

Virtual Listening Tour 2020

STABLE, QUALITY CHILD CARE A CRITICAL NEED FOR WORKING FAMILIES AND ECONOMIC STABILITY

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused life-altering disruptions in many people's personal and professional lives. Data from our listening tour show that when schools and businesses shut down, the state's early child care providers faced exponential challenges. Stay open and run the risk of spreading COVID-19? Close their doors, lay off employees and leave essential workers scrambling to find child care? Like many of the findings gathered from our listening tour, the pandemic brought to light a fundamental need for families—access to quality early learning programs that prepare children for academic success and support working families who fuel the economy. [Data and analysis](#) compiled by the Center for American Progress this past April found that Florida could lose more than half of its child care slots (56%), impacting about 419,633 children. Since March, media outlets have [reported](#) the toll closures had on first responders with children, victims of child abuse without the safety of mandatory reporters and employees who work low-wage jobs who can't afford to miss a day of work. A series of key themes and recommendations emerged from our interviews and surveys of over 4,000 parents, educators and families from across the state—the availability of reliable child care ensures the wellbeing of working families and their children.

THEMES

The absence of safe, quality child care programs has a negative economic impact on working families and local economies.

When child care programs closed in March, it affected every aspect of a community's economic stability. Without child care, working parents scrambled to find help or risked losing their job. Without the income from parents, programs couldn't pay their staff (average wage [less than \\$12 per hour](#)). It's estimated that without federal assistance, 40% of programs will close [permanently](#) this year. For those parents who can work remotely ([only 37% of US jobs](#)), caring for children while working is nearly impossible. This impacts working moms the most ([77% work full-time](#)) who already shoulder a majority of the caregiving and managed nearly all of it during school closures. These conditions, coupled with the need to ensure a safe, virus-free environment, exacerbated the struggles for the providers and parents.

Access to quality [child care programs](#) for all children is critically important given that COVID-19 has exacerbated existing achievement gaps.

Children who participate in quality early learning programs are [80% more likely](#) to attend college and their employability is increased by 23%. [On average](#), minority and low-income children enter kindergarten significantly behind in reading and math skills. A recent [report](#) suggests current achievement gaps will grow by 15-20% as a result of learning loss throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Reducing the effects of school and child care closures on the

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achievement gap begins by ensuring children and parents have access to high-quality early learning programs. As Susan Block, Chief Executive Officer for the [Early Learning Coalition of Southwest Florida](#) put it, “If we have high-quality early learning programs and children are getting those appropriate experiences early on, school readiness becomes a whole lot more prolific in our cities, and everything else follows.”

Without access to a safe, reliable child care program, children are at greater risk for abuse and neglect.

The Florida Department of Children and Families often sees a reduction in abuse hotline calls when school breaks for summer. There was a similar [reduction](#) as schools closed for an extended period of time because teachers and child care providers serve as mandatory reporters, leading to concerns that abuse and neglect went unreported. Since brick and mortar schools have reopened, there has been a [27% increase](#) in calls to Florida’s Child Abuse Hotline. In an interview with one of the state’s early learning coalitions, staff described how a working parent, desperate to find care or risk losing their job, will leave their children in potentially unsafe environments.

CONSIDERATIONS

INCREASE THE ACCESS TO QUALITY CHILD CARE FOR WORKING FAMILIES.

Business organizations such as the [Florida Chamber](#) recognize the critical role early learning programs play in economic stability and recovery. An underlying challenge for many families is finding a reliable, quality program they can afford. The Office of Early Learning, in partnership with the state’s early learning coalitions, launched a [program](#) that served more than 20,000 children of healthcare workers and first responders. The federal CARES funding helped [boost programs](#) affiliated with the Early Learning Coalition of Escambia County. Typically, subsidized programs must show attendance records to receive funding but under the emergency response, these programs were funded based on enrollment. This boost kept 20 child care programs in Escambia operational for most of the shutdown so parents could continue to work. The Children’s Movement of Florida CEO Vance Aloupis, who also serves in the Florida House of Representatives, implored the state in an [interview](#) to make the additional federal funding readily available to support programs.

When we invest in high-quality early education, the benefits are overwhelmingly positive, with an estimated average [return on investment](#) of up to 13% and contribution of \$163 billion to the U.S. gross domestic product. Further, children who experience [quality child care](#) are more prepared for kindergarten, more likely to graduate from high school, less likely to commit crimes, be unemployed, or require public assistance. The most significant way to increase the quality of early education is by improving the knowledge and skills of the educator workforce. A critical step is to develop and maintain a comprehensive and coherent [professional development system](#) with multiple, aligned pathways for educators to advance their education and careers.

INVEST IN THE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATOR WORKFORCE TO MAXIMIZE THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIETAL IMPACTS OF QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION.

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CONNECT FAMILIES WITH RESOURCES FOR SUPPORTING THEIR YOUNG CHILDREN'S BRAIN DEVELOPMENT OUTSIDE OF THE CLASSROOM.

While distance learning was widely implemented in Florida's K-12 system, engaging the youngest children from afar is a seemingly insurmountable challenge. As many child care programs were closing their physical buildings across the state, some were still able to connect with their families and provide tips for promoting healthy development at home. A parent in Sarasota County recalled being contacted by her three year-old's child care program at least once a week during its closure and being offered the opportunity to join Zoom calls with teachers and parents. She also highlighted how helpful she found the resources and activities from the [Children's Movement of Florida](#) as she tried to ensure her children continued learning while at home. Other initiatives like the Florida Grade-Level Reading Campaign's [Educare Concierge](#), PNC Bank's [Grow Up Great](#), and our own [Early Literacy Tip Sheets](#) provide beneficial guidance on how families can create learning opportunities for their children every day.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

The University of Florida Lastinger Center for Learning, a national leader in researching and improving how teachers deliver learning, launched a comprehensive analysis of the responses and approaches taken by birth through 12th grade public and private education programs throughout Florida during the COVID-19 pandemic. As part of a Virtual Listening Tour, researchers interviewed students, parents, teachers, early childhood and K-12 educators and administrators about the effect of COVID-19 and how it impacted the delivery of educational services. The work was made possible with funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The findings and conclusions contained within are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of the foundation.