2023

CandL Listening Session Analysis (Western Counties)

UNDERSTANDING BARRIERS AND FACILITATORS TO CHILDCARE FROM THE VOICES OF PARENTS AND PROVIDERS ACROSS 13 COUNTIES IN WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA

THE LINK GROUP, IN COLLABORATION WITH CANDL

The Link Group

TABLE OF CONTENTS

BACKGROUND & METHODOLOGY	**2**
OVERALL FINDINGS	**4**
Quality childcare is defined by TRUST	**5**
Quality childcare is defined by AFFORDABILITY	10
Quality childcare is defined by AVAILABILITY	15
Other findings	21
COUNTY-BY-COUNTY ANALYSIS	
Avery County	**23**
Buncombe County	**25**
Burke County	**28**
Cherokee County	**30**
Clay County	**31**
Graham County	**34**
Henderson County	**36**
Jackson County	**39**
Madison County	**41**
McDowell County	**44**
Polk County	**47**
Rutherford County	**50**
Swain County	**52**

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. **This report represents 13 counties (18 listening sessions) in the western part of the state.** 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.

Base sizes by respondent type:

County	Parents / Caregivers	Providers	Total
Avery	6	6	**12**
Buncombe	23	10	**33**
Burke	11	4	**15**
Cherokee	8	9	**17**
Clay	-	4	**4**
Graham	2	10	**12**
Henderson	-	17	**17**
Jackson	6	9	**15**
Madison	17	-	**17**
McDowell	9	3	**12**
Polk	8	2	**10**
Rutherford	11	8	**19**
Swain	13	3	**16**
Total	**114**	**85**	**199**

Base sizes by race

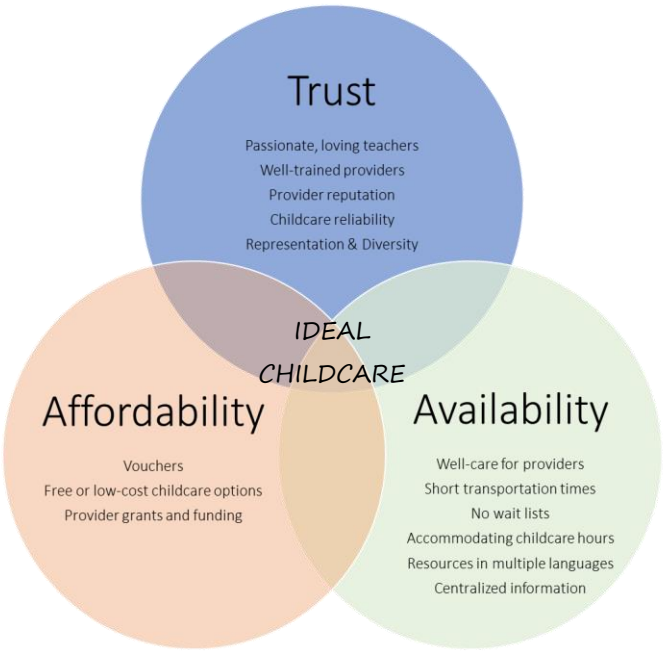
County	Asian	Black / African American	Indigenous	Latinx / Hispanic	Multiracial / Multicultural	Not part of BIPOC community / White	Person of Color
Avery	*Demographic information not collected*						
Buncombe	1	1	-	15	-	12	4
Burke	-	2	-	7	-	3	4
Cherokee	*Demographic information not collected*						
Clay	*Demographic information not collected*						
Graham	*Demographic information not collected*						
Henderson	-	4	-	1	-	7	-
Jackson	-	-	-	2	-	13	-
Madison	-	-	-	-	1	16	-
McDowell	-	1	-	-	1	9	-
Polk	-	1	-	-	1	8	-
Rutherford	-	1	-	10	-	8	-
Swain	-	-	1	8	-	6	-
Total	**1**	**11**	**1**	**43**	**3**	**82**	**8**

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 (and especially in the western part of 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.

The findings from the western counties are consistent with what was heard throughout the rest of the state, indicating that the barriers, facilitators, and needs are universal among North Carolina parents and providers. However, 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*

In particular, the key sources of pronounced tension are heard in the affordability and availability pillars.

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 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.

*"You're **trusting your child with someone for hours**. When they are young and can't be vocal, that's **frightening**."*
– Parent, Madison 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*

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.

"Does reputation count? Yes. No one wants to take their child to a center that isn't clean or has no communication with families. ***People feel more comfortable when it is out there that 'people know xyz facility is friendly and communicative****." – Parent, Buncombe 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.

*"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*

- ***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 are meaningless in counties which already have few childcare options.

- 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*

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

- There were 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.

*"****I don't know the star rating of my child's facility****. I've never asked." – Parent, Graham 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*

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 western 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.

*"Why would I work full time to **give all my money to day care**? I'll just stay home with my child and be broke." – Parent, McDowell 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.

"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.

*"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*

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.
- 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.
- 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.

*"****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*

    - 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.

  - 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.

*"**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*

  - 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.
  - 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.

*"Using a voucher **made me feel downgraded** but I knew it was necessary." – Parent, Avery 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.
- Providers 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*

*"During Covid due to grants **I was able to do free tuition if needed. I can't do that without grants**." – Director, Henderson 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.
- 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.

*"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*

- 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.

*"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*

Quality childcare is defined by availability

While there is a shortage of childcare options across the state, this shortage is especially pronounced in the western counties. Several people used the term "childcare desert" when speaking about childcare in western counties. 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 (and as a result of the shortage), 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.

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*

*"There is an **existing culture of accepting less**. You don't have to go far outside our mountains to learn that urban areas do not accept the same pay level as we do." – Provider, Graham County*

*"It feels like we are **cobbling together care out of scraps**. The elephant in the room is the economy." – Parent, Madison 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*

This lack of childcare options creates long wait times due to a high demand for childcare, 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.

"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*

- **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.

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

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

- **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.

"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*

"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.

- 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*

- 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.
- 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.

"I'm currently not working because my son is on the waitlist (for Head Start). ***I have nowhere dependable to take my son.****" – Parent, Avery 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.

*"****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*

- 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.

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.

*"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*

- 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.

*"We have lots of families that are Hispanic and **not many facilities offer translators for the paperwork**." – Parent, Swain County*

*"One of the biggest needs is more assistance for parents to help understand how to correctly discipline their children. **And specifically to have this information in other languages, aside from English**." – Parent, Rutherford 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 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.

*"****You can't just Google things around here****. It's really hard when you move to this area without family." – Parent, Madison 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.

"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*

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*

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 support developmental daycare for special needs. The closest one is 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	• Adequate compensation

• Flexibility from parents and as providers	• 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*

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*

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*

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*

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 & Providers	12

Three providers participated and nine parents. Two of the providers also identify as parents. Nine of the participants identified as white (including all three providers), one identified as Black (parent), and one as Multicultural / Multiracial (parent). 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*

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*

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*

---END OF REPORT---