Child Care Initiative
North Central Michigan College

Executive Summary

2026 Child Care Landscape Survey

The Child Care Initiative (CCI) at North Central Michigan College is leading development of a community-centered plan for a sustainable, viable child care system in rural Northern Michigan, where a shortage of child care affects parents, employers, and providers alike.

This report presents findings from the 2026 Child Care Landscape Survey, conducted to identify the industry's key challenges, generate solutions, and inform local planning, investment, and data-driven decision-making.

Survey and Methodology

CCI distributed the survey through SurveyMonkey to all 49 licensed early childhood programs in Emmet and Charlevoix counties — first to program directors, who were asked to share it with their staff. The survey ran April 27 through May 31, with four follow-up reminder emails. It drew 58 responses from early care and education professionals: 64% program staff and 36% owners or administrators.

What the Data Show

The results point to a workforce that is deeply committed: most respondents plan to stay in the field long-term, driven by belief in the importance of early childhood and the relationships they build with children and families. That commitment is a significant community asset, one that deserves an equally serious commitment in return from the systems, employers, and policymakers who benefit from it.

That commitment comes at a cost. 52% of staff report feeling emotionally exhausted always or often, and more than a third say stress significantly affects whether they stay in their positions. Most respondents identify as professionals who pursue credentials and ongoing training, yet the field's national median wage is $13.07 per hour — lower than 97% of all other occupations — and annual raises of “a few cents” are common. This gap between professional identity and professional compensation is longstanding; this report adds local data and a local voice to that conversation.

The region also has a strong foundation to build on: licensed programs engaged with quality systems, experienced administrators, passionate staff, and infrastructure already in place through MiRegistry, Great Start to Quality, and CDC scholarship participation. The goal of this work is not simply to stabilize a strained system, but to build one worthy of the people who work in it and the families who depend on it.

Key Findings

Survey responses were analyzed for key themes across five impact areas: Workforce, Capacity, Affordability, Quality, and Accessibility.

Workforce

- The workforce is highly experienced and committed: **77%** of administrators have 10+ years in the field, and **80%** plan to stay until retirement.

- Passion for working with children drives recruitment (**91%** of staff); meaningful relationships, flexible scheduling, and supportive environments drive retention.
- **52%** of staff report feeling emotionally exhausted always or often — a significant workforce challenge.
- Top stressors are challenging child behaviors (**81%**), staffing shortages (**67%**), and workload — pointing to a need for more staffing, behavioral support, and planning time.
- **68%** of staff say wages significantly affect their decision to stay, making compensation a central barrier to workforce stability.

Capacity

- **56%** of providers report open slots, but enrollment is often intentionally capped due to staffing limits, program design, or quality considerations.
- Staffing, not demand, is the main constraint on growth: **22%** of administrators would enroll more children if additional qualified staff were available.
- Enrollment is concentrated among preschool-age children; infant, toddler, and school-age slots are smaller and more variable.
- Among providers interested in expanding, **71%** need more physical space and **57%** need more funding — with staffing underlying both.
- **76%** of staff say stress or burnout affects their decision to stay at least somewhat, linking capacity directly to retention.

Affordability

- Providers work to balance affordability with sustainability: **53%** charge less than the state's CDC reimbursement rate, and only **24%** charge the true cost of care.
- **69%** of staff say current wages significantly affect their decision to remain in their position.
- Wage growth is modest — raises of “a few cents” are common — and **40%** of administrators report no regular increases at all.
- Benefits access is inconsistent: roughly half of providers and staff report no employer-sponsored benefits.
- **88%** of programs participate in the Child Development and Care (CDC) scholarship program, a critical support for family access to care.

Quality

- Programs define quality mainly through relationships and practice: warm, responsive interactions (**75%** of administrators) and intentional, play-based learning (**65%**).
- **45%** of programs are actively working toward their next Great Start to Quality level.
- Professional development participation is high: **93%** of administrators and **100%** of teachers and staff used MiRegistry in the past year.
- Funding is the top barrier to quality: among administrators who report unmet needs, **100%** cite a need for more funding.

- Access to professional growth isn't equitable: **38%** of staff say they lack the resources to meet their development goals.

Accessibility

- Access is limited more by workforce capacity than by demand: **22%** of administrators would enroll more children with additional staff.
- Most programs serve multiple age groups: **90%** serve preschoolers, and roughly **65%** each serve infants and toddlers.
- Affordability and workforce sustainability are connected: pricing that prioritizes family access often falls below the cost of sustainable operation.
- Public funding is essential to access: **88%** of programs accept CDC scholarships.
- Expansion is possible but requires more physical space, more funding, and support for recruiting and retaining qualified staff.

Recommended Next Steps

These next steps are intended to move from insight to action, addressing both immediate needs and longer-term systems change.

1. Disseminate findings widely.

Share this report with providers, employers, school districts, elected officials, community foundations, and regional economic development organizations. Tailor the format to each audience, for example, a one-page brief for employers, a data summary for policymakers, and a public-facing infographic.

2. Prioritize compensation as the top retention strategy.

Wages, not recruitment, are the primary driver of retention. Treat compensation as a workforce stability investment by advocating for higher CDC reimbursement rates, connecting programs to state and federal wage supplement programs, exploring employer-funded child care stipends, and developing a regional wage floor or compensation benchmark.

3. Launch a MiRegistry awareness campaign, and tie pathway advancement to pay.

With 18–19% of respondents unsure of their Career Pathway level, and 29% of staff unsure of their five-year pathway goals, offer accessible orientations through the Great Start Resource Center, local ISDs, and program directors. Most importantly, link pathway advancement to real pay increases: CCI can support this by developing model wage scale frameworks and exploring incentive programs tied to pathway milestones, so that professional development translates into financial gain.

4. Build a sustained local strategy for challenging child behaviors.

With 81% of staff and 47% of administrators naming this a top stressor, a one-time training is not enough. A meaningful strategy should: expand trauma-informed care training focused on practical, classroom-applicable tools; establish or connect programs to behavioral consultation support, such as an early childhood mental health consultant; and convene a local working group, potentially through CCI and the Great Start Resource Center, to coordinate resources rather than leaving the burden to individual teachers and directors.

5. Help programs close the pricing gap.

Offer financial coaching and support accessing supplemental funding streams, advocate for CDC rate increases that reflect regional market conditions and help providers build business models that sustain both affordable family pricing and competitive staff compensation.

6. Build a pipeline of new educators.

With 41% of staff planning to retire in their current role, succession planning matters. Partner with North Central Michigan College and regional high schools on career pathways into early childhood education, including apprenticeships, stackable credentials, and dual-enrollment opportunities.

7. Establish consistent data collection for longitudinal tracking.

This survey establishes a valuable baseline. CCI intends to repeat it annually to track progress on wage growth, career pathway advancement, capacity utilization, and workforce stability — building a foundation for accountability and informed advocacy.