Child Care Initiative
North Central Michigan College

THE STATE OF CHILD CARE

A Child Care Landscape Assessment for Charlevoix & Emmet Counties

2026

ABOUT CCI

The Child Care Initiative at North Central Michigan College

The undersupply of child care in rural Northern Michigan is a systemic issue impacting parents, prospective parents, local employers, and child care providers. America's child care system—long devalued and underfunded—has been unsustainable in the Little Traverse region and across the country. Yet we know that quality, affordable, and reliable child care is essential for the economic stability of all families.

Our Vision:
A high-quality, accessible early care and education system supported through community connections.

Launched in 2022 with support from the Petoskey-Harbor Springs Area Community Foundation, the Frey Foundation, and the NCMC Foundation, North Central's Child Care Initiative (CCI) is a community-driven effort to build a sustainable, equitable early childhood system in Emmet County.

Through broad engagement with families, child care providers, employers, and community leaders, the initiative has identified the challenges and the opportunities within the child care sector. Addressing the crisis requires innovative solutions, cross-sector collaboration, and a commitment to valuing child care as a foundational component of our social and economic infrastructure. From data collection and community input to innovative solutions, CCI is working to create a child care system where families can find and afford quality care, and professionals are compensated fairly for their vital work.

To learn more about the Child Care Initiative, visit us at: https://www.ncmich.edu/community-events/child-care-initiative/

Introduction

The Child Care Initiative (CCI) at North Central Michigan College is leading the development of a community-centered plan for a sustainable, viable local child care system. Across rural Northern Michigan, the undersupply of child care is a systemic issue that impacts parents and prospective parents, local employers, and child care providers alike.

This report presents findings from the 2026 Child Care Landscape Survey and is intended to identify key challenges facing the child care industry, generate solutions to the industry's most pressing problems, inform local planning and investment, and support data-driven decision-making.

Executive Summary

The CCI conducted a survey of the child care landscape in Emmet and Charlevoix counties in Michigan. The results of this survey revealed several key findings, organized by the five impact areas the CCI identified in its first phase of research, including:

WORKFORCE:

- The early childhood workforce is highly committed and experienced, with 77% of administrators reporting 10 or more years in the field and 80% planning to remain in their positions until retirement.
- Passion for working with children drives recruitment, cited by 91% of staff respondents, while meaningful relationships, flexible scheduling, and supportive environments support retention.
- Burnout and emotional exhaustion are significant workforce challenges, with 52% of staff reporting they feel emotionally exhausted always or often.
- Challenging child behaviors (81%), staffing shortages (67%), and workload demands are the primary sources of stress, highlighting the need for additional staffing, behavioral support, and planning time.
- Compensation and financial constraints remain major barriers to workforce stability, with 68% of staff reporting that wages have a very significant impact on their decision to stay in their current position.

CAPACITY:

- Many providers are operating below licensed capacity, with 56% reporting available slots; however, enrollment is often intentionally capped due to staffing limitations, program design, or quality considerations.
- Workforce shortages are the primary constraint on expanding access. 22% of administrators reported they would enroll more children if additional qualified staff were available.
- Enrollment is concentrated among preschool-aged children, with infants, toddlers, and school-age children served in smaller and more variable numbers.
- Interest in expansion exists but faces significant barriers: among those seeking to grow, 71% need more physical space, 57% need increased funding, and most identify staffing as the underlying constraint.
- Capacity and retention are closely linked, with 76% of staff reporting that stress or burnout affects their decision to stay at least somewhat.

AFFORDABILITY:

- Child care providers strive to balance affordability with financial sustainability, with 53% charging less than the state's CDC reimbursement rate and only 24% charging the true cost of care.
- Compensation is a major workforce concern, with 69% of staff reporting that their current wages have a very significant impact on their decision to remain in their positions.
- Wage growth occurs but is often modest, with annual increases frequently described as "a few cents" and 40% of administrators reporting they do not receive regular increases at all.
- Access to benefits is inconsistent across the sector, with approximately half of both providers and staff reporting no employer-sponsored benefits.
- Most programs (88%) participate in the Child Development and Care (CDC) scholarship program, which plays a critical role in maintaining family access to care.

QUALITY:

- Programs define quality primarily through relationships and teaching practices, with warm, responsive interactions cited by 75% of administrators and intentional, play-based learning cited by 65%.
- Providers and educators demonstrate a strong commitment to continuous improvement, with 45% of programs working toward their next Great Start to Quality level.
- Professional development participation is high, with 93% of administrators and 100% of teacher and staff respondents reporting use of MiRegistry in the past year.
- Funding, staffing, and compensation challenges remain barriers to quality: among administrators who report not having what they need, 100% cite a need for more funding.
- Access to professional growth opportunities is not always equitable, with 38% of staff reporting they lack the resources needed to meet their professional development goals.

ACCESSIBILITY:

- Child care access is limited more by workforce capacity than by demand, with 22% of administrators reporting they would enroll more children if additional staff were available.
- Most programs provide care across multiple age groups, with 90% serving preschool-aged children, and approximately 65% each serving infants and toddlers.
- Affordability and workforce sustainability are closely connected, with pricing structures that prioritize family access often falling below the cost of sustainable program operations.
- Public funding and subsidy programs are essential to maintaining access, with 88% of programs accepting CDC scholarships.
- Expansion opportunities exist but face significant barriers, including the need for additional physical space, increased funding, and support for recruiting and retaining qualified staff.

Methodology

Survey Design

The 2026 CCI Child Care Landscape Survey was designed to better understand the perspectives of professionals across the early childhood system, including program owners and administrators, program staff, and teachers.

The survey was developed in SurveyMonkey and shared with all licensed early childhood programs in Emmet and Charlevoix counties, which totaled 49. It was initially distributed via email to directors of early childhood programs who were then asked to share the survey with their staff. The survey launched on April 27 and closed on May 31. A total of four follow-up emails were sent during the survey period.

Respondent Overview

A total of 58 individuals responded to the survey. Almost two-thirds of the respondents (64%) identified as staff working in a program that cares for and educates children, while just over one-third (36%) identified as program owners or administrators. See Appendix 1 for a visual summary of respondent demographics by program type, county, and license status.

Owner and Administrator Respondents

Among the 21 program owners and administrators who completed the survey, the largest share represented Child Care Centers (45%), followed by Family Child Care programs (25%), Small-Capacity Centers (20%), and Group Child Care Homes (10%). It should be noted that some program owners and administrators operate multiple programs and/or sites. Almost all respondents operate programs in Emmet County (65%), with the remaining 35% in Charlevoix County. All responding programs reported being licensed.

Programs reported serving a range of age groups, with preschool-aged children being the most served population (90%). Approximately two-thirds of programs serve infants (65%) and toddlers (65%), while less than half (45%) provide care for school-aged children.

Teacher and Staff Respondents

A total of 37 teachers and staff members provided information about the programs in which they work. Most respondents (74%) worked in Child Care Centers, while smaller numbers also described their programs of employment as Small-Capacity Centers (22%), GSRP/Head Start classrooms (19%), Home Visiting Programs (7%), and Group Child Care Homes (4%). No respondents reported working in a Family Child Care program. Most respondents (93%) worked in licensed programs, while 7% worked in licensed-exempt settings. No respondents reported working in unlicensed programs.

Most teacher and staff respondents worked in programs located in Emmet County (78%), while 30% reported working in programs located in Charlevoix County (because respondents could select more than one county, and some programs may operate across county boundaries).

When asked about their position in the program, 50% identified as Lead Teachers and 46% as Assistant Teachers. Respondents most commonly worked with toddlers (59%) and preschool-aged children (56%), followed by infants (41%). Only 15% reported working with school-aged children. These findings suggest that the teacher and staff sample is primarily concentrated in programs serving children from birth through preschool age.

Data Analysis

The survey responses were grouped and analyzed. Both quantitative and qualitative responses were reviewed to identify key themes and trends. The findings were organized into five impact areas: 1) Workforce, 2) Capacity, 3) Affordability, 4) Quality, and 5) Accessibility.

Findings

In its first phase of development, the Child Care Initiative identified five impact areas of the child care system. These areas represent the most pressing challenges in the system, and the areas in which CCI has been intentional about creating solutions. For the purposes of this report, the impact areas are listed in this order: Workforce, Capacity, Affordability, Quality, and Accessibility.

Workforce

Workforce Impact Area: Measures recruitment, retention, qualifications, career pathways, compensation, benefits, stress, burnout, staffing quality, and workforce development.

Owner and Administrator Respondents

Education and Experience

Survey responses from program owners and administrators indicate a highly experienced leadership group within the local early childhood system. Among respondents, 65% identified as administrators and 41% identified as owners, with some individuals serving in both capacities.

More than three-quarters of respondents (77%) reported working in the field for 10 years or more, while the remaining 24% had between four and six years of experience. No respondents reported fewer than four years in the field.

When asked about their educational attainment, more than half of respondents (53%) reported holding an associate degree or higher in early childhood education (P2) or a related field, as recorded in the MiRegistry Career Pathway system. Nearly one-quarter (24%) held a bachelor's degree-level credential (P3), while 12% held a master's degree-level credential (P4). 18% were unsure of their current Career Pathway Level, suggesting an opportunity to increase awareness and utilization of the MiRegistry professional development framework.

Looking ahead, respondents expressed a commitment to continued professional growth. The largest share (41%) indicated that they expect to be at the bachelor's degree level (P3) within five years, an increase of 17%, while 18% anticipated reaching the master's degree level (P4), an increase of 6%. These findings suggest that many program leaders value ongoing education and credential advancement.

All respondents (100%) who answered the question about how they view their role indicated that they see themselves as professionals rather than simply workers.

Recruitment and Retention

Responses to questions about why individuals were attracted to their current positions and what influences their decision to stay highlight a workforce that is largely motivated by factors such as passion for early childhood education, autonomy, and program mission, as well as flexibility and family needs.

When asked about factors that attracted them to their current role, respondents most cited the opportunity to work directly with young children, particularly preschool-aged children, and the ability to make a meaningful impact on families and the community. Several respondents emphasized the ability to shape program direction, exercise creativity, and work in a supportive organizational culture. Personal and family considerations were also present, noting that the position allowed them to stay home with their own children or align work with caregiving responsibilities. Additional factors included living wage opportunities, program location, and alignment with broader community services.

Similarly, responses regarding factors influencing retention reflect flexible scheduling, strong leadership support, autonomy in decision-making, and opportunities for professional growth and program improvement. Respondents also highlighted ongoing community need for services and personal health considerations. Overall job satisfaction was evident in several responses, with some individuals noting simply that they “enjoy it” or find meaning in their work.

When asked about long-term intent, the majority of respondents (80.0%) indicated they plan to remain in their position until retirement. A smaller proportion (13.3%) reported that they may leave for better pay, while another 13.3% selected “other,” including responses indicating conditional commitment based on continued engagement and fulfillment in the role or uncertainty about long-term plans.

Stress and Well-Being

Responses from program owners and administrators indicate that emotional exhaustion is a regular experience for many leaders in the early childhood field. While 20% reported rarely feeling emotionally exhausted and 27% reported never feeling this way, the majority experienced some level of exhaustion, with 40% reporting “Sometimes” and 27% reporting “Often.” A smaller share (13%) reported feeling emotionally exhausted “Always,” suggesting that while severe burnout is not universal, moderate-to-high levels of fatigue are common.

When asked about primary sources of stress, respondents identified multiple overlapping challenges. The most common stressors included financial challenges (47%), challenging child behaviors (47%), and balancing administrative and classroom responsibilities (47%). Administrative workload (33%), supporting staffing needs (33%), staffing shortages (27%), and licensing or regulatory requirements (27%) were also commonly cited. A small number of respondents also noted transitional challenges related to newly opening programs and the emotional demands of daily operations.

Staffing Structure and Qualifications

Responses to staffing composition questions indicate that programs vary considerably in both staffing levels and the distribution of staff across the MiRegistry Career Pathway (see Appendix 2 for complete tables), reflecting a workforce comprised of entry-level, mid-level, and degree-credentialed professionals.

Assistant teacher roles were more frequently concentrated at the F1–P2 levels, particularly at the associate degree (P2) and bachelor’s degree (P3) ranges in some programs. A small number of programs reported larger assistant teacher teams.

For lead teachers, staffing distributions show greater representation at higher credential levels and were commonly reported at the P2 and P3 levels, with some presence at P1 and limited representation at P4.

Perceptions of Staff Stress and Well-Being

Perceptions of staff stress followed a pattern like that of the owner and administrator respondents. The most identified source of stress for staff, as perceived by owners and administrators, was challenging child behaviors (60%), followed by staffing shortages (33%). Additional factors included low wages or financial stress (27%), workload or responsibilities (13%), and limited planning time (13%).

Regarding turnover, 40% of respondents indicated that stress or burnout contributes “Somewhat” to staff turnover, while 27% reported it has “No” impact. Another 33% indicated that burnout contributes “Significantly,” though no respondents identified it as the primary driver of turnover.

When asked about the biggest barriers to improving staff well-being, respondents most frequently cited financial constraints, including low wages, limited budgets, and insufficient resources. Additional barriers included staffing shortages, lack of time, limited opportunities for advancement, and challenges related to program enrollment and revenue stability. Some respondents also pointed to family engagement and child behavior challenges, as well as operational constraints in smaller or family-based programs where providers may work without breaks.

Staff and Teacher Respondents

Education and Experience

When asked where staff and teachers were on the MiRegistry Pathway, the largest share of respondents (33%) reported holding an associate degree in early childhood education (P2), followed by 19% holding a bachelor’s degree (P3). Smaller proportions were distributed across other levels, including 10% at both F1 and P4, and 5% at P1, with no respondents reporting F2, F3, or doctoral-level credentials. A notable 19% selected “Unknown,” indicating some uncertainty about their official pathway designation.

Looking ahead, respondents generally expressed upward career mobility. The largest share (29%) anticipated reaching the bachelor’s level (P3) within five years, an increase of 10%, while 14% expected to reach the master’s level (P4), an increase of 4%. Smaller proportions identified advancement goals across other levels, including movement into higher credential categories (P5 at 5%). However, 29% selected “Unknown,” suggesting that a significant portion of respondents have not clearly defined or formalized their long-term professional development pathway.

Nearly half of respondents (46%) reported working in the field for four to six years, while 23% reported 10 or more years of experience. Smaller proportions reported one to three years (18%), seven to ten years (9%), and very few reported less than one year in the field (5%).

Professional identity remains strongly affirmed among respondents. A clear majority (86%) described themselves as professionals, while only 14% identified as workers.

Recruitment and Retention

When asked what attracted individuals to their current positions, the most frequently selected factor was passion for working with children (91%), followed by schedule/hours (64%) and a positive work environment (59%). Other commonly cited reasons included convenient location (55%), pay (46%), leadership or management (46%), and opportunities for advancement (41%). Benefits (27%) and recommendations from others (18%) were selected less frequently, while relatively few respondents reported a lack of other job options (9%). One respondent also noted alignment with the organization's mission as a key factor in joining.

When considering factors that influence retention, relationships with coworkers (77%) and relationships with children and families (77%) were the most frequently cited. This was followed closely by a positive work environment (68%) and job stability (64%). Pay (64%) and benefits (46%) also remained important, along with leadership support (41%) and opportunities for professional growth (50%). Flexible scheduling was selected by half of the respondents (50%).

When asked about intent to remain in current positions, about 41% of respondents reported plans to stay until retirement, while 27% indicated they would leave for better pay. The remaining 32% selected "other," with responses ranging from short-term plans (e.g., five years or less) to conditional commitment based on advancement opportunities, job openings, or personal circumstances. A small number of respondents expressed strong long-term commitment, while others indicated uncertainty or anticipated job changes.

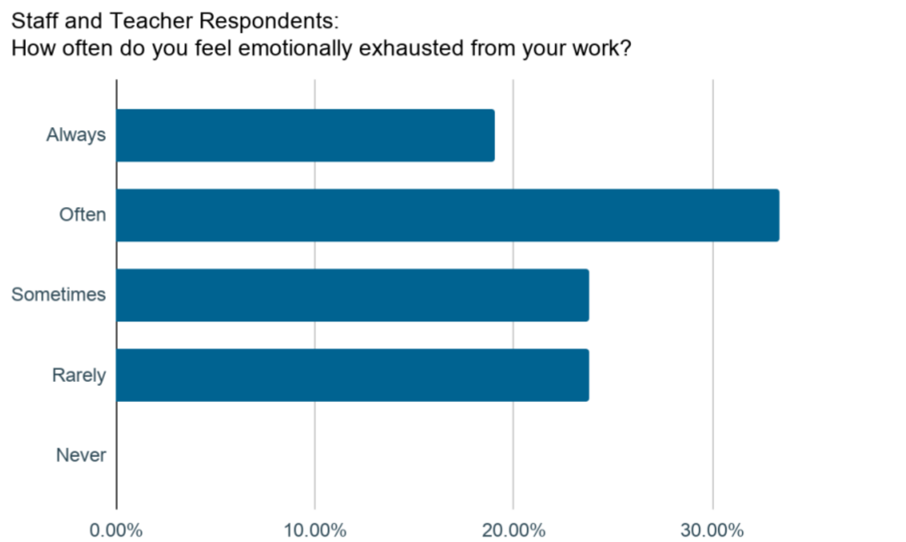
Perceptions of Leadership

Responses regarding perceptions of program leadership were generally positive, with most respondents (62%) reporting that they feel "Supported" by leadership, while 38% indicated that they feel "Sort of supported." No respondents selected "Do not feel supported," indicating an absence of overtly negative perceptions within this sample.

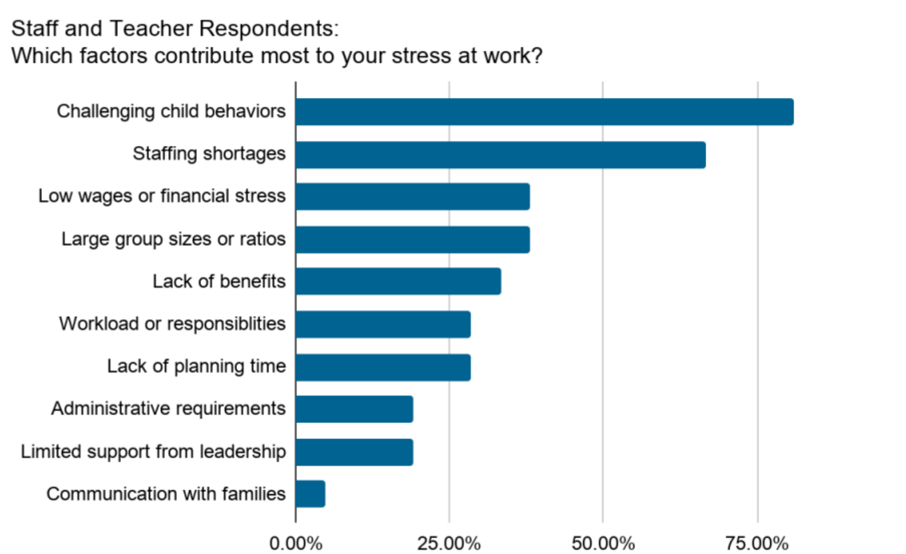
Open-ended responses, though limited in number, provided additional context. Some respondents expressed satisfaction with leadership, describing their director and board as "fabulous." Others emphasized a desire for stronger collaboration, clearer guidance, and more structured communication, such as regular bi-monthly meetings. One respondent noted that insufficient planning time for lead staff may be affecting leadership effectiveness and program operations. Another expressed interest in taking on a greater leadership role, contingent on improved scheduling flexibility.

Stress and Well-Being

When asked how often staff and teachers felt exhausted in their work, 24% reported "Rarely" feeling emotionally exhausted, and another 24% reported "Never". The majority reported moderate to high levels of exhaustion, with 33% feeling “Often” and 19% “Always.” This distribution suggests that while severe burnout is not universal, emotional strain is a regular experience.



When asked about sources of stress, respondents most frequently cited challenging child behaviors (81%) as the primary stressor, followed by staffing shortages (67%). Other common stressors included large group sizes or ratios (38%), low wages or financial stress (38%), lack of benefits (33%), workload and responsibilities (29%), and lack of planning time (29%). Administrative requirements (19%) and limited leadership support (19%) were also noted.



Break availability further highlights workload pressures affecting well-being. Only 19% of respondents reported “Always” being able to take scheduled breaks, while 33% reported “Often” and the largest share

(43%) reported only “Sometimes.” A small proportion (5%) reported rarely being able to take breaks, indicating that consistent restorative time during the workday is not reliably available for many staff.

When considering the impact of stress on retention, responses show a connection between burnout and workforce stability. While 24% reported that stress does not affect their decision to stay, the majority indicated some level of impact, with 33% reporting “Somewhat” and 38% reporting “Significantly.” Also, 5% identified stress or burnout as a primary reason they may leave their position.

Open-ended responses about improving health and well-being reinforce these patterns. The most common themes included the need for more consistent staffing, increased classroom support, and additional planning time during the workday. Respondents also emphasized the importance of better compensation, improved handling of challenging behaviors, stronger teamwork, and clearer role expectations between lead and assistant staff. Several comments also highlighted the importance of collaboration, leadership support, and access to wellness resources as ways to reduce stress and improve working conditions.

Workforce Key Findings:

- The early childhood workforce is highly committed and experienced, with most leaders having more than 10 years of experience and strong professional identities among both leadership and staff.
- Passion for working with children and meaningful relationships drive recruitment and retention, while supportive work environments, flexibility, and professional growth opportunities help employees stay.
- Burnout and emotional exhaustion are significant workforce challenges, with many staff and leaders reporting frequent stress that contributes to turnover risk.
- Challenging child behaviors, staffing shortages, and workload demands are the primary sources of stress, highlighting the need for additional staffing, classroom support, and planning time.
- Compensation and financial constraints remain major barriers to workforce stability, affecting recruitment, retention, staff well-being, and programs’ ability to attract and retain qualified employees.

Capacity

Capacity Impact Area: Measures available child care slots, enrollment, staffing levels, growth potential, expansion, and constraints on service availability.

Owner and Administrator Respondents

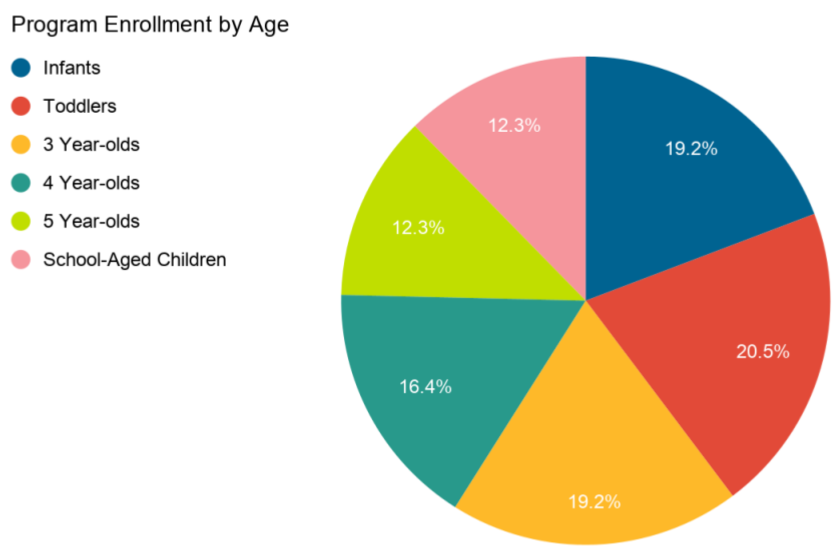
Capacity and Enrollment

Responses regarding licensed capacity show a wide range of program sizes, from very small family- or home-based programs serving fewer than 10 children to larger centers licensed for more than 100 children.

Reported capacities ranged from 7 to 144, with most programs serving fewer than 50 children, indicating a mix of small- and mid-sized providers within the sample.

When asked whether they are operating at licensed capacity, more than half of respondents (56%) reported that they are not currently operating at full capacity, while 44% indicated they are at capacity. Among those operating below capacity, the most commonly cited reason was intentionally setting enrollment targets below licensed limits (60%), suggesting that many providers limit enrollment based on staffing, program design, or quality considerations. Staffing shortages were the second most common factor (30%), while financial constraints, physical space, insufficient demand, and licensing requirements were each mentioned by smaller proportions of respondents. Open-ended responses further highlighted that respondents were opening new programs and facing challenges in meeting student needs or filling specific age-group slots, particularly for preschool-aged children.

When asked about enrollment and ages, infants (19%) and toddlers (21%) were commonly served but in smaller and more variable numbers, while preschool-age groups (3–5-year-olds) (47% total) generally showed higher enrollment. School-age (12%) enrollment was more limited, typically reflecting before- and after-school or seasonal care arrangements.



Growth and Expansion

When asked whether they were satisfied with their current enrollment, most respondents reported satisfaction (78%). A smaller proportion indicated they would enroll more children if additional staff were available (22%), highlighting staffing as a primary constraint on capacity.

Interest in expansion is mixed, with responses split among those not seeking to grow, those unsure, and a smaller share expressing interest. Among those who do want to expand, the most commonly identified needs include more or a new physical space (71%), increased funding or grants (57%), hiring additional staff (29%), and support in navigating licensing requirements.

Staffing Composition

Responses indicate that programs operate with relatively small staffing structures across all roles. Assistant teachers represent the largest staff group, with totals ranging from zero to eleven per program, showing the widest variation across respondents. Lead teacher counts are consistently low, typically ranging from 0 to 4 per program, while administrative staffing is minimal and highly uniform, with most programs reporting only 1 administrative staff member.

Assistant teacher staffing shows higher volume and greater variation. Full-time assistant teachers range from 0 to 8 per program, with 1 program reporting 8 full-time assistants and several reporting 0 to 2. Part-time assistant teachers range from zero to three to five per program, indicating that many programs rely on a mix of full- and part-time staffing, though part-time roles are less dominant overall.

Lead teacher staffing remains smaller and more stable than assistant staffing. Full-time lead teachers range from zero to four per program, with most programs reporting one to three full-time leads. Part-time lead teachers are rare, with most programs reporting zero part-time lead teachers and only a few reporting one.

Staff and Teacher Respondents

Retention

Survey responses suggest that workforce capacity and retention are influenced by both employees' long-term career intentions and their experiences with stress and burnout.
When asked how long they plan to stay in their current position, the largest group of respondents (41%) indicated they intend to remain until retirement. However, 27% reported that they would stay only until they find a higher-paying job. Responses categorized as "Other" (32%) revealed a mix of uncertainty, plans for career advancement, aspirations for full-time or leadership opportunities, and, in one case, an upcoming job transition.

Stress and burnout also emerged as significant workforce capacity concerns. More than three-quarters of respondents (76%) reported that stress or burnout affects their decision to stay at least somewhat, including 38% who said it affects them significantly. One respondent (5%) identified stress and burnout as a primary reason they may leave their position. Only 24% reported that stress and burnout do not influence their retention decisions.

Capacity Key Findings:

- Many providers are operating below licensed capacity, with 56% reporting available slots; however, enrollment is often intentionally capped due to staffing limitations, program design, or quality considerations.
- Workforce shortages are the primary constraint on expanding access, as providers report they could serve more children if additional qualified staff were available.
- Enrollment is concentrated among preschool-aged children, while infant, toddler, and school-age care are generally offered in smaller numbers, reflecting variations in service availability across age groups.
- Interest in expansion exists but faces significant barriers, including the need for additional physical space, increased funding, and support for recruiting and retaining staff.
- Capacity and retention are closely linked, with many staff committed to long-term employment, but stress, burnout, and compensation concerns continue to threaten workforce stability and limit programs' ability to grow.

Affordability

Affordability Impact Area: Measures costs, tuition, wages, benefits, and financial access for both families and the workforce.

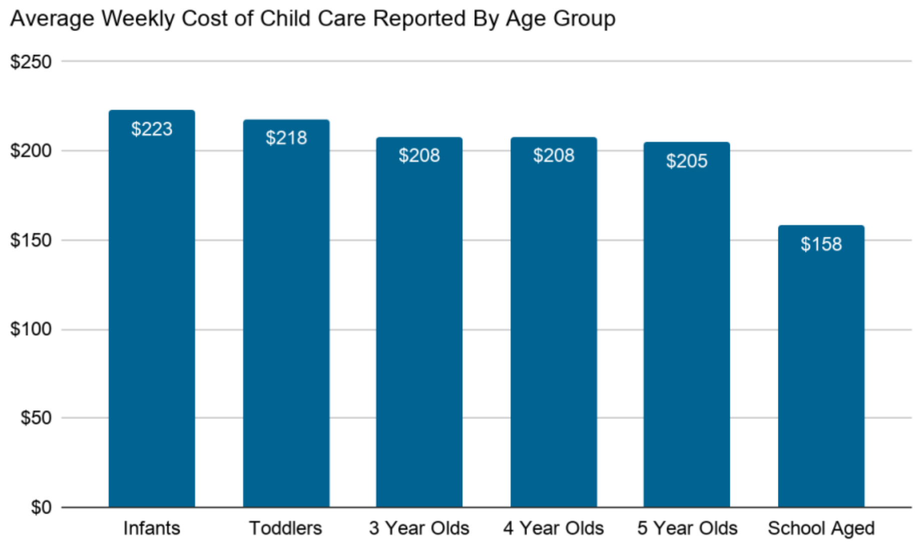
Owner and Administrator Respondents

Rates and Perceptions of Rates

Responses regarding tuition rates show considerable variation in what providers charge for both part-time and full-time care. Among providers offering part-time care, weekly rates generally ranged from $108 to $220. Full-time care rates varied more widely, with most providers reporting weekly tuition between approximately $200 and $335, although a few programs reported rates as high as $500 per week for infant and toddler care.

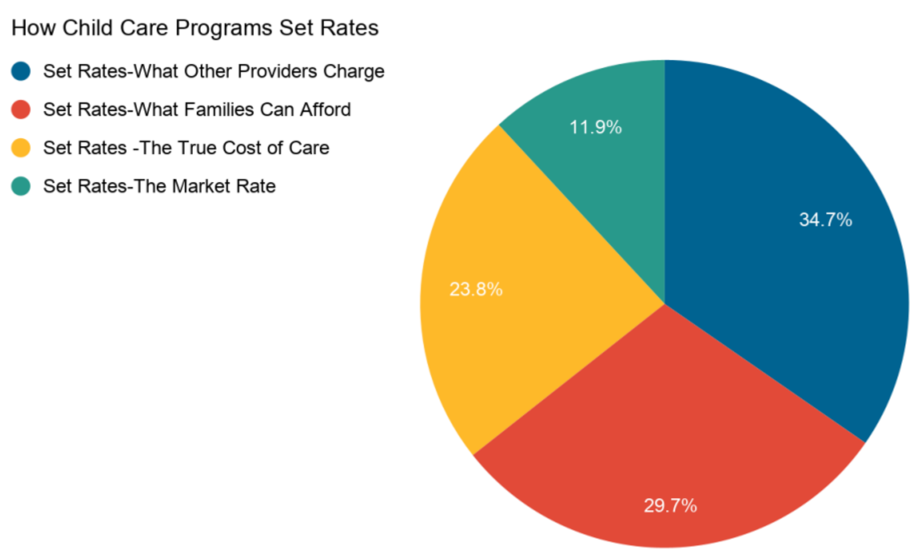
As expected, infant and toddler care tended to command the highest tuition rates, while preschool- and school-age rates were generally lower. Several providers also reported flexible pricing structures based on the number of days attended, hours of care needed, or additional services such as meals.

Providers' perceptions of their tuition rates suggest that many believe reimbursement levels may not fully align with the cost of care. More than half of respondents (53%) indicated that their programs charge less than Child Development and Care (CDC) Scholarship reimbursement rates (see Appendix 3), while 35% reported charging more than reimbursement rates and 12% reported charging approximately the same amount.



Pricing Practices and CDC Participation

Responses indicate that child care providers use a variety of approaches when setting tuition rates, with many balancing market conditions with family affordability. The most common response (35%) was that programs charge rates similar to other providers in their area, while 30% reported setting rates based on what families can afford. Nearly one-quarter of respondents (24%) indicated that they charge the true cost of care, and only 12% reported charging the market rate.



When asked about participation in the Child Development and Care (CDC) scholarship program, nearly 88% reported accepting CDC scholarships, while only 12% do not participate.

Self-Reported Wages

Survey responses reveal considerable variation in wages among child care providers and program leaders, reflecting the diverse employment arrangements represented in the sample. Reported current wages ranged from approximately $15 to $30 per hour and from roughly $51,000 to $90,000 annually, while several respondents identified as program owners or family child care providers whose earnings are tied directly to program revenue rather than a traditional salary. Some respondents reported little or no personal income from their programs, noting that earnings are often reinvested into operating expenses and business needs.

Comparisons between starting and current wages suggest that many respondents have experienced wage growth over time. Several participants reported substantial increases since beginning their positions, including examples of salaries increasing from approximately $32,000 to $71,000 and from $45,000 to $90,000. Expectations for future earnings also indicate a desire for continued wage growth, with many respondents hoping to earn more in five years than they do currently.

Compensation appears to play a meaningful role in both recruitment and retention. While nearly half of respondents (47%) indicated that their starting wage had no impact on their decision to apply for their current position, more than half reported that it had at least some influence. Current wages appear more important for retention, with 60% of respondents stating that their current wage has either some impact or a very significant impact on their decision to remain in their position.

Annual wage increases were not universally available. Only 40% of respondents reported receiving annual wage increases, while the remaining respondents indicated they either do not receive regular increases, receive them only sometimes, or were unsure.

Open-ended comments further illustrate the reality that many providers face, particularly family child care owners, who often view their wages as whatever remains after covering program expenses.

Self-Reported Benefits

Survey responses indicate that access to benefits varies across child care programs. Slightly more than half of respondents (53%) reported receiving benefits in their current position, while 47% reported receiving no employer-provided benefits.

Among those receiving benefits, paid time off was the most common benefit, reported by all respondents who answered the question (100%). Health insurance, dental coverage, and vision coverage were each reported by 60% of respondents, while 40% reported access to retirement benefits. Child care benefits were less common, reported by only 30% of respondents. Additional benefits mentioned included cash-in-lieu options for insurance coverage and workplace flexibility.

Benefits appear to play a mixed role in both recruitment and retention. More than half of respondents (53%) indicated that benefits had no impact on their decision to apply for their current position, while 47% reported that benefits had at least some influence. Similar results were reported regarding retention, with 47% indicating that benefits have either some or a very significant impact on their decision to remain in their current role.

Open-ended comments suggest that the availability of benefits is often shaped by program size and financial capacity. Several family child care providers noted that they rely on a spouse's employer-sponsored benefits because their own businesses cannot afford to offer comprehensive coverage. Others commented that benefit packages can be costly for both employers and employees, limiting participation even when benefits are available.

Staff Wages

Responses regarding staff compensation reveal notable variation in wages across employee roles and program types. Assistant teacher wages were generally higher, with reported starting rates ranging from approximately $14.75 per hour to as much as $20.00 per hour. Among programs that reported assistant teacher wages, the highest-paid employees earned between $17.00 and $28.00 per hour. This variation may reflect differences in employee experience, qualifications, program size, and local labor market conditions.

Lead teachers received the highest wages among reported classroom positions. Reported hourly rates commonly ranged from the low $20s to $30 per hour, with some respondents indicating wages exceeding $45 per hour or reporting annual salary arrangements.

Administrative staff compensation showed the greatest variability, largely because many respondents either did not employ dedicated administrative personnel or combined administrative duties with teaching or director roles. Among programs that reported administrative wages, hourly rates ranged from approximately $15 to more than $45 per hour, although some responses reflected annual salaries rather than hourly compensation.

Overall, the results highlight significant differences in compensation across positions and suggest that wages generally increase with increased responsibility and experience.

Staff Benefits

Survey responses indicate that benefit offerings vary across child care programs but generally follow similar patterns for assistant teachers and lead teachers. Paid time off was the most frequently reported benefit across all staff categories, with 75% of assistant teachers and 58% of lead teachers reporting it. Health, dental, and vision insurance were also commonly offered, though less consistently, with approximately one-third to one-half of respondents reporting these benefits depending on the position.

Retirement benefits were less common, reported by only 25%-33% of respondents across staff roles. Child care benefits were offered by approximately one-third to 41.7% of programs, providing important support for employees with young children. At the same time, a notable share of respondents reported offering no benefits at all, particularly for lead teachers, with 42% indicating no benefits were provided.

There were also additional benefits such as paid professional development, paid training opportunities, tuition reimbursement, participation in the Michigan T.E.A.C.H. scholarship program, free meals, access to on-site medical and mental health services, and other workplace supports.

Staff and Teacher Respondents

Wages

Survey responses indicate that wages for child care staff vary considerably but are generally concentrated in the mid- to upper-teen and low-$20-per-hour ranges. Most respondents reported current wages between $15 and $25 per hour, although a small number reported annual salaries ranging from $33,000 to $54,000. Comparisons between starting and current wages suggest that many employees have experienced modest wage growth over time, with several respondents reporting increases of $2 to $6 per hour since beginning their current positions.

Compensation appears to be an important factor in attracting employees to child care positions. Respondents indicated that wages had either “Some Impact” (46%) or a “Very Significant Impact” (41%) on their decision to apply for their current role.

Wages appear to be even more important for retention. More than two-thirds of respondents (69%) reported that their current wage has a very significant impact on their decision to stay in their current position, while an additional 23% indicated that wages have some impact. Only 9% reported that wages do not influence their retention decisions.

Future wage expectations further underscore employees’ concerns about earnings. Most respondents expressed a desire to earn between $25 and $30 per hour over the next five years, while others hoped for annual salaries of $45,000 or more. Several responses specifically referenced the need for a "livable wage" or acknowledged uncertainty about whether desired wage increases would be achievable.

Annual wage increases are relatively common, with 73% of respondents reporting that they received them. However, open-ended responses suggest that these increases are often minimal, typically described as small annual adjustments of only a few cents or modest cost-of-living changes. Several respondents expressed dissatisfaction with current wage growth, noting that child care educators are often underpaid relative to their education requirements and workloads, and that many staff members must work multiple jobs to cover basic expenses.

At the same time, a smaller number of respondents emphasized positive aspects of their compensation, noting that their wages are competitive in their local context or that pay levels help retain staff by making employees feel valued.

Benefits

Survey responses indicate that just over half of respondents (55%) receive benefits in their current positions, while 45% do not, highlighting a divide in access to benefits across the workforce. Among those who receive benefits, most commonly reported are child care support (100%), followed by health insurance (67%), dental and vision coverage (50% each), retirement benefits (50%), and paid time off (33%).

Benefits also appear to play a meaningful role in workforce decisions. A majority of respondents (77%) reported that benefits had at least some influence on their decision to accept their current position, with 41% describing them as “Very Impactful.” Similarly, 50% of respondents indicated that benefits influence their decision to remain in their role, with 23% reporting a “Very Strong Impact” on retention.

Open-ended responses reinforced this with some participants emphasizing that access to health insurance and other supports is a key reason for staying in the field, while others note that many workers lack benefits entirely or receive only limited offerings, such as stipends.

Affordability Key Findings:

- Child care providers strive to balance affordability with financial sustainability, often setting tuition based on what families can afford or local market conditions rather than the true cost of care.
- Compensation is a major workforce concern, with both providers and staff reporting that wages significantly influence recruitment and retention, yet many programs struggle to offer competitive pay.
- Wage growth is modest, and many staff expressed concerns that compensation does not adequately reflect their education, responsibilities, or workload.
- Access to benefits is inconsistent across the sector, with roughly half of providers and staff reporting no employer-sponsored benefits, while those available most commonly include paid time off, health insurance, and retirement support.
- Most providers participate in the Child Development and Care (CDC) scholarship program, though participation does not indicate utilization among families.

Quality

Quality Impact Area: Measures program quality, accreditation, quality ratings, resources, leadership, continuous improvement, professional development, and quality standards.

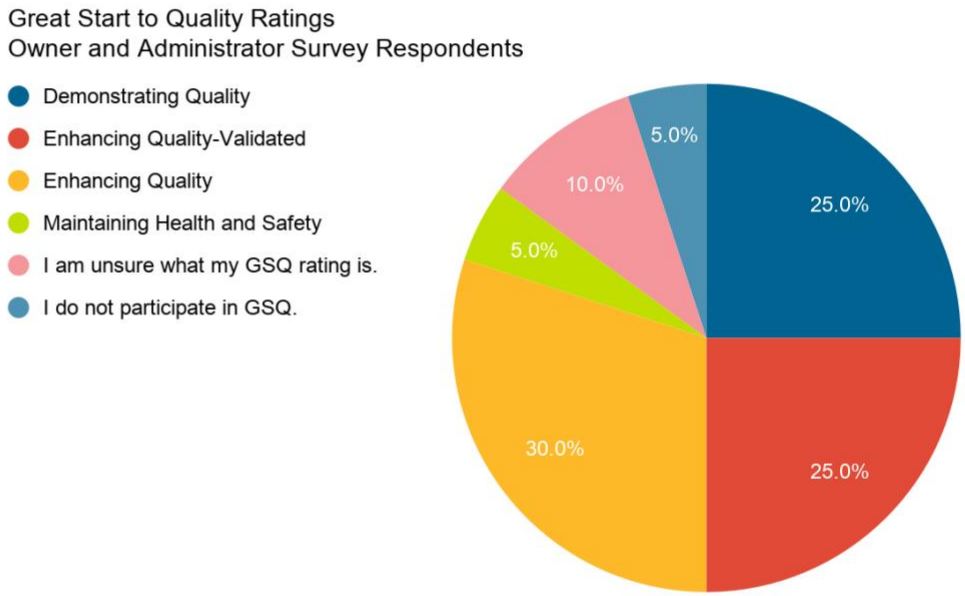
Owner and Administrator Respondents

Program Quality

Responses indicate that a minority of programs (25%) are GSRP partner programs, while the majority (75%) are not, suggesting that most respondents operate outside this publicly funded preschool partnership structure. Similarly, none of the responding programs reported current NAEYC accreditation, though 30% indicated plans to pursue accreditation in the future.

In terms of quality indicators, programs most frequently identified warm, responsive relationships between teachers and children (75%) and intentional, play-based learning (65%) as central features of quality. Accreditation or adherence to recognized quality standards was selected by 40% of respondents.

Great Start to Quality (GSQ) ratings show a relatively even distribution across mid-to-upper tiers. The most common responses were "Enhancing Quality" (30%), "Enhancing Quality–Validated" (25%), and "Demonstrating Quality" (25%), with smaller shares at the lowest level (5%) or not participating (5%). When asked about their trajectory, 45% of programs reported they are working toward the next GSQ level, while 35% plan to remain at their current level, and 20% are already at the highest level.



When asked whether they have what they need to run a high-quality program, 65% of respondents reported having it, while 35% said they do not. Among those identifying gaps, the most commonly cited need was more funding (100%), followed by higher wages to attract staff (57%) and more qualified staff (43%). Additional needs included improved materials, better facilities, and expanded professional development.

Professional Development

Survey responses indicate strong engagement with professional development resources among child care providers. Nearly all respondents (93%) reported using MiRegistry in the past year, and a majority also accessed the Great Start Resource Center (60%). Smaller but still notable shares participated in resources from the Michigan Association for the Education of Young Children and local ISDs (both 33%).

Professional goals for the coming year reflect a mix of individual advancement, program improvement, and system-level aspirations. Common themes include pursuing higher education or certification, improving program enrollment and quality ratings, strengthening staff development, and expanding or stabilizing program operations. Several respondents also emphasized challenges related to staffing, administrative workload, and maintaining enrollment in a competitive early childhood landscape.

Most respondents (73%) reported having the resources needed to meet their professional goals, while 27% reported not having them. Among those needing additional support, key themes included funding or scholarships, time constraints, and increased enrollment. Open-ended responses highlight that while resources and training opportunities are generally available, time and financial capacity remain the primary barriers to fully utilizing them.

Staff Professional Development

Survey responses indicate a relatively strong culture of professional development and ongoing evaluation within participating child care programs. Most respondents (75%) reported receiving routine evaluations, often including annual reviews, self-assessments, and goal-setting processes, as well as external oversight through licensing or quality systems such as GSQ.

Engagement in professional organizations and networks is mixed. Half of the respondents reported belonging to MiAEYC, while others cited involvement in additional early childhood education or child care networks such as local advisory committees, family child care networks, and quality improvement initiatives. At the same time, some respondents reported no formal professional organization membership.

Participation in professional development activities is high overall. A large majority (83%) of respondents reported attending PD events regularly, with activities ranging from conferences and ISD trainings to monthly network meetings, online courses, and health and safety certifications. Most programs also support staff development structurally, with 67% reporting that they offer PD opportunities and 75% including a dedicated PD budget line item, suggesting institutional commitment to ongoing training.

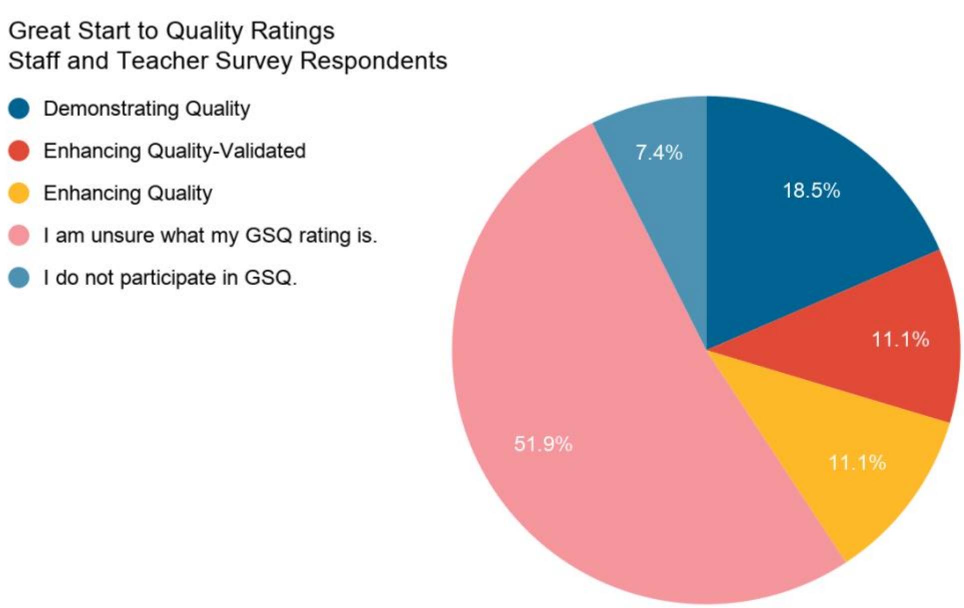
Staff access to professional resources is also widespread, with MiRegistry (92%) and the Great Start Resource Center (58%) being the most commonly used supports, along with local ISDs (42%) and professional associations (33%). In terms of future needs, staff requests were relatively limited but focused on specialized training areas, including trauma-informed care, early mathematics instruction, Montessori methods, and certification pathways.

Staff and Teacher Respondents

Program Quality

Survey responses from staff and teachers show that just over half of programs (52%) are GSRP partner programs, while 48% are not, indicating a relatively even split between programs connected to the state-funded preschool system and those operating outside it.
When asked whether they work in a quality early care and education program, 89% of respondents answered "Yes." Open-ended responses reinforce this strong self-identification, emphasizing nurturing environments, developmentally appropriate practices, trained staff, and strong family engagement. However, a small number of respondents expressed uncertainty or limited understanding of what defines a "quality" program, indicating variation in how quality is interpreted across the workforce.

Great Start to Quality (GSQ) ratings further illustrate a mixed but generally mid-to-higher tier distribution. The most common response was uncertainty about GSQ status (52%), followed by programs reporting "Demonstrating Quality" (19%), "Enhancing Quality" (11%), and "Enhancing Quality–Validated" (11%), with a small share not participating in GSQ.



Capacity indicators suggest that most programs feel equipped to perform their work effectively. A large majority (85%) reported having what they need to do their job effectively, while 15% reported gaps. Among those identifying needs, key themes included increased funding, improved supplies and equipment, additional training and professional development, and staffing support. Several respondents also highlighted broader systemic issues, such as limited access to subsidized programming for families and challenges serving households just above eligibility thresholds.

Professional Development

A closer look at the responses shows that professional development is not only widely accessed but also heavily structured around Michigan's early childhood systems. Nearly all respondents (100%) reported using MiRegistry, and a large majority (71%) accessed the Great Start Resource Center, indicating strong reliance on state-supported training infrastructure. Local Intermediate School District (ISD) supports were also commonly used (43%), while national conferences were notably rare (0%), suggesting that professional learning is primarily regional rather than national in scope.

The types of PD experienced also show a clear preference for accessible formats: 91% reported local trainings, and over half (52%) participated in coaching or mentoring, while only 14% reported statewide trainings and even fewer (10%) attended state conferences.

Goal-setting responses further highlight a workforce focused on credentialing and instructional improvement. Many educators cited earning degrees (such as bachelor's degrees), adding certifications, or deepening expertise in approaches such as Montessori and Reggio Emilia. Others focused on practical classroom priorities such as improving behavior support, strengthening leadership skills, and increasing time for organization and planning. These goals align with reported barriers, where respondents specifically identified the need for more funding, better access to training during work hours, mentoring support, and additional planning time.

Finally, while 62% report having the resources needed to meet their goals, the remaining 38% who do not point to systemic constraints. Their responses emphasize limited availability of training during work hours, insufficient funding, and difficulty finding appropriate courses.

Quality Key Findings:

- Programs define quality primarily through relationships and teaching practices, with warm, responsive interactions and intentional, play-based learning viewed as the most important indicators of quality.
- Providers and educators demonstrate a strong commitment to continuous improvement, with many pursuing higher quality ratings, additional credentials, certifications, and specialized training opportunities.
- Professional development participation is high, supported largely through MiRegistry, Great Start Resource Centers, and local training networks, reflecting strong engagement with Michigan's early childhood quality systems.
- Funding, staffing, and compensation challenges remain barriers to quality, with providers citing the need for more resources, higher wages, and qualified staff to sustain and improve program quality.

- Access to professional growth opportunities is not always equitable, as time constraints, limited funding, and difficulty accessing training during work hours prevent some educators from fully pursuing their professional goals.

Accessibility

Accessibility Impact Area: Measures availability of care, service delivery, populations served, program types, geographic access, and family access to services.

Owner and Administrator Respondents

Access Characteristics

The geographic distribution shows that programs are concentrated in Emmet County (65%) and Charlevoix County (35%), indicating a relatively small but clearly defined regional sample within northern Michigan. This suggests the findings primarily reflect rural or small-community child care contexts rather than a broader statewide urban-rural mix. All responding programs (100%) are licensed, with no unlicensed or licensed-exempt providers represented.

In terms of age groups served, preschool-aged children are nearly universal (90%), followed closely by infants and toddlers (both 65%), showing that most programs operate mixed-age early childhood settings. Nearly half (45%) also serve school-aged children, suggesting that many programs extend into before- and after-school care.

The enrollment outlook adds important context to the program structure and licensing data. A strong majority of respondents (78%) report being satisfied with current enrollment levels, while none indicate plans to decrease capacity. However, a notable minority (22%) say they would enroll more children if they had additional staff, directly linking growth capacity to workforce availability rather than demand or interest. Overall, the data point to a system where stability is common, but growth is constrained primarily by staffing rather than enrollment demand or program intent.

Pricing structures across programs show a mixed but largely constrained financial landscape. The most common approach is benchmarking against nearby providers (35%), followed by 29% of programs charging what families can afford. Fewer programs report charging the true cost of care (24%) or full market rate (12%), indicating that many providers are likely operating below sustainable cost-recovery levels. Regarding CDC scholarship participation, 88% of programs accept CDC scholarships, a key mechanism that supports both family access and program viability.

Community Needs

When asked what would most improve child care in their community, respondents consistently cite affordability and workforce sustainability as the central challenges to improving child care locally. The most frequently cited need is lower cost for families, but nearly every response connects affordability directly to staffing issues—particularly low wages, burnout, and difficulty recruiting and retaining qualified educators. Several respondents explicitly call for a "sustainable model" that balances family affordability with fair compensation for staff, indicating that these two pressures are seen as interdependent rather than separate problems.

"I believe the biggest improvement our community could make in child care is finding a sustainable model that both supports and fairly compensates qualified early childhood educators while still remaining affordable for families. High-quality care depends on consistent, knowledgeable staff, but many programs struggle with burnout, turnover, and limited resources. Greater investment in early childhood education, professional development, and community support would improve stability and quality of care for children and families alike." -Owner and Administrator Survey Respondent

A second major theme is increased investment by the public and employers. Suggestions include stronger statewide funding for child care workers, expanded subsidies, employer-supported or on-site child care, and better integration with local school districts.

Operational flexibility and regulatory adjustments also emerge as concerns. Respondents mention improving ratios, adjusting capacity rules for school-age children, and updating subsidy eligibility thresholds to reflect current cost-of-living realities. Additional comments highlight the need for more training, improvements to physical space, and expanded access to resources.

Capacity-Related Access Indicators

Responses to questions about capacity show a wide range in program size, with licensed capacity ranging from very small programs (7–14 children) to much larger centers (63–144 children), though most fall in the small-to-medium range.

Despite this range in capacity, more than half of respondents (56%) report operating below their licensed capacity, and that this decision is primarily due to design or necessity rather than regulatory constraints. The most common reason is that programs intentionally set enrollment targets below their licensed maximum (60%), followed by staffing shortages (30%) and, to a lesser extent, low wages limiting recruitment, space constraints, and insufficient demand. Several open-ended responses also highlight transitional issues, such as newly opened programs and under-enrolled age groups, particularly for preschool-aged children.

Enrollment data clarifies utilization patterns: infants and toddlers show relatively consistent enrollment across programs, while preschool-age groups—especially 3- and 4-year-olds—show the greatest variability, including both very low and very high counts. Some programs report substantial preschool enrollment (e.g., 43 and 74 four-year-olds in individual programs), while others report minimal or no enrollment in those same age bands.

In the future, there is a mixed but cautious outlook for program growth. The largest share of respondents (44%) say they do not want to expand their program, while 39% express interest in expansion and 17% remain unsure.

Staff and Teacher Respondents

Access Characteristics

Program composition shows a system heavily dominated by center-based care, with 74% of respondents identifying as child care centers and an additional 22% as small-capacity centers. There are no family child care providers represented, and only small shares identify as group child care (4%) or GSRP/Head Start classrooms (19%) and home visiting programs (7%).

Regulatory alignment is very strong with 93% of programs licensed and no unlicensed providers reported. Geographically, programs are concentrated in Emmet County (78%) with a smaller share in Charlevoix County (30%), reinforcing a regional rather than statewide distribution. Age-group coverage shows broad but uneven service patterns: toddlers (59%) and preschool-aged children (56%) are most common, followed by infants (41%), while school-aged care is less prevalent (15%).

Responses also indicate that most programs are operating comparison-driven pricing models rather than cost-based models, with 35% charging what families can afford and 23% matching nearby programs, while only 27% report charging the true cost of care and 15% charging market rate.

Community Needs

When asked what would most improve child care in their community, respondents emphasized a consistent theme: improvement depends primarily on workforce investment and system-wide funding increases. The most frequently cited solution is higher wages and better benefits for early childhood educators, with multiple respondents emphasizing that current pay is not livable and directly contributes to burnout and turnover. Several responses also highlight the perception that teachers carry significant responsibility, such as educating, caring for, and protecting children, while receiving compensation that does not reflect the level of expectation or training.

"In my opinion, child care in the community would be most improved by increasing access to affordable, high-quality programs and ensuring providers are adequately funded and staffed. Supporting early educators with better wages, ongoing professional development, and manageable class sizes would also strengthen the quality of care and learning experiences for children and families." -Staff and Teacher Respondent

A second major theme is structural funding and access. Respondents call for increased public funding to support both affordable care for families and sustainable program operations, including more free or subsidized programs for children under age four and expanded eligibility beyond poverty thresholds. This reflects a concern that current support systems, while improving for some age groups (such as preschool-age programs), still leave gaps in earlier developmental stages and for moderate-income families.

Workforce stability and system capacity also emerge as key concerns. Comments reference burnout, staffing shortages, and the need for more programs overall, particularly for infants and toddlers. Some respondents suggest easing licensing barriers to encourage program expansion, while others emphasize the need for stronger administrative support, improved ratios, and consistent staffing frameworks. Additionally, increasing parent engagement and community understanding of the profession would be beneficial, suggesting that the valuation of early childhood educators starts with recognition and respect.

Accessibility Key Findings:

- Child care access is limited more by workforce capacity than by demand, as many programs operate below licensed capacity and report they could serve more children if additional staff were available.
- Most programs provide care across multiple age groups, but access challenges vary by age, with particular concerns around infant and toddler care availability and uneven enrollment patterns across preschool-age groups.
- Affordability and workforce sustainability are closely connected, with providers and staff emphasizing that low wages, burnout, and recruitment challenges directly affect families' ability to access care.
- Public funding and subsidy programs are essential to maintaining access, as most providers participate in CDC scholarships and call for increased investment to support both families and program operations.
- Expansion opportunities exist but face significant barriers, including staffing shortages, financial constraints, regulatory challenges, and limited operational capacity, particularly in rural and small-community settings.

For a complete side-by-side comparison of owner/administrator and teacher/staff responses across all survey domains, see Appendix 4.

Conclusions

The 2026 Child Care Landscape Survey paints a picture of a local early childhood system that is deeply committed, quietly resilient, and operating under pressures that are both invisible and compounding. Across every impact area (workforce, capacity, affordability, quality, and accessibility), a consistent story emerges: the people who care for and educate young children in Charlevoix and Emmet counties are dedicated professionals doing essential work in a system that has not yet caught up to compensating or supporting them.

The workforce is more stable than national trends might suggest, but that stability is fragile. One of the most striking findings of this survey is the degree of long-term commitment expressed by respondents, particularly among program owners and administrators. A full 80% of administrators reported plans to remain in their positions until retirement. This figure stands in sharp contrast to national turnover data showing annual child care staff attrition rates of 21% to 38% or more, and industry-wide turnover that runs roughly 65% higher than the median U.S. occupation (Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland, 2024; Amadon et al., 2023). Among staff and teachers, 41% also expressed intent to stay until retirement. This is a meaningful commitment in a field known for instability. This should be recognized as an asset and protected through intentional investments in working conditions, compensation, and support.

People enter this field for the right reasons but stay for different ones. The data reveal an important and often overlooked distinction: passion for working with children was overwhelmingly the top factor attracting staff to their positions (91%), while compensation ranked considerably lower as a recruitment driver. However, the picture reverses when it comes to retention. Nearly 70% of staff said wages have a very significant impact on whether they stay, and 27% indicated they would leave their current position for better pay. This means that love of the work brings people in, but their financial reality determines whether they stay. Recruitment strategies that emphasize mission and relationships align well with what draws candidates to the field. Retention strategies, however, must address compensation directly.

Another notable finding is that wages are moving up. Unfortunately, not fast enough and not consistently. There is encouraging evidence that wages in the local early childhood system are edging upward. Several administrators reported substantial increases from their starting salaries, and 73% of staff reported receiving annual wage increases. However, open-ended responses reveal that these increases are frequently minimal, described as “a few cents a year”, and that 40% of administrators do not receive regular increases at all. This inconsistency creates real unpredictability for workers trying to manage household budgets and plan for the future. When workers cannot count on meaningful annual increases, even those committed to the field begin to question whether they can afford to stay. At the national level, the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment’s 2024 Early Childhood Workforce Index found that early educator wages grew just 4.6%, trailing the national average of 4.9% and the 6.8% growth seen in retail, one of the sectors early childhood educators most commonly leave for. Locally, closing this gap will require deliberate and sustained action.

The data suggests that awareness of the MiRegistry Career Pathway is an untapped opportunity. Across both administrator and staff respondents, a notable share reported being unsure of their current MiRegistry Career Pathway level: 18% of administrators and 19% of staff. Among staff, an additional 29% selected "Unknown" when asked about their five-year pathway goals, suggesting that professional development planning is not yet widely formalized in many programs. This represents a meaningful opportunity. MiRegistry is Michigan's designated framework for recognizing early childhood credentials, tracking professional development, and supporting career advancement, yet it appears to lack visibility and active use among a significant segment of the local workforce. Increasing awareness, simplifying system navigation, and connecting Career Pathway levels to compensation incentives could meaningfully improve both workforce development and retention.

Challenging child behaviors are the field's most urgent well-being issue. In both administrator and staff responses, challenging child behaviors emerged as the single most frequently cited source of workplace stress, being reported by 81% of staff and 47% of administrators. This is not simply a classroom management problem. It reflects a systemic need for better training, more specialized support, and adequate staffing levels so educators can respond to complex behavioral needs without burning out. When this stressor goes unaddressed, it compounds emotional exhaustion and accelerates turnover. Fifty-two percent of staff reported feeling emotionally exhausted from their work always or often. Developing a coordinated local response to this challenge, including trauma-informed practice training, behavioral consultation support, and access to mental health resources, should be considered a workforce sustainability priority.

This survey also revealed that the affordability gap is structural, not incidental. More than half of local programs (53%) charge families less than the state's CDC reimbursement rate. As a result, they operate below the state's floor for sustainable pricing, and only 24% charge the true cost of care. This is not a failure of business acumen. It is a deliberate, well-intentioned effort to keep care within reach for families in a region where rural economic realities leave little room for rate increases. But good intentions cannot close a structural gap, and the consequence is a system chronically underfunded at the program level.

The math makes the problem concrete. Michigan's adult-to-infant ratio is 1:4, meaning one caregiver serves four infants at a time. At the local average of $223 per week per infant, that classroom generates $892 per week in total revenue — or $17.84 per hour over a 50-hour week. That $17.84 must cover wages, payroll taxes, benefits, facilities, materials, food, and program overhead. It cannot. When programs charge less than the work actually costs, the shortfall doesn't disappear. It shows up as wages that can't rise, benefits that can't be offered, and improvements that can't be made.

Closing this gap requires upstream solutions: expanded subsidy availability, stronger employer investment in child care, and sustained advocacy for state-level policy change. The answer is not asking providers to simply charge more. It is building a funding system that reflects what quality care actually costs to provide.

Taken together, these findings reflect a system that is holding on through the dedication of its people, not the adequacy of its infrastructure. The interconnected challenges of workforce stress, compensation constraints, pricing pressures, and limited capacity for expansion cannot be solved in isolation. Each affects the others. That is why coordinated, multi-sector solutions are not just preferable — they are necessary.

Final Thoughts

There is something powerful in what this survey reveals. The people who have chosen to work in early childhood care and education in Charlevoix and Emmet counties are not here by accident or default. They are here because they believe in this work and in the profound importance of the first years of a child's life, and in the relationships they build with children and families every single day. That belief is evident in the data, in the open-ended responses, and in the fact that so many of them plan to stay for the long haul.

That commitment is an enormous community asset. And it deserves to be met with an equally serious commitment from the systems, employers, policymakers, and neighbors who benefit from their work.

The data in this report are not simply statistics. They are a window into the daily realities of professionals who arrive each morning carrying the weight of financial stress, behavioral challenges, and emotional demands that few outside the field fully understand, and who still show up for the children in their care. When 52% of staff say they feel emotionally exhausted always or often, and when more than a third say that stress significantly affects whether they stay in their positions, those are not abstract workforce metrics. They are signals that the people sustaining this system need more support.

It is also worth sitting with what the data reveal about perception and value. Staff and administrators in this survey almost universally describe themselves as professionals. They hold credentials, pursue ongoing education, engage deeply with quality systems, and they aspire to grow. Yet they work in a field where the national median wage is $13.07 per hour — less than 97% of all other occupations — and where small annual raises of "a few cents" are common. The imbalance between professional identity and professional compensation is one the field has long named but not yet resolved. This report adds a local voice to that regional, state, and national conversation.

What gives cause for genuine optimism is the foundation that already exists here in the Little Traverse region. Programs are licensed and engaged with quality systems. Administrators are experienced and deeply committed. Staff are passionate and relationship-oriented. The infrastructure (MiRegistry, Great Start to Quality, CDC scholarship participation) is in place. The CCI itself represents a coordinated community commitment to better the local child care system. This survey tells us where to focus next.

The goal is not simply to stabilize a struggling system. It is to build one worthy of the people who work in it and the children and families who depend on it.

Next Steps

The findings of this report are only as valuable as the action they inform. The following next steps are intended to move from insight to impact, with attention to both immediate needs and longer-term systems change.

Disseminate findings widely and intentionally. Share this report with child care providers, local employers, school districts, elected officials, community foundations, and regional economic development organizations. Tailor communications for different audiences such as a one-page brief for employers, a data summary for policymakers, and a community-facing infographic for broader public awareness. The story this data tells is compelling, and more people need to hear it.

Prioritize compensation as a workforce retention strategy. Given the clear finding that wages are the primary driver of retention decisions, not recruitment, compensation supports should be treated as a workforce stability investment. Explore options including:

- Advocating for increased CDC reimbursement rates that reflect the true cost of care
- Connecting programs to state and federal wage supplement programs
- Partnering with local employers on child care stipends or co-investment models
- Developing a regional wage floor or compensation standard as a benchmark for local programs

Launch a MiRegistry awareness and activation campaign and connect pathway advancement to compensation. Given that 18% of administrators and 19% of staff were unsure of their current Career Pathway level, and that 29% of staff selected "Unknown" when asked about their five-year pathway goals, a targeted outreach effort is clearly warranted. Work with the Great Start Resource Center, local ISDs, and program directors to offer brief, accessible orientations on MiRegistry navigation, credential recognition, and pathway planning.

Critically, awareness alone is insufficient. For MiRegistry to serve as a meaningful workforce development tool, Career Pathway advancement must be linked to tangible benefits, most importantly, compensation. Programs should be encouraged to develop internal wage scales that recognize and reward credential attainment, so that earning a P2 or moving from P1 to P3 results in a clear, communicated pay increase. CCI can support this by developing model wage scale frameworks and working with local employers and policymakers to explore incentive programs or wage supplements tied to pathway milestones. When educators see a direct link between professional development and financial gain, participation in MiRegistry shifts from passive compliance to active career investment.

Develop a local strategy to address challenging child behaviors. With 81% of staff and 47% of administrators identifying these behaviors as a leading workplace stressor, and with more than half of staff reporting that stress significantly affects their decision to stay, this issue warrants a dedicated and sustained response — not a one-time training.

A meaningful local strategy should include at least three components. First, expand access to trauma-informed care training for classroom staff and program leaders, emphasizing practical, classroom-applicable tools rather than one-time awareness sessions. Second, establish or connect to a behavioral consultation resource, such as an early childhood mental health consultant or an early intervention specialist, who can work directly with programs when children present with complex behavioral needs. Third, convene a local working group, potentially through CCI and the Great Start Resource Center, to assess existing resources, identify the greatest gaps, and coordinate a regional response that doesn't place the full burden of solutions on individual program directors or teachers.

Addressing this stressor is not merely a quality-of-life issue. It is a workforce stability issue. When educators lack the support needed to respond effectively to behavioral challenges, emotional exhaustion accelerates, turnover risk rises, and programs' capacity to serve children is directly diminished.

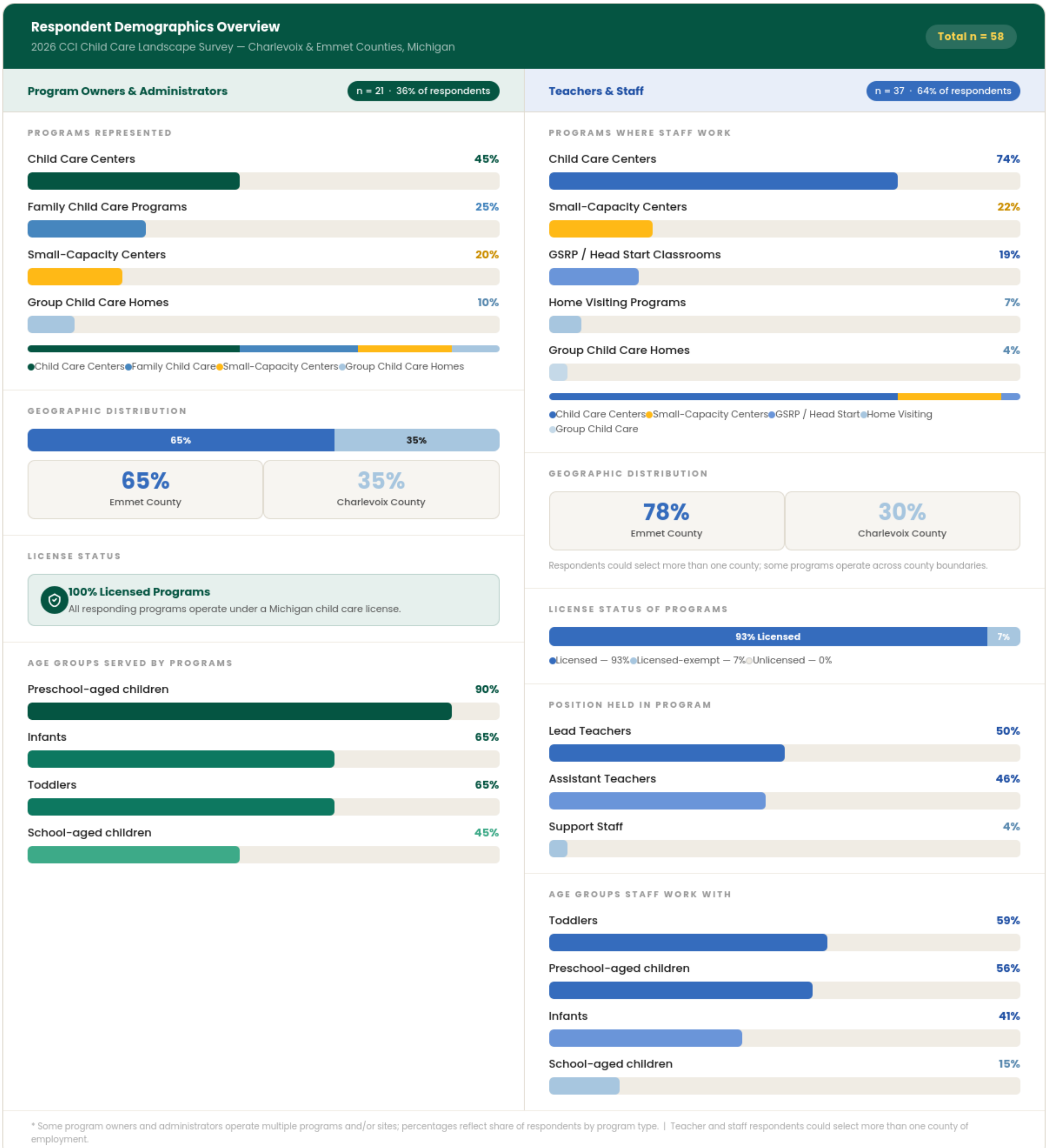
Support programs in understanding and closing the pricing gap. Engage directly with providers on the implications of pricing below the CDC reimbursement rate. This may include financial coaching, assistance accessing supplemental funding streams, and advocacy for CDC rate increases that better reflect regional market conditions. Support providers in building business models that can sustain both affordable family pricing and competitive staff compensation. Finally, support providers and parents in being advocates for community, regional, and state affordability supports.

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 to develop career pathways into early childhood education, including apprenticeship models, stackable credentials, and dual-enrollment opportunities that introduce students to the profession early.

Establish consistent data collection for longitudinal tracking. This survey establishes a valuable baseline. CCI intends to repeat it on an annual cycle, which will allow CCI and community partners to track progress on key indicators including wage growth, career pathway advancement, capacity utilization, and workforce stability. Consistent data is the foundation for accountability and informed advocacy.

Appendix 1

Respondent Demographics Chart



Appendix 2

MiRegistry Career Pathway & Possible Career Opportunities

miregistry

Career Pathway

for Early Childhood and School Age Professionals

MiRegistry Career Pathway Overview

The MiRegistry Career Pathway supports Michigan's early childhood and school age professionals in advancing their education and training. As a member of MiRegistry, you are awarded a Career Pathway Level based on the education and training that is verified in the MiRegistry system.

Log in to your MiRegistry account to view your Career Pathway Level. After reviewing your level, explore career opportunities that align with your Career Pathway Level.

Reading the Career Pathway

Here is what you need to know to understand how the Career Pathway works:

- The Career Pathway consists of eight sequential levels.
- Each level has specific education or training requirements.
- You are awarded the highest level you qualify for based on the information you submit and MiRegistry verifies.
- Meeting the requirements of prior levels is not required.

Glossary of Terms

Registered Apprenticeship: Refers to an employer-driven model that combines on-the-job learning with related instruction that increases an apprentice's skill level and wages.

CD: Refers to the field of Child Development.

CDA: Refers to the Child Development Associate Credential that consists of 120 clock hours of professional education, awarded by the Council of Professional Recognition.

ECE: Refers to the field of Early Childhood Education.

Foundational Levels: These levels represent the fundamental education and training requirements for Early Childhood and School Age Professionals.

MI-AIMH: Refers to the Michigan Association for Infant Mental Health

MI-YDA: Refers to the Michigan Youth Development Associate Credential, awarded by Michigan After-School Partnership (MASP).

Montessori Teaching Credential: Refers to a credential issued by a program accredited by the Montessori Accreditation Council for Teacher Education (MACTE) or issued by the American Montessori Society (AMS) or the Association Montessori Internationale (AMI).

Professional Levels: Levels focusing on degrees, college credit hours, and credentials.

FOUNDATIONAL LEVELS

F1	* Obtained membership in MiRegistry
F2	* 60 unduplicated training hours aligned to the Michigan Professional Standards and Competencies and Core Knowledge and Core Competencies - School Age
F3	* 6 semester (9 term) credit hours in ECE / CD or child related-field * 90 unduplicated training hours aligned to Michigan Professional Standards and Competencies and Core Knowledge and Core Competencies - School Age * Michigan Infant and Toddler Caregiver Certificate

Training Hours must be approved and obtained within three years. Approved training hours include those offered through miregistry.org and/or those bearing State Continuing Education Clock Hours (SCECH), or Continuing Education Units (CEU).

PROFESSIONAL LEVELS

	Pathway A	Pathway B
P1	* 12 semester (18 term) credit hours in ECE / CD or child-related field * Valid CDA Credential * Valid MI-YDA * Montessori Credential * Valid MI-AIMH endorsement credential: Infant Family Associate or Early Childhood Family Associate	
P1+	* Registered Apprenticeship Completion Certificate with CDA or MI-YDA	
P2	* Associate Degree in ECE / CD * 60 semester (90 term) credit hours with at least 18 semester (27 term) credit hours in ECE / CD	* Associate Degree in a child-related field * 60 semester (90 term) credit hours with at least 18 semester (27 term) credit hours in a child-related field OR with Montessori Teaching Credential
P2+	* Registered Apprenticeship Completion Certificate with Associate in ECE/CD or child-related field	
P3	* Bachelor Degree in ECE / CD or Teacher Certification (with ZA, ZS, ZN, or ZO) * Bachelor Degree or higher in a related / unrelated field with 30 semester (45 term) credit hours in ECE / CD	* Bachelor Degree in a child-related field * Bachelor Degree or higher in an unrelated field with 30 semester (45 term) credit hours in a child-related field OR with Montessori Teaching Credential
P3+	* Registered Apprenticeship Completion Certificate with Bachelor's Degree in ECE/CD or Education	
P4	* Master Degree in ECE / CD	* Master Degree in a child-related field
P4+	* Registered Apprenticeship Completion Certificate with Master's Degree in ECE/CD or Education	
P5	* Ed.D. or Ph.D. in ECE / CD, teaching and learning, educational leadership, or educational administration with a minimum of 36 semester (54 term) credit hours in ECE / CD	* Ed.D. or Ph.D. in a child-related field

NOTE: Child-related field is defined by child care licensing.

miregistry

Possible Career Opportunities

for Early Childhood and School Age Professionals

Possible Career Opportunities

The positions listed are based on preliminary educational qualifications and are possible opportunities that relate to the requirements of each level of the Career Pathway. This is not an exhaustive list of all career opportunities for Early Childhood and School Age Professionals.

Early On Michigan also offers career paths that align closely with the skills and qualifications outlined in the Career Pathway. These positions allow professionals to apply early childhood competencies in a Part C early intervention setting and may require specific degrees or licensure. For more information, visit: Early On Personnel Standards and/or the Early On Center for Higher Education.

About MiRegistry

MiRegistry proudly supports early childhood and school age professionals by being an all-in-one resource for tracking professional development, facilitating training, and growing professionally. MiRegistry is here to support you.

Contact Us

For questions related to the MiRegistry Career Pathway or your MiRegistry account /membership, please contact us or visit www.miregistry.org for more information.

833.386.9238

support@miregistry.org

www.miregistry.org

MiLEAP

Materials for the MiRegistry were developed with federal funds awarded to the Michigan Department of Lifelong Education, Advancement, and Potential (MiLEAP).

Rev. January 2026

FOUNDATIONAL LEVELS

F1	* Assistant teacher in Child Care Center or School Age Program * Family / Group Child Care Home Owner or Assistant
F2	* Assistant teacher in Child Care Center or School Age Program * Family / Group Child Care Home Owner or Assistant
F3	* School Age Program Director

PROFESSIONAL LEVELS

P1	* Great Start Readiness Program (GSRP) Associate Teacher * Head Start Assistant Teacher * Early Head Start Lead Teacher * Lead Teacher in Child Care Center * Trainer
P2	* Child Care Center Program Director / Administrator * CDA Professional Development Specialist * Head Start Lead Teacher * Validator / Assessor, Great Start to Quality (GSQ)
P3	* Great Start Readiness Program (GSRP) Lead Teacher * Early Childhood Special Education Teacher * T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood Scholarship Counselor * Quality Improvement Specialist, Great Start to Quality (GSQ) * Validation Manager / Assessment Manager, GSQ * School Age Multi-Site Director
P4	* Great Start Readiness Program (GSRP) Early Childhood Specialist * Community College Faculty / University Adjunct Faculty * Child Care Licensing Consultant * Quality Improvement Coach, Great Start to Quality (GSQ) * Agency or Program Director, Michigan AEYC, T.E.A.C.H., Michigan Afterschool Association * Research and Policy
P5	* University Faculty

The career opportunities listed are categorized based on the minimum educational qualifications as outlined by licensing, or by program. Refer to the licensing rules or program specific (Head Start, GSRP, etc.) guidelines for additional employment qualifications.

Appendix 3

Michigan Child Development and Care (CDC) Scholarship Reimbursement Rates

CHILD DEVELOPMENT AND CARE (CDC) REIMBURSEMENT RATES

Per Two-Week Pay Period: 9/22/2024 – Ongoing

Child Care Centers		**Child Care Fee limit of $65 and absence hour limit of 360 per fiscal year (10/1-9/30)**					
Child Type	Number of Hours Billed	Base Rate Maintaining Health & Safety (Formerly Blank Star)	Maintaining Health & Safety (Formerly 1 Star)	Reflecting on Quality (Formerly 2 Star)	Enhancing Quality (Formerly 3 Star)	Enhancing Quality-Validated (Formerly 4 Star)	Demonstrating Quality (Formerly 5 Star)
Infant/Toddler (Birth up to age 2 ½)	(hourly rates)	$7.15	$7.15	$7.55	$8.40	$8.75	$9.60
	1-30 hours	$214.50	$214.50	$226.50	$252.00	$262.50	$288.00
	31-60 hours	$429.00	$429.00	$453.00	$504.00	$525.00	$576.00
	61+ hours	$643.50	$643.50	$679.50	$756.00	$787.50	$864.00
Preschool (Age 2 ½ up to Age 5)	(hourly rates)	$5.05	$5.05	$5.45	$6.30	$6.75	$7.55
	1-30 hours	$151.50	$151.50	$163.50	$189.00	$202.50	$226.50
	31-60 hours	$303.00	$303.00	$327.00	$378.00	$405.00	$453.00
	61+ hours	$454.50	$454.50	$490.50	$567.00	$607.50	$679.50
School Age (Age 5 and older)	(hourly rates)	$4.90	$4.90	$5.35	$6.15	$6.55	$7.35
	1-30 hours	$147.00	$147.00	$160.50	$184.50	$196.50	$220.50
	31-60 hours	$294.00	$294.00	$321.00	$369.00	$393.00	$441.00
	61+ hours	$441.00	$441.00	$481.50	$553.50	$589.50	$661.50

CHILD DEVELOPMENT AND CARE (CDC) REIMBURSEMENT RATES

Per Two-Week Pay Period: 9/22/2024 – Ongoing

Group and Family Homes		**Child Care Fee limit of $40 and absence hour limit of 360 per fiscal year (10/1-9/30)**					
Child Type	Number of Hours Billed	Base Rate Maintaining Health & Safety (Formerly Blank Star)	Maintaining Health & Safety (Formerly 1 Star)	Reflecting on Quality (Formerly 2 Star)	Enhancing Quality (Formerly 3 Star)	Enhancing Quality-Validated (Formerly 4 Star)	Demonstrating Quality (Formerly 5 Star)
Infant / Toddler (Birth up to age 2 ½)	(hourly rates)	$5.70	$5.70	$6.15	$7.00	$7.35	$8.20
	1-30 hours	$171.00	$171.00	$184.50	$210.00	$220.50	$246.00
	31-60 hours	$342.00	$342.00	$369.00	$420.00	$441.00	$492.00
	61+ hours	$513.00	$513.00	$553.50	$630.00	$661.50	$738.00
Preschool (Age 2 ½ up to Age 5)	(hourly rates)	$4.90	$4.90	$5.35	$6.15	$6.55	$7.35
	1-30 hours	$147.00	$147.00	$160.50	$184.50	$196.50	$220.50
	31-60 hours	$294.00	$294.00	$321.00	$369.00	$393.00	$441.00
	61+ hours	$441.00	$441.00	$481.50	$553.50	$589.50	$661.50
School Age (Age 5 and older)	(hourly rates)	$4.80	$4.80	$5.20	$6.00	$6.45	$7.25
	1-30 hours	$144.00	$144.00	$156.00	$180.00	$193.50	$217.50
	31-60 hours	$288.00	$288.00	$312.00	$360.00	$387.00	$435.00
	61+ hours	$432.00	$432.00	$468.00	$540.00	$580.50	$652.50

License Exempt-Related and License-Exempt Unrelated Providers		
Child Type	Level 1 - Base Rate	Level 2
Infant/Toddler (Birth up to age 2 ½)	Hours billed X $2.95	Hours billed X $4.95
Preschool (Age 2 ½ up to Age 5)	Hours billed X $2.95	Hours billed X $4.40
School Age (Age 5 and older)	Hours billed X $2.95	Hours billed X $4.40

Appendix 4

Owner/Administrator and Teacher/Staff Data Comparison Table

Owners & Administrators vs. Teachers & Staff
Key Findings at a Glance

2026 CCI Child Care Landscape Survey · Charlevoix & Emmet Counties · n = 58 · Full comparison table available on request

TOPIC	Owners & Administrators n = 21	Teachers & Staff n = 37
PROFILE & EXPERIENCE		
Years in the Field ◆ CONTRAST	**77%** have **10 or more years** No respondents under 4 years	**46%** have **4–6 years** 23% have 10+; 18% have 1–3 years
Professional Identity ● SIMILAR	**100%** identify as **professionals**	**86%** identify as **professionals** 14% identify as workers
LONG-TERM COMMITMENT		
Plan to Stay Until Retirement ▲ KEY CONTRAST	**80%** plan to stay until retirement 13% would leave for better pay	**41%** plan to stay until retirement **27% would leave for better pay**
What Attracted Them ● SIMILAR	Mission, autonomy, impact on children and families — compensation cited less often as a recruitment driver	Passion for children 91% Schedule / hours 64% Positive environment 59%
WELL-BEING & STRESS		
Emotional Exhaustion Always or often ◆ NOTABLE	**40%** feel exhausted always or often Always 13% · Often 27%	**52%** feel exhausted always or often Always 19% · Often 33%
Top Stressors ◆ NOTABLE	Financial challenges 47% Challenging behaviors 47% Admin overload 47%	Challenging behaviors 81% Staffing shortages 67% Large groups / ratios 38%
COMPENSATION		
Wage Impact on Staying ▲ KEY CONTRAST	**60%** say wages have some or significant impact on their decision to stay	**92%** say wages have some or significant impact **69% say "very significant"**
Annual Wage Increases ▲ KEY CONTRAST	**40%** receive regular annual increases 60% do not or are unsure	**73%** receive annual increases — but most describe them as minimal: **"a few cents a year"**
Benefits Access ● SIMILAR	**53%** receive employer-sponsored benefits 47% receive none	**55%** receive employer-sponsored benefits ~45% receive none
QUALITY & PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT		
MiRegistry Awareness ● SIMILAR GAP	**18%** unsure of their current Career Pathway level	**19%** selected "Unknown" for current level **29%** unknown for 5-year pathway goal
GSQ Awareness Program quality rating ◆ NOTABLE	Clear awareness of GSQ rating · 45% working toward next level · 20% at highest level	**52% were uncertain** of their program's GSQ status — suggests staff are less involved in quality rating processes
What Would Most Help ● ALIGNED — WAGES & FUNDING	Sustainable model balancing family affordability with fair staff compensation; employer & public investment	Higher wages, better benefits; more subsidized programs for ages 0–3; recognition and community respect

● Similar | ◆ Notable Difference | ▲ Key Contrast. Full 15-row comparison table available as a report appendix. 2026 CCI Child Care Landscape Survey · n = 58 respondents.

Citations

References

Amadon, S., Dye, C., Halle, T., Rodrigues, K., & Partika, A. (2023). *National Survey of Early Care and Education: Characteristics of the early care and education workforce* (OPRE Report No. 2023-061). Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/report/national-survey-early-care-and-education-characteristics-early-care-and-education

Anthropic. (2026). *Claude* (Version claude.ai) [Large language model]. Used to assist in drafting report sections, generating data visualizations, and creating comparative tables. https://claude.ai

Center for the Study of Child Care Employment. (2024). *Early childhood workforce index 2024*. University of California, Berkeley. https://cscce.berkeley.edu/workforce-index-2024/

Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland. (2024, January). *Child care and education employment: Trends and challenges*. Community Development Reports. https://www.clevelandfed.org/publications/cd-reports/2024/20240119-childcare-and-education-workforce

Hall, J., Fares, R., Markowitz, A. J., Miller-Bains, K., & Bassok, D. (2024). Child care workforce size, turnover, and the implications for access to care. *Education Finance and Policy, 19*(3), 524–551. https://doi.org/10.1162/edfp_a_00410

Michigan Department of Lifelong Education, Advancement, and Potential (MiLEAP). (2024). *Great Start to Quality: Michigan's quality rating and improvement system*. State of Michigan. https://www.michigan.gov/milead/early-childhood/great-start-to-quality

Michigan Department of Lifelong Education, Advancement, and Potential (MiLEAP). (2024). *MiRegistry: Michigan's early childhood and youth professional development registry*. State of Michigan. https://www.miregistry.org

Data Sources

Child Care Initiative at North Central Michigan College. (2026). *2026 CCI Child Care Landscape Survey* [Survey instrument and raw data]. Unpublished survey data.

Michigan Department of Education. (2024). *Great Start Readiness Program (GSRP): State-funded preschool overview*. State of Michigan. https://www.michigan.gov/mde/services/early-learners-and-care/gsrp

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Child Care. (2024). *Child care and development fund (CCDF) program: State and territory reimbursement rates and policies*. https://www.acf.hhs.gov/occ

Suggested Citation for this Report

Child Care Initiative at North Central Michigan College. (2026). *The state of child care: A child care landscape assessment for Charlevoix and Emmet Counties*. North Central Michigan College.

A Note on AI Assistance

Portions of this report were developed with the assistance of Claude, an AI assistant created by Anthropic (claude.ai). AI tools were used to support data visualization design, drafting and editing of narrative sections, and creation of comparative tables. All data, findings, and interpretations reflect the original survey responses collected by CCI. All AI-assisted content was reviewed, edited, and approved by CCI staff prior to publication.