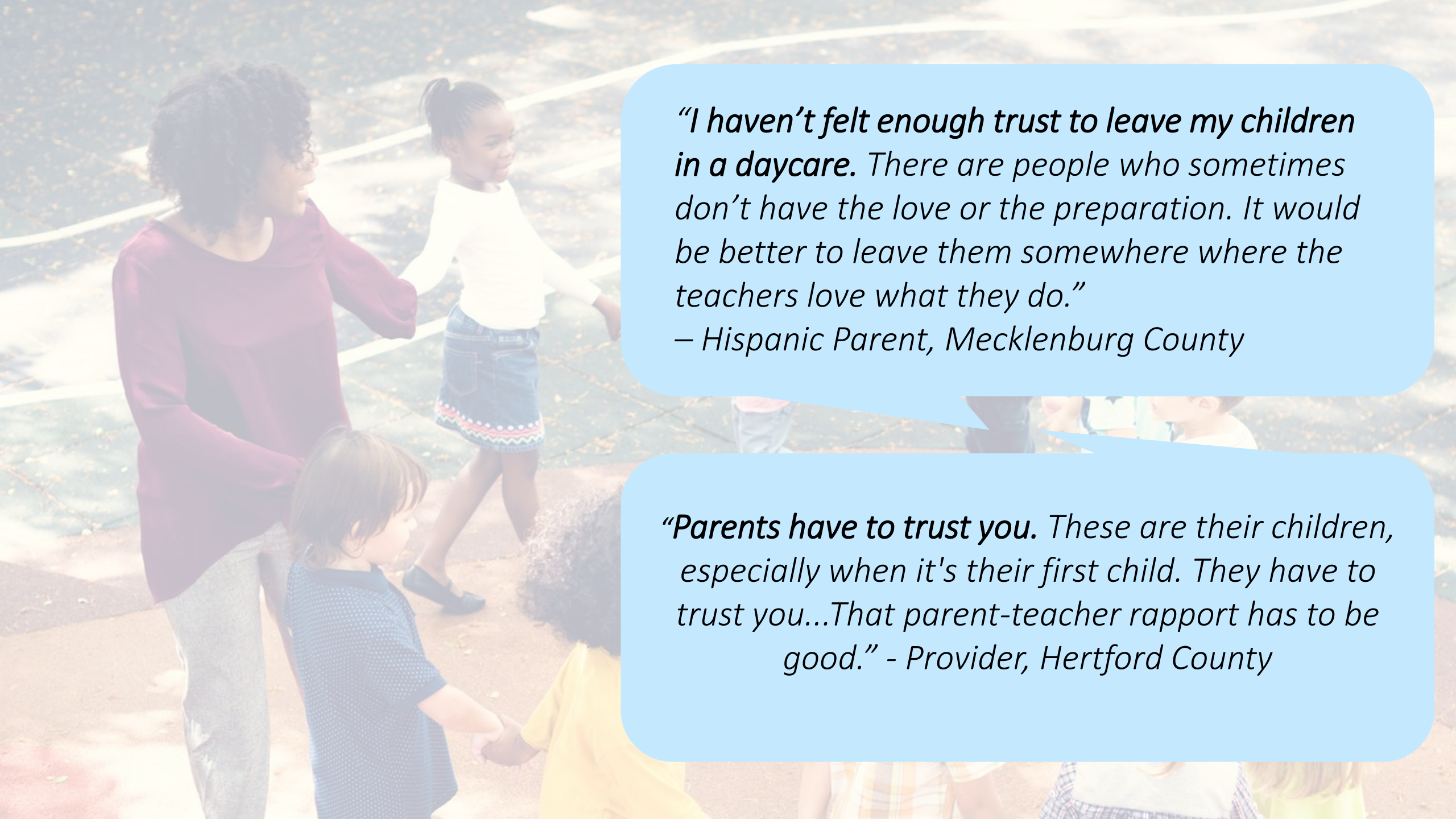
Short transportation times

No wait lists

Accommodating childcare hours

Resources in multiple languages

Centralized information



*"**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*

Parents want to know that their child will be safe, well-cared for, and learn new things. Trust manifests differently for parents and providers:

Passionate, loving teachers

Well-trained providers

Provider reputation

Childcare reliability

Representation & Diversity

- **Parents want providers who love what they do and want to be there for children.** This energy is usually the basis for a trusting relationship among parent-provider-child.
- **Many parents and providers think of each other as family** because of the close bonds they form with one another and with the 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 is the lack of providers who are passionate about this calling.

Parents want to know that their child will be safe, well-cared for, and learn new things. Trust manifests differently for parents and providers:

Passionate, loving teachers

Well-trained providers

Provider reputation

Childcare reliability

Representation & Diversity

More than a babysitter. Parents want to know that providers are properly trained in ECE and can teach appropriate social, emotional, and behavioral skills to students. Providers want to be seen as more than a babysitter; they both want children to create a solid foundation for life-long learning.

Parents want to be sure that providers are properly trained and able to deal with children with special needs and abilities, such as autism and Down's Syndrome. 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.

Parents want to know that their child will be safe, well-cared for, and learn new things. Trust manifests differently for parents and providers:

Passionate, loving teachers

Well-trained providers

Provider reputation

Childcare reliability

Representation & Diversity

- Many parents rely on the word of mouth and recommendations from family and friends to find a provider, because:
  - They trust first-hand accounts more
  - Most don't know where to access information about providers

> *"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*

- Providers understand how important that word of mouth reputation is, which is why they spend so much time looking for the right staffing needs for their center or home.

- Many wish there was a centralized location where they could find information about the providers.

Parents want to know that their child will be safe, well-cared for, and learn new things. Trust manifests differently for parents and providers:

Passionate, loving teachers

Well-trained providers

Provider reputation

Childcare reliability

Representation & Diversity

- Trust means the provider being open when they say they will and having consistency of staffing.
- **Staffing turnover erodes trust** because it means parents have to start over in building and establishing a relationship with the provider.
- **Many in-home providers often forgo their own medical needs because it would otherwise mean having to close for the day,** which would impact their reliability and parent trust.

Parents want to know that their child will be safe, well-cared for, and learn new things. Trust manifests differently for parents and providers:

Passionate, loving teachers

Well-trained providers

Provider reputation

Childcare reliability

Representation & Diversity

Parents want to see themselves and their child represented by the provider:

- ***Speaking the same language:*** parents and providers want to be able to communicate with one another and to preserve language fluency in children.
- ***Respecting diversity:*** parents want their child (and themselves) to be respected no matter their language, background, or skin color, adding to safety and trust.
- ***Celebrating diversity:*** parents would like providers to celebrate different holidays and customs.

"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. 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 or kin care setting.

Strong bond among parent, child and provider creates more trust.

Settings often have fewer children, more attention paid to the child, and more flexibility for parents.

"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

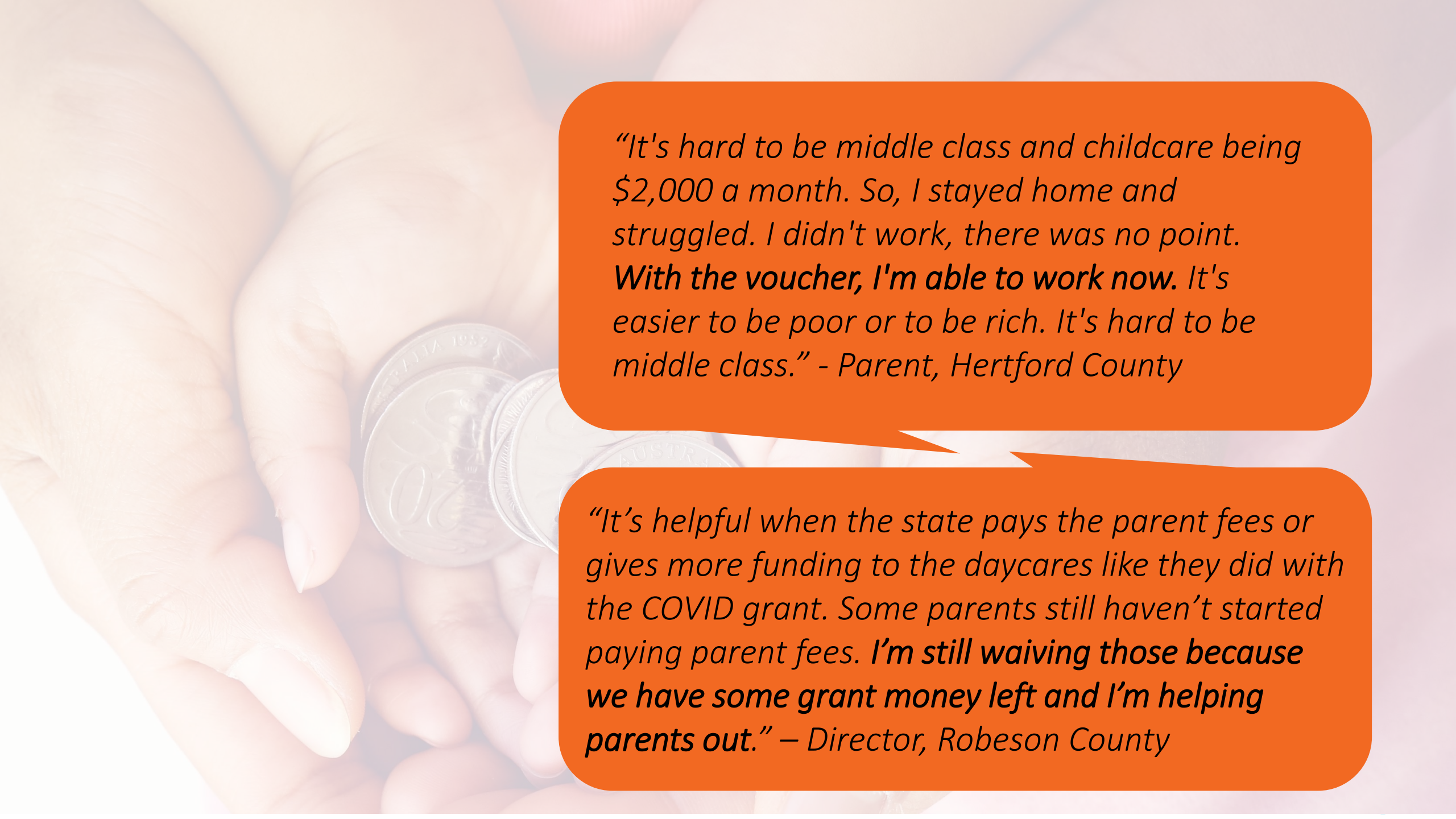
Star ratings do not translate to trust and are often a barrier to childcare.

Vast majority of parents are either not aware of star ratings or do not use it as an indicator of trust.

Some see stars as inequitable because providers with more stars are more expensive and not all providers have opportunity to earn stars.

"The more stars the more expensive. I know someone who provides in-home didn't have the time or money to get the five-star rating. We don't care about stars anymore. You're talking about families who 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

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 funding
Star ratings creating an inequitable system for both parents and providers	• Re-examine how "quality" is defined in QRIS so that it better aligns with parents' definition of quality (i.e., trust factors) • Provide funding to help centers earn star ratings • Ensure four-and-five star facilities accept children from all backgrounds 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.



"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*

"It's helpful when the state pays the parent fees or gives more funding to the daycares like they did with the COVID grant. 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*

While few parents mention sacrificing food or shelter for childcare, childcare costs mean parents often sacrifice other bills or pursuit of dreams / careers to keep their job that pays the childcare bills.

Vouchers

Free or low-cost childcare options

Provider grants and funding

Childcare subsidies (vouchers) do not adequately meet parents' needs and some find that they are discriminatory.

- Many families struggle to pay the parent fee, especially when they have to account for other family expenses. And some make just over the threshold to qualify for vouchers.

Some of us are doing the best we can and trying to do better. 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 find it difficult to qualify for vouchers.

- Vouchers create a social stigma.

"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. ***I think my child would have enrolled, but since they asked for the taxes, they didn't call me.*** *" – Hispanic Parent, Wilson County*

While few parents mention sacrificing food or shelter for childcare, childcare costs mean parents often sacrifice other bills or pursuit of dreams / careers to keep their job that pays the childcare bills.

Vouchers

Free or low-cost childcare options

Provider grants and funding

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.

However, many parents feel they don't have a choice: they would prefer to work and provide better financial stability for their family, but the cost of childcare means most of their paycheck would go towards childcare.

"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, Hartnett County*

Some trade off duties with the other parent or partner. This can create significant mental and emotional strain.

While few parents mention sacrificing food or shelter for childcare, childcare costs mean parents often sacrifice other bills or pursuit of dreams / careers to keep their job that pays the childcare bills.

Vouchers

Free or low-cost childcare options

Provider grants and funding

- Those who do work find that the cost of childcare significantly cuts into their paycheck, meaning they cannot be as financial independent as they would like.
- They must keep a close eye on the budget or forgo medical needs in order to afford childcare.
- Those with inconsistent income struggle to piece together childcare so they can look for work. This can be expensive and add to 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*

While few parents mention sacrificing food or shelter for childcare, childcare costs mean parents often sacrifice other bills or pursuit of dreams / careers to keep their job that pays the childcare bills.

Vouchers

Free or low-cost childcare options

Provider grants and funding

Many providers worry about the future, once COVID grant money runs out. Providers often need additional funding or grant money to pay for expenses and staff and rely on funds to stay open. Some use grant money to help parents with their parent fees (those on vouchers).

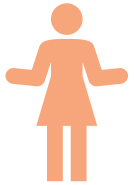
> *"If the government finds the funds to support our industry, then we will be open and be able to meet the needs of all families. We can't do our jobs of having fully opened classrooms if we don't have the workforce to man them. We can't get the workforce without the funds.* ***We were already at crisis level for staffing, but then if that [COVID grant] money disappears, we're going to hit a new crisis level.*** *" – Provider, New Hanover*

Qualifying for grants is an ongoing burden for providers and directors. This adds to their mental strain and burnout, especially as they feel an obligation to be open for parents and children.

Star ratings contribute to the high cost of childcare, discriminating against lower-income families and putting providers at a disadvantage.

Some providers stive to keep prices low to cater to parents of all income levels. However, this impacts their ability to receive stars and impacts perceived quality of childcare.

"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



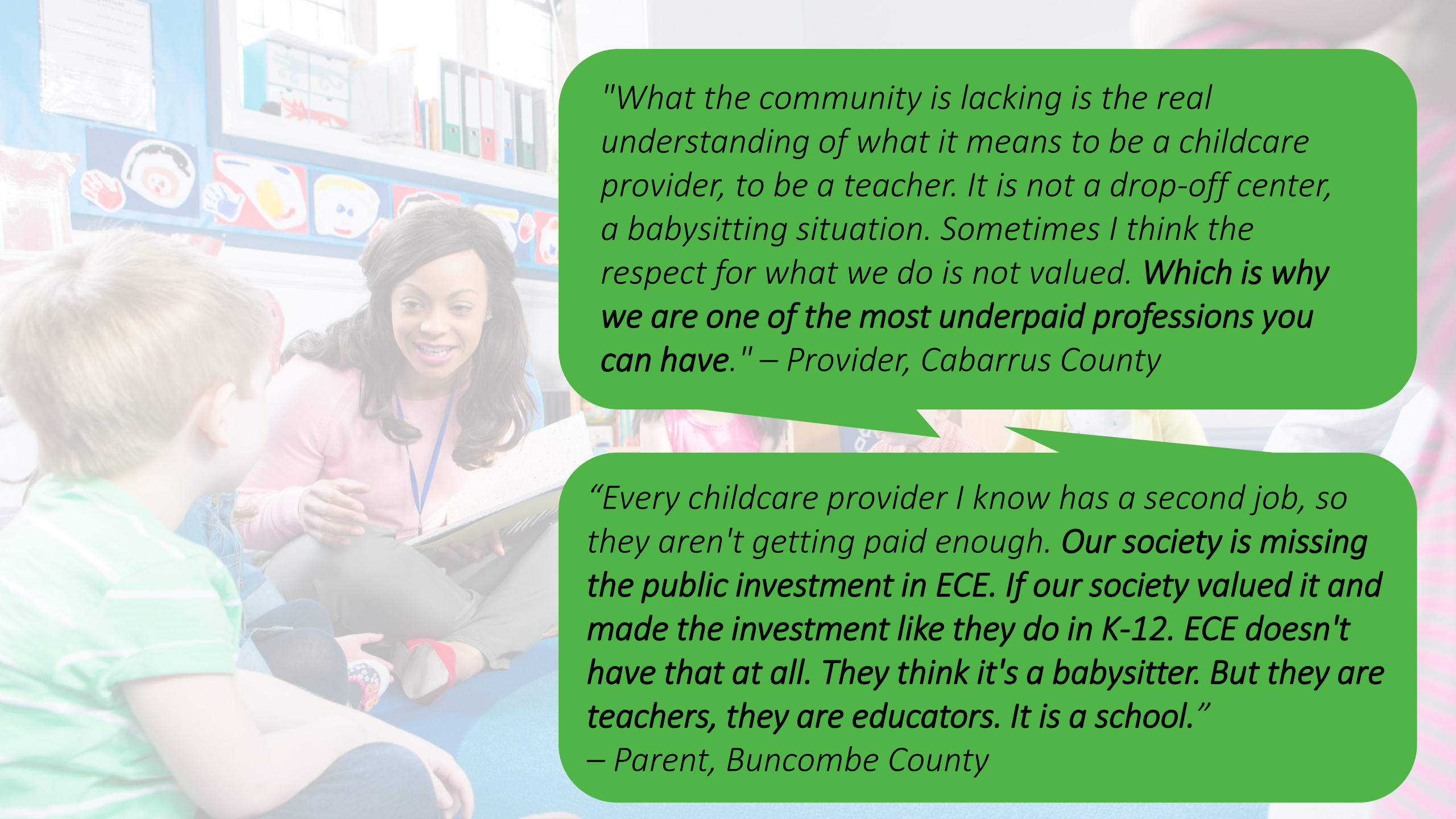
Staffing shortages impact star rating. Providers struggle to keep up funding and may not have enough funding to pay staff more, which impacts star ratings.

"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 the state caters more to those centers who have 4 and 5 star ratings. Providers want more equity among providers and work as an industry to lower childcare costs.

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

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, the impact on families, and the economic opportunity cost on the state • Lower 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 to create more equity and stability in childcare costs
An outdated and ineffective voucher system	• Increase education around voucher availability and qualification • Raise the earnings ceiling for voucher qualification • Allow vouchers to be used for all childcare settings, including in-home or kin care. Ensure equitable reimbursement rates across settings. • Ensure all parents have access to vouchers • Allow an unemployment grace period with vouchers • Expand the number of centers who accept vouchers so parents don't have to tradeoff quality for affordability
The use of star ratings to allocate funding to providers or set childcare pricing	• Provide incentives / require highly rated star centers to accept vouchers and/or families from all socio-economic backgrounds • Provide funding to help centers earn star ratings
Availability of childcare centers hinging on grant opportunities	• More equitable grant allocation so all centers have access to funding • Ensure grants are given for longer periods of time • Address staffing shortages and pay issues to eliminate grant needs



"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*

"Every childcare provider I know has a second job, so they aren't getting paid enough. ***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

A shortage of childcare options across the state is driven by lack of centers / facilities and staff shortages. This fuels long wait lists, both for facility and in-home care.

Well cared for providers

Short transportation times

No wait lists

Accommodating childcare hours

Resources in multiple languages

Centralized information

There is high turnover in the industry because providers are burned out and undervalued.

Providers feel underappreciated by the community, state, and some parents.

Providers are overwhelmed because they don't have all the resources and trainings to help them succeed in their role. They need mental health resources, which are scarce.

Providers are undervalued and are not paid according to the value they provide.

"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, Hartnett County*

A shortage of childcare options across the state is driven by lack of centers / facilities and staff shortages. This fuels long wait lists, both for facility and in-home care.

Well cared for providers

Short transportation times

No wait lists

Accommodating childcare hours

Resources in multiple languages

Centralized information

- In those counties with fewer childcare options, the distance between home, work, and childcare can be a burden and deter parents from seeking outside childcare options.
- Parents often drive up to 30 minutes to access childcare, impacting finances (gas money) and work hours.
- Issue is worse when childcare has limited hours or is a NC Pre-K classroom that follows school hours. This shortened day, impacted by long travel times, means parents are limited in their job opportunities.

"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*

A shortage of childcare options across the state is driven by lack of centers / facilities and staff shortages. This fuels long wait lists, both for facility and in-home care.

Well cared for providers

Short transportation times

No wait lists

Accommodating childcare hours

Resources in multiple languages

Centralized information

- **Staffing shortage and limited childcare options in some counties create extremely long waiting lists.**
- Waiting lists create stress and frustration for parents, as it limits employment opportunities and contribute to inequities in access.
- Some feel the difficulty in opening in-home centers contributes to childcare shortages in their county.
- Parents and providers feel the waiting lists create a sense of competition and elitism among centers: the more highly valued centers have the long wait lists, which means they can charge more.

A shortage of childcare options across the state is driven by lack of centers / facilities and staff shortages. This fuels long wait lists, both for facility and in-home care.

Well cared for providers

Short transportation times

No wait lists

Accommodating childcare hours

Resources in multiple languages

Centralized information

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

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 work in the gig economy.

Without flexible or non-traditional hours available, parents often rely on drop-in centers and family / kin care, which may be expensive and places additional burden on family and friends.

"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." – Parent, Lenoir County

A shortage of childcare options across the state is driven by lack of centers / facilities and staff shortages. This fuels long wait lists, both for facility and in-home care.

Well cared for providers

Short transportation times

No wait lists

Accommodating childcare hours

Resources in multiple languages

Centralized information

- Immigrant parents, or those parents who do not speak English fluently, often feel that childcare options are not available to them.
- Parents struggle to find information about childcare options and resources about financial assistance for childcare in Spanish.
- Most providers in centers do not speak Spanish (or other languages) fluently. Relying on children, Google Translate, or a single translator in the facility doesn't create trust, inclusion or belonging.
- Some parents need legal status to enroll child, which prevents some families from looking into ECE options.

A shortage of childcare options across the state is driven by lack of centers / facilities and staff shortages. This fuels long wait lists, both for facility and in-home care.

Well cared for providers

Short transportation times

No wait lists

Accommodating childcare hours

Resources in multiple languages

Centralized information

- Counties and the state lack a centralized location to access information about childcare and childcare assistance resources.
- Parents wish there was a place to find information about childcare options and parents resources. They currently rely on word of mouth or do their own research.
- Providers also wish they had a centralized location of information to assist parents. They often do their own searches or pull together information based on their own networks.

*"**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*

Barriers to childcare availability	What is needed to address these barriers?
Staffing shortages and high turnover within the childcare industry	• Elevate importance of the childcare provider and demonstrate the value that they bring to a community • Provide mental health support and resources to providers • Provide access to trainings that tie to the individual classroom needs • Provide comparable benefits to public school teachers, including health insurance and retirement • Increase the wages for providers
Long wait times for childcare centers, which adds stress and limits employment options for parents	• Increase the number of centers within a community; reduce the "red tape" for in-home centers • Increase the number of providers in the industry
Long distances to / from centers, resulting in long transportation time	• Increase number of centers, especially rural communities • Work with communities to equitably distribute centers 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

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

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

Our state's childcare crisis is also a crisis among women and is contributing to female burnout.

When childcare scarcity means a parent must sacrifice not working, that responsibility almost always falls on the mother. **This holds women back economically.**

Almost all of the providers who participated were female. Some feel the lack of respect and devaluation of their worth is because they are not seen as the heads of households and so their contribution to the family income is deprioritized.

"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 barriers are more pronounced in the western counties, with greater stress and frustration among parents and providers.

Trust

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

"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*

"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*

Affordability

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

Providers struggle to keep up with their own funding in order to stay open. They cannot increase prices and there is a lag in voucher reimbursement.

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

Availability

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

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

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

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