The Business of Childcare And Early Learning in Orange County

A Research and Planning Project
Funded by Helios Education Foundation

Key Findings and Recommendations
November 2023

Report Overview

The following report on the state of childcare and early learning in Orange County unveils key findings from a research and planning project made possible through generous funding from the Helios Education Foundation in partnership with the Early Learning Coalition of Orange County and the K-Ready Community Project.

The focus of the research and planning presented is primarily on addressing the critical issues affecting access to quality early care and education (ECE), such as under-investment and affordability, teacher and childcare seat shortages, and provider stability.

Recommendations made in the report are informed by the key findings from original research conducted in Orange County for this project that have been synthesized and summarized for the purposes of this report. The data and detailed reports from this research confirm the dire state of childcare and early learning, and can be found here:

Provider Surveys 2022/2023:   **Survey Report (Reinvestment Fund)**

Provider Interviews 2022:   **Provider Insights Report (Think Spot)**

ARPA Application Data '22/23:   **Zip Code Level Report ARPA (UF)**

Occupancy Geo-Map Tool: **Geo-map of Zip Code Occupancies (from ARPA)**

Research from Florida's Early Learning Roadmap developed by The Children's Movement of Florida was also synthesized and referenced in this report. Quotes from concerned providers, teachers, and parents from Florida's Early Learning Roadmap's listening tour across the state of Florida were included in this report to support key findings. More information about Florida's Early Learning Roadmap can be found on the The Children's Movement of Florida Future Project landing page.
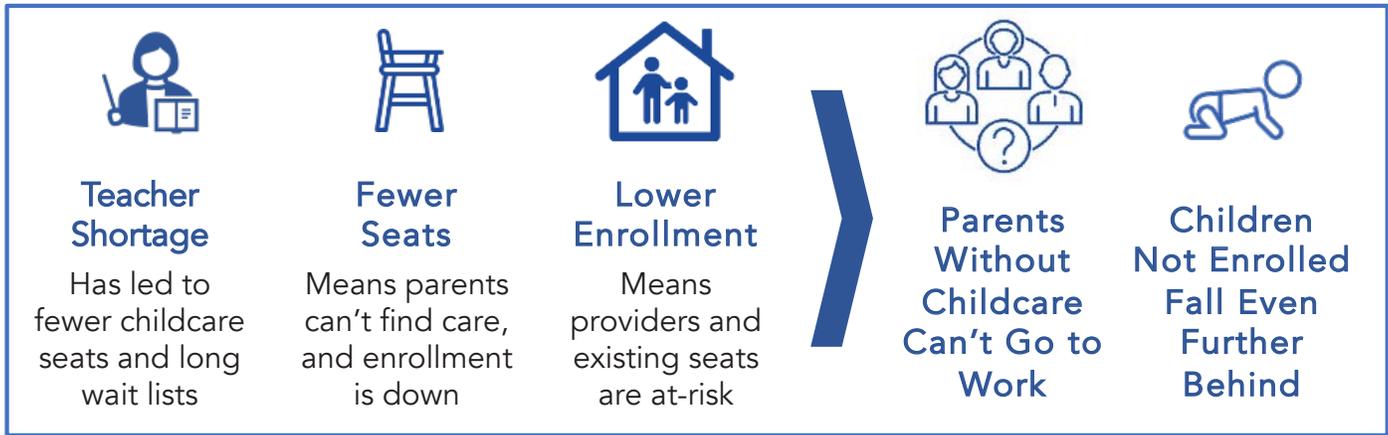
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THE SITUATION

Reliable childcare is what allows parents, especially mothers, to work and enables businesses to hire and retain workers. In fact, the childcare industry is what sustains all other industries and businesses in Orange County.

Quality early care and education (ECE) for all children from birth to four years of age is also the best investment we can make in children, our future workforce, and in the success of our businesses and the prosperity of our families. Yet, the ECE industry is in serious trouble and unable to meet the childcare needs of all working parents and children in Orange County.

Chronically low teacher salaries and competition from other employers has led to a shortage of teachers, causing a childcare shortage, longer wait lists, and lower enrollment. As a result, childcare is increasingly harder to find, and with higher costs of living, it has become unaffordable for most families. State subsidies to help cover costs are inadequate, meaning that early care and education (ECE) providers can't afford to raise teacher pay.

With lower enrollment revenue, inadequate subsidies, and higher costs, childcare providers are struggling financially. At least half are operating at enrollment levels below sustainable thresholds, and with the recent expiration of federal ARPA funds that kept many providers afloat, are likely reaching a breaking point. This means that half of childcare spots could be at risk; more parents will be without childcare and unable to fully participate in the workforce; businesses will have more difficulty hiring and retaining workers; and even more children will fall further behind.

This is an untenable situation that the ECE industry cannot and should not have to solve on its own.

Teacher Shortage	Fewer Seats	Lower Enrollment	Parents Without Childcare Can't Go to Work	Children Not Enrolled Fall Even Further Behind
Has led to fewer childcare seats and long wait lists	Means parents can't find care, and enrollment is down	Means providers and existing seats are at-risk		

THE PROJECT

A research and planning project – funded by Helios Education Foundation and led by the Early Learning Coalition of Orange County and the K-Ready Community Project – was launched in 2022 in order to identify pilot innovations and policy solutions with the following objectives:

- Address the childcare teacher and seat shortages
- Improve the sustainability and viability of providers
- Ensure the availability and affordability of high-quality ECE for all families that need it

Research Plan

Research was conducted between Summer 2022 and Spring 2023 with ECE providers to increase our understanding of childcare seats, needs, and shortages at the neighborhood level, utilizing 3 methods:

- 26 structured interviews with center owners or directors
- Surveys (online and by phone) collected from 56% of providers
- Data provided by 76% of providers who applied for ARPA assistance

Research Partners

K-Ready Project Team
UF Anita Zucker Center
Think Spot, Inc.
Peace and Justice Institute
Dr. Judy Levin, UCF
The Reinvestment Fund
ELC of Orange County

Project Partners and Supporters

This project is made possible by the Helios Education Foundation and the support of the Early Learning Coalition of Orange County. Other partners and supporters of the project include (but are not limited to):

Early Childhood Stakeholders

Orange County Public Schools (OCPS)
Head Start
West Lakes Early Learning Center
Rollins College
UCP and 4C
Early Learning Shared Services Alliance (ELSSA)
UCF Early Childhood Development and Education
Winter Park Day Nursery
Healthy Start
FL Family Childcare Home Association

Government

Orange County
City of Orlando

Community and Business

Healthy West Orange
Peace & Justice Institute
Central Florida Foundation
Embrace Families
Children's Home Society
Heart of Florida United Way
Children's Movement of Florida
PNC Bank
Nemours Hospital
Orlando Health and Advent Health
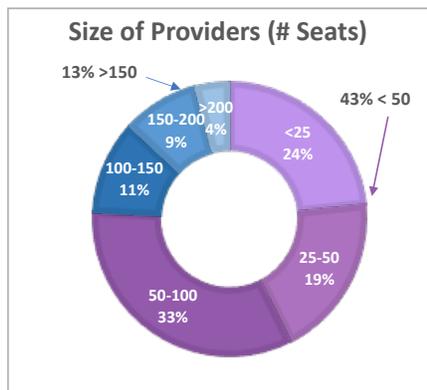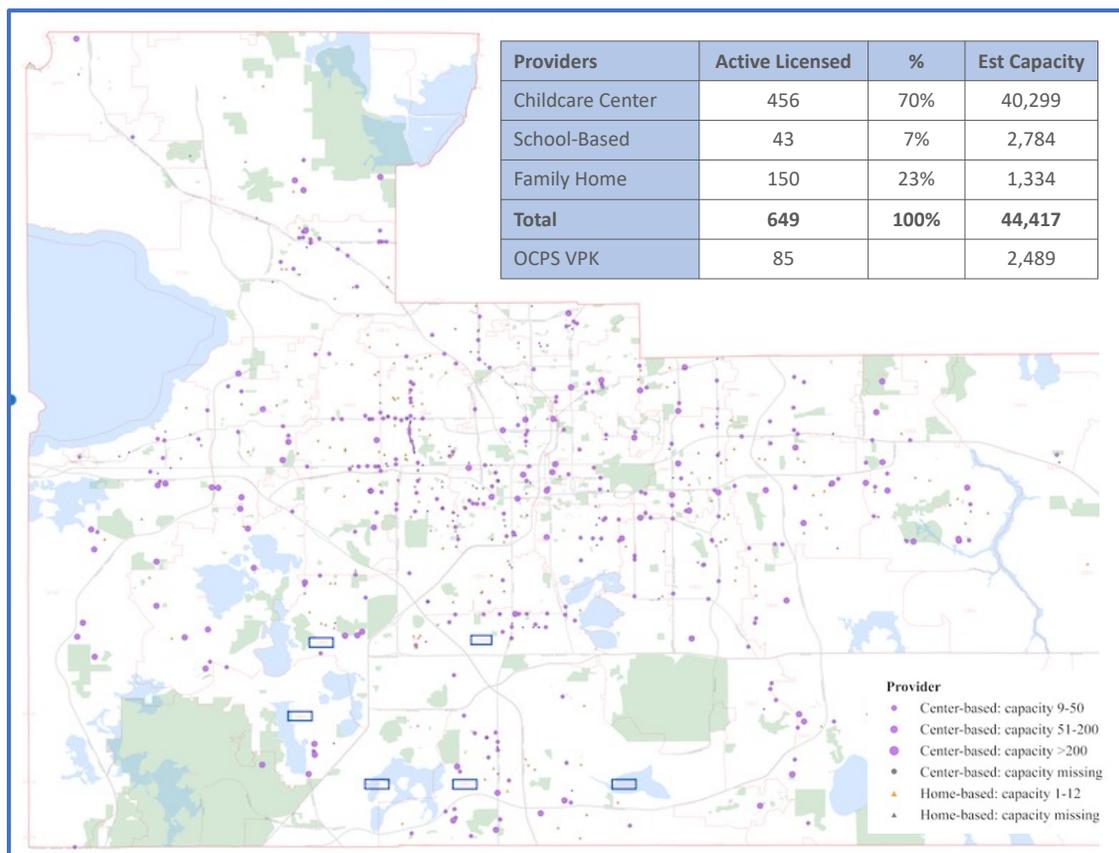Orlando Economic Partnership (OEP)
JP Morgan Chase

THE EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION (ECE) INDUSTRY

The infrastructure of early care and education (ECE) in Orange County is comprised of almost 650 licensed providers, plus an additional 85 VPK classrooms operated by Orange County Public Schools (OCPS). Most providers are small, privately-owned, single-site centers. Seventy percent are centers, and nearly 80% have less than 100 spots.

These ECE providers have a capacity to serve an estimated 44,417 children under 5 years of age with 90% of the spots located in childcare centers.

Orange Co. ECE Providers

Providers	Active Licensed	%	Est Capacity
Childcare Center	456	70%	40,299
School-Based	43	7%	2,784
Family Home	150	23%	1,334
Total	**649**	**100%**	**44,417**
OCPS VPK	85		2,489

Provider
- • Center-based: capacity 9-50
- • Center-based: capacity 51-200
- • Center-based: capacity >200
- • Center-based: capacity missing
- ▲ Home-based: capacity 1-12
- ▲ Home-based: capacity missing

Size of Providers (# Seats)

- 13% >150
- >200 4%
- 150-200 9%
- 100-150 11%
- 50-100 33%
- <25 24%
- 43% < 50
- 25-50 19%

Providers	%
For Profit	64%
Single Site	83%
Faith Based	27%
Operating 5+ Yrs	77%
Gold Seal (ARPA)	20%
CLASS >=5 (ARPA)	26%

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Our research indicates that the early care and education industry (ECE) is failing to provide reliable and affordable access to quality childcare and early learning services for all Orange County families that need it. Findings show four persistent challenges:

1. Under-investment and Affordability

Investment levels in ECE do not reflect acknowledgment of its societal benefits and do not cover the real cost of quality care, placing most of the burden on small, private providers, teachers, and parents. Most families can't afford quality childcare and struggle to qualify for public assistance.

2. Quality Disparities

Providers in higher-income, less price-constrained markets can better afford to invest in quality measures (higher teacher pay, training, technology), likely leading to quality disparities.

3. Workforce Shortage

Low wages and greater competition for workers have led to a teacher shortage, reducing available childcare spots, enrollment, quality, and profitability.

4. Childcare Spot Shortage

There are not enough childcare spots where many families live and work. Existing childcare providers struggle to remain financially viable, putting existing spots at risk and eroding quality.

1. Under-Investment and Affordability

Investment levels in ECE do not cover the real cost of quality care, placing most of the burden on small, private providers, teachers, and parents. Most families can't afford quality childcare and can't get adequate assistance.

Current investments in early care and education also do not reflect recognition or acknowledgment of its societal benefits, such as improved child development and education outcomes, increased workforce participation, and broader prosperity. In essence, under-investment in ECE comes at high societal cost. According to Nobel Prize winning economist James Heckmann, investments in high-quality early learning generate an estimated return on investment of over 13%.

United Way's most recent ALICE Report unveiled that 49% of families with children in Orange County were at or below the household income threshold of $79,476.80 needed annually to meet the basic costs of living for a family of four. The ALICE household budgets allocate $15,540 annually for childcare covering an infant and a pre-schooler (age 3). This budget understates current childcare rates by as much as $9,000, using the weighted median private pay rate – meaning childcare costs surpass $24,000 annually or 30% of ALICE family total household budgets. These families cannot afford high-quality early learning without support, and subsidies are inadequate and inaccessible for most.

Across Florida, more than two thirds of young children living in households earning below 85% of the state median income are not receiving subsidies from the School Readiness program due to current funding and eligibility requirements. In addition to making childcare unaffordable for families, this inadequate funding has an enormous negative impact to Florida's economy. Extensive research in other states conducted by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation has shown that the lack of stable, quality childcare could cost the Florida economy in excess of $5.4 billion annually (*Untapped Potential by U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation*).

"Nobody can afford to have kids."

"Government help is lost when both parents work."

"We technically make too much money to qualify for anything, but we're pretty broke. So, we're in that middle ground where you're just like…sorry."

"My whole paycheck is going to pay childcare."

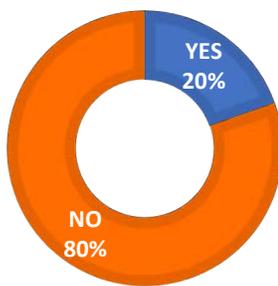Source: Florida's Early Learning Roadmap

2. Quality Disparities

Quality ECE starts with a qualified and stable teacher workforce, but that requires higher pay and benefits. Providers in higher income, less price-constrained markets can better afford to invest in quality measures (higher teacher pay, training, technology), likely leading to quality disparities. For example, providers in price-constrained markets are forced to find staff willing to work for the prevailing low wages, making it more difficult to meet higher quality standards. These providers often sacrifice investments in staff training and professional development as well as forgoing needed facility repairs and maintenance. Measures to increase quality are not widely implemented as additional requirements are labor-intensive and perceived as "not worth it".
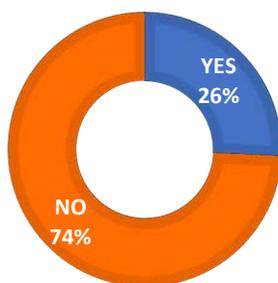
A small portion of providers in Orange County have achieved or even pursue quality ratings. According to data from recent ARPA grant applications, only 20% of providers have the Gold Seal rating, and 26% stated that they have a CLASS ranking of 5 or above.

During interviews, providers painted a picture of being constrained by regulations (e.g., teacher-child ratios) and market conditions (e.g., a tight labor market and the inability of families to pay higher tuition). Traditional means of generating revenues—raising prices—to afford investing in quality measures are off the table.

GOLD SEAL

YES 20%

NO 80%

"We struggle with being able to pull staff out of the classroom and pay overtime for training. It's impacting our bottom line."

Source: Orange Co. Provider interviews

CLASS ≥5

YES 26%

NO 74%

Quality measures and achieving higher quality ratings (such as Gold Seal or higher CLASS scores) also does not always result in higher enrollment. Quality ratings are not widely communicated, understood, or valued, and decisions are often made based on convenience and affordability.

Source: ARPA provider stabilization grant applications (10/28/22-2/28/23)

3. Workforce Shortage

Low wages and greater competition for workers have led to a teacher shortage, reducing available childcare spots, enrollment, quality, and profitability. Early childhood education teachers left the profession in droves during the pandemic, and providers continue to struggle to attract and retain teachers because other employers offer much higher wages. Survey results indicate that all childcare providers in Orange County combined have an estimated 1,000 teacher openings, and 74% of providers are hiring.

Providers interviewed all agreed that difficulty in recruiting staff was the single biggest challenge for stabilizing their businesses, expanding capacity, and enhancing quality. Of providers surveyed, 82% said that hiring was somewhat or extremely difficult, and 75% cited that hiring was their greatest business challenge.

"It's an employee-driven market. [They] can go and work at Target and make more money than we're paying."

The Washington Post
Democracy Dies in Darkness

Economy

'The pay is absolute crap': Child-care workers are quitting rapidly, a red flag for the economy

$25K
'22 Median annual earnings for childcare workers in metro Orlando

Only 10%
Of Orlando area jobs pay less

53%
Childcare workers nationally enrolled in public benefit programs

Research shows that quality teachers are a key driver of child success in early learning. Yet, a significant number of the more than 7,000 ECE teachers in Orange County do not make a living wage, and many early learning programs operate on razor-thin margins without sufficient funding to increase teacher compensation. While Florida's new minimum wage requirement and competition from other employers will bring up the wages of a childcare worker, it will not be near enough to maintain a strong early learning teacher workforce. In addition to the poverty wages, a career in early learning also often lacks the community respect, appreciation, and support that it deserves. *(Florida's Early Learning Roadmap).*

"It kills me when you have people that work in early childhood education and then have to go on benefits. That makes no sense that someone who has such an important and vital job has to worry about whether or not they can pay their bills or feed their own."

Source: Florida's Early Learning Roadmap

4. Childcare Spot Shortage

There is also a shortage of childcare spots where many families live and work, and existing childcare providers struggle to remain financially viable, putting existing spots at risk and eroding quality. This is due in large part to the teacher shortage and reduced enrollment, but in some high-growth areas may reflect a need for more childcare providers to meet an increased demand for early care and education (ECE).

Feedback from providers, teachers, and parents show childcare shortages in Orange County and across the state, primarily due to staffing issues. Forty percent of providers surveyed in Orange County reported lower enrollment, and over half are managing wait lists. Eighty-nine percent of childcare centers stated that staffing is the top barrier to full enrollment.

"I've got to go back to work, but I can't find a (childcare) spot. There's just not the spots!"
(Florida's Early Learning Roadmap)

"We decided I would stay home to care for the baby because we couldn't find childcare."
(Florida's Early Learning Roadmap)

"We don't have as many seats because we don't have enough staff. We've had to close classrooms, and it's not because of lack of demand."
(Orange Co. Provider interviews)

40%	Report lower enrollment since '21
51%	Have wait lists (43% from ARPA data)
33%	Have a closed classroom due to staff shortages
89%	Centers say staffing is top barrier to full enrollment

To better understand the extent of childcare shortages and provider financial stability, three metrics were examined:

- Ideal capacity (if fully staffed)
- Enrollment as % of children under 5
- Occupancy = Enrollment % of capacity

If fully staffed, there would be a capacity to serve 56% of the almost 83,400 children under 5 in Orange County. Less than half (46%) are currently enrolled.

This varies by age with 70% of 4-year-olds and 18% of infants enrolled. Statewide, VPK serves 65% of 4-year-olds, but VPK funding only covers 3 hours per day.

Occupancy (enrollment as a % of ideal capacity) reflects how well a providers' capacity is utilized. A low occupancy can result primarily from 2 conditions – a teacher shortage reducing the available spots and a lower demand for childcare (due to affordability or other reason).

An occupancy of 80% is an accepted threshold for childcare provider sustainability.

However, half of providers surveyed are operating below 80% occupancy, meaning half of the existing childcare spots are potentially at risk. Twenty-seven percent of childcare providers stated they were not financially stable. Nearly all (90%) of providers with occupancies below the sustainable threshold have indications that their low enrollment is due to staffing issues. Affordability was also cited as a reason for lower enrollment, especially for family childcare homes.
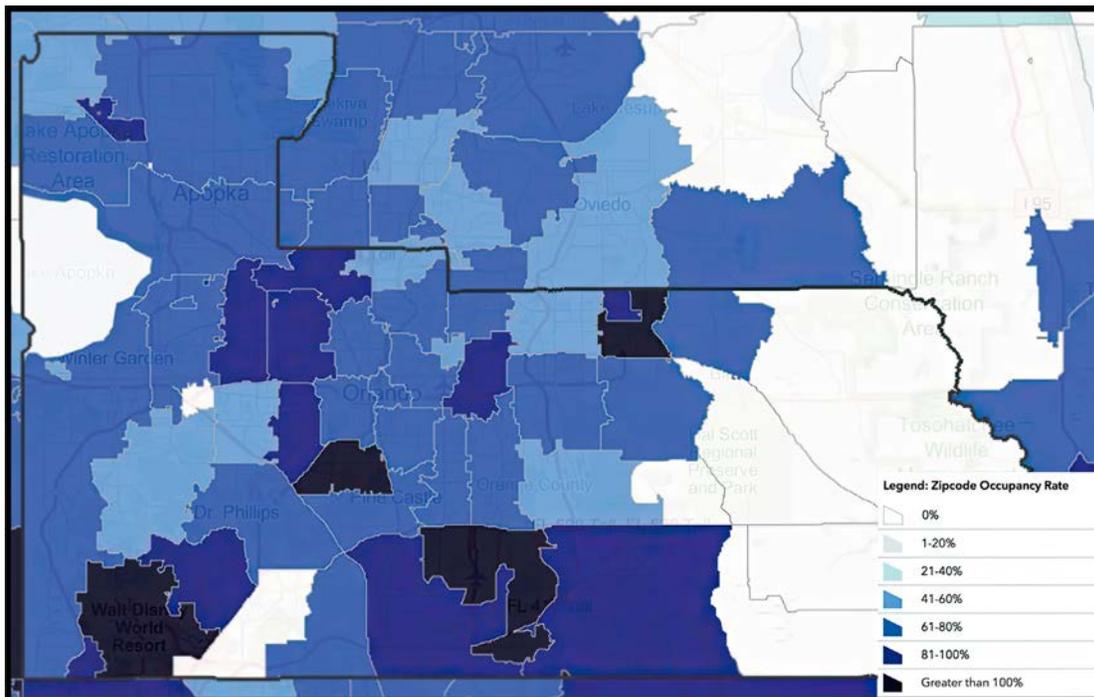
HALF of Providers at Risk

Childcare provider occupancies vary by area and by age group but show widespread concerns across Orange County and across income levels. Occupancies for infants were the lowest at 64%, possibly indicating that providers are shifting their limited staff to cover older children.

<div style="display:flex">

64%

Occupancy for infants (lowest)

Age	OR (%)
Infant	64%
Toddler	86%
2 Yr	84%
Pre-school	79%

60%-79%

Occupancy for over half of zips

Total Occupancy Rate	Zip Codes (%)
40-59%	5 (12%)
60-79%	23 (55%)
80-100%	10 (24%)
Over 100%	4 (10%)

</div>

Total Occupancy Rate geo-maps for all Florida counties, utilizing data from ARPA stabilization grant applications, were developed by UF Anita Zucker Center. Two-thirds of zip codes, shown below in lighter blue, have average occupancy rates below 80%.

Orange County Zip Code Occupancy Rates Geo-map

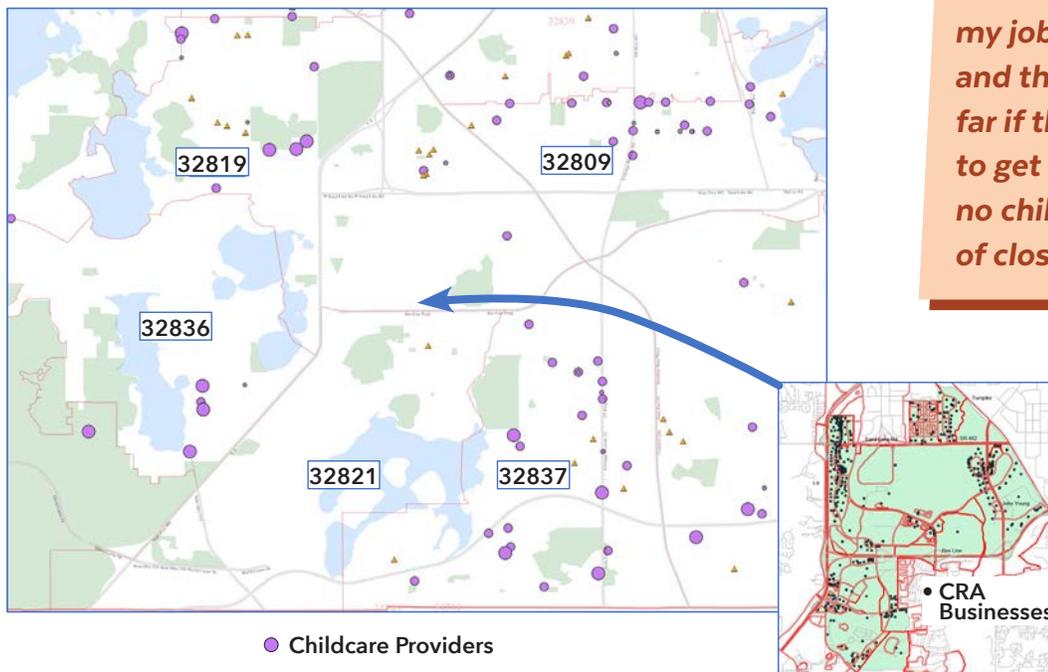[Link to FL Zip Code Occupancy Map](#)

Regional Profiles and Pilot Areas

Access to childcare is hyper-local. There must be enough providers, teachers, and spots near where families live and work. Regional profiles have been developed to understand the childcare issues at the neighborhood level; to identify interventions that may be needed; and to engage community partners. Included in this report are two examples of regional profiles that have been created – the I-Drive corridor and West Orange County.

International-Drive Corridor

- The International Drive Community Redevelopment agency (CRA), founded in 1998, is currently exploring opportunities to support job development and career pathways for workers in the I–Drive corridor

- The corridor includes 1,800 companies (heavily hospitality and tourism) with over 90,000 jobs, and there are an estimated 25,577 residents

- An estimated 1,500 children under 5 live in the corridor, and an additional 4,000 children of people working there live outside the corridor. Yet, there are only eight providers and 216 childcare seats within the corridor

- While there is additional childcare available in surrounding zip codes where workers may live, there is a shortage of care in the corridor, where parents work. Providers in the corridor have the capacity to serve only an estimated 14% of children living there and 5% of the children of workers

- In recent focus groups with CRA workers, conducted by Orange County, respondents overwhelmingly reported serious challenges with childcare

ECE Provider Surrounding I-Drive

32819 32809

32836

32821 32837

● Childcare Providers

● CRA Businesses

"There's lots of people at my job that have children and they have to travel so far if there's an emergency to get to their kids...there's no childcare that's kind of close to I–Drive."

Source: I-Drive CRA Workforce Focus Group Findings 2023

Regional Profiles and Pilot Areas

International-Drive Corridor – Surrounding Zip Codes

- In the five zip codes surrounding the I-Drive corridor, where workers likely live, there are almost 8,000 children under 5, and providers within the zip codes have a capacity to serve 55% of those children

- Most providers are operating at an enrollment level that is not financially viable

- Occupancies (enrollment as % of capacity) of 80% is viability threshold

- Occupancies for infants are lower than average in these zip codes

- Occupancies in most all the zip codes are lower than Orange Co.. Over half of providers in 32836 and 32819 operate at less than 75%

	32809 Bell Isl, Oakridge	32836 DP / Bay Hill	32819 Univ, Tangelo	32837 Hunter's Cr	32821 Sea World	Total	Orange County
Children Under 5	2,275	1,358	1,341	2,019	788	7,781	83,391
Providers	24	7	24	26	1	82	651
Centers	18	7	13	20	0	58	458
Family Homes	2	0	11	1	1	15	150
School-based	4	0	0	0	0	5	45
Total Seats	1,526	794	1,368	1,917	9	4,246	44,870
Capacity % 0-4	67%	58%	102%	95%	1.1%	55%	56%
Enrollment	1,228	586	1,047	1,493	7	4,361	35,738
Enrollment % 0-4	54%	43%	78%	74%	0.9%	56%	46%
Avg Occup	80%	65%	74%	75%	76%	75%	80%
Infant Occup	49%	53%	60%	94%	NA	57%	61%
Providers < 75% Occ	33%	50%	58%	46%	0%	46%	40%
Providers < 55% Occ	7%	50%	17%	0%	0%	11%	19%
% with Wait	47%	100%	33%	54%	0%	49%	52%

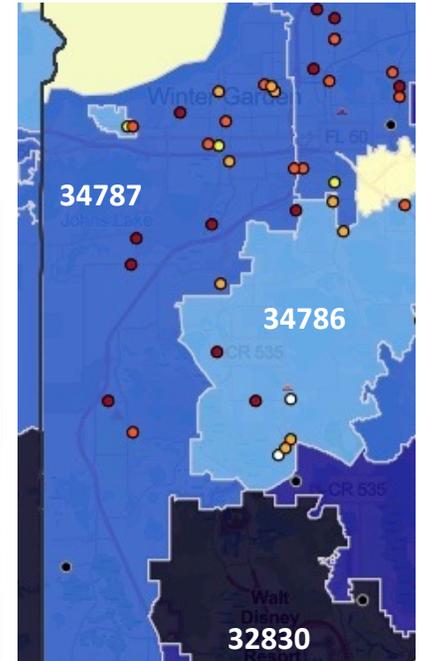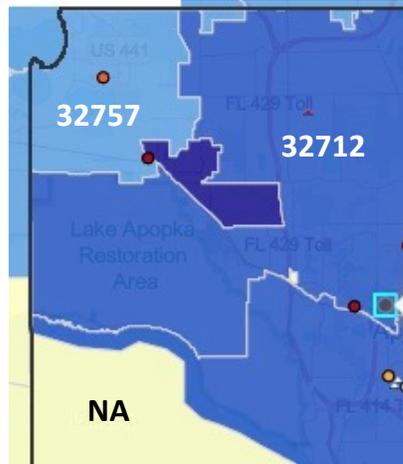|	32839 Millenia	32811 Orlo Vista	32835 Metro West
Children Under 5	2,922	2,863	3,190
Providers	12	29	13
Centers	7	20	9
Family Homes	5	9	4
School-based	0	0	0
Total Seats	519	1,402	813
Capacity % 0-4	18%	49%	25%
Enrollment	387	1,121	647
Enrollment % 0-4	18%	39%	20%
Avg Occup	71%	77%	79%
Infant Occup	69%	57%	56%
Providers < 75% Occ	71%	25%	44%
Providers < 55% Occ	14%	17%	22%
% with Wait	29%	50%	56%

Nearby zip codes where employees may also live have a shortage of seats and a higher percentage of providers with low occupancies.

Regional Profiles and Pilot Areas

Western Orange County – Winter Garden, Independence, Apopka

- Western Orange County, a region with a large population of children, and with high growth, appears to have a shortage of childcare seats

- All ZIP Codes have a capacity to serve less than 30% of children and an enrollment less than 25%

- A relatively high portion of providers carry a waitlist in most ZIP Codes

- In 34787, occupancies are better than orange county, and over 80% have waitlist. This shows that additional capacity is likely needed in this high growth area

- In 34786, half of providers have low occupies with 67% carrying a waitlist. This may indicate a staffing shortage along with a need for additional capacity

	32712 Apopka	32757 Apopka	34787 Winter Garden	34786 Windermere/535	Total	Orange County
Children Under 5	2,827	1,134	5,353	2,751	12,065	83,391
Providers	9	2	28	12	51	651
Centers	5	2	18	8	33	458
Family Homes	4	0	4	3	11	150
School-based	0	0	6	1	7	45
Total Seats	837	88	1,783	735	3,443	44,870
Capacity % 0-4	30%	8%	33%	27%	29%	56%
Enrollment	703	87	1,438	592	2,820	35,738
Enrollment % 0-4	25%	8%	27%	22%	23%	46%
Avg Occup (Survey)	85%	99%	81%	81%	82%	80%
Infant OCC	63%	NA	70%	47%	60%	61%
Providers < 75%	40%	20%	27%	50%	34%	40%
% with Wait	20%	50%	82%	67%	55%	52%

PILOT INNOVATIONS AND SOLUTIONS

Innovations and systemic solutions were developed to mitigate the most critical issues from the research. Two pilot concepts, described below, are being developed further with potential funder and stakeholder partners to target issues specific to pilot neighborhoods – such as, inadequate funding, affordability, teacher shortages, and provider stability.

> **Goal:** Build and sustain a childcare and early learning infrastructure that provides access to high-quality early care and education for all children and families that need it in the neighborhoods where families live and work.

I. Support Teachers and Providers

A. Supports to stabilize providers in pilot areas – Provide shared services, business supports, and coaching to improve financial stability of pilot cohorts.

- Staff recruiting and development
- Enrollment marketing and software
- Bookkeeping and payroll services
- ACA benefits assistance
- Business planning and coaching
- Access to new revenue streams

B. Teacher recruitment and career development pipeline – to fill teacher openings and retain quality teachers in pilot areas.

- Expand early learning programs at Community Partnership Schools
- Paid internships and placement assistance for new recruits
- Support career pathways – achievement of accreditation and advanced certifications and degrees

II. Invest in ECE Infrastructure and Industry

A. Industry Analytics, Community Engagement, Advocacy – to prioritize smart and sustained investments in early childhood.

- Engage community leaders and citizens to commit to making early childhood a priority and advocate for local, state, and federal policy
- Build shared data systems, Early Childhood Scorecard, and planning tools to set common goals and measure progress
- Grow early childhood alliances and connect with groups across the state to advocate for smart policies
- Pilot, support, and scale programs and policies to address issues and achieve common goals
- Facilitate ventures to add childcare capacity and services, as needed
- Support and grow provider and teacher professional networks

II. Invest in ECE Infrastructure and Industry Cont'd

B. Shared funding streams – Establish sustainable funding through employers, government, and philanthropy to support providers, teachers, and parents.

- Employer-supported childcare for employees – administer scholarship program to be used at participating providers

- Community and business "Partners in Early Learning" sponsorships for neighborhoods, zip codes or providers

- Public, philanthropic, and private grants to fund specific pilot and systemic solutions

- Collaborative advocacy with other agencies and other Florida communities for additional government funding and policies

K-Ready Alliance and Advocacy

An important recommendation in Innovation 2 is to build our capacity for early childhood advocacy in Orange County and merge our voices with other communities and agencies across the state, like the Children's Movement of Florida and the Children's Forum, to achieve additional funding and better policy. While the recommended pilot solutions and innovations will yield significant outcomes, scaling the solutions and achieving systemic and lasting reform will require robust public investments at the state and federal level.

Dedicated staff, including a community engagement manager and policy consultants, is needed to work locally and with other advocacy agencies to achieve funding and policy goals, such as:

- Increase state funding for ECE and health care for mothers and young children

- Improve pay, benefits, and career supports for teachers and providers

- Provide incentives for employers to offer childcare benefits

- Fund and support integrated data systems and scorecards for early childhood

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this action-oriented research and planning project was to address the critical issue of childcare teacher and seat shortages in Orange County, Florida and to identify systems innovations and solutions to fix it. Pilot and systemic solutions from this project will create successful models that increase access to quality early care and education and ensure that all children start kindergarten ready to thrive in school and in life.

Data on ECE providers in Orange County (i.e. capacity, enrollment, available seats, location, wait lists, teacher openings, and business viability) was collected and synthesized along with data from other sources to present key findings in this report. Through the collaborative work of the K-Ready Community Project team and its Advisory Committees, priorities and recommended innovations and solutions were developed and presented.

The K-Ready Project team and its partners will continue to meet with potential partners and supporters through Spring of 2024 to secure funding and further develop the recommended pilot and systems solutions with the goal to move into implementation by Summer of next year.

This work was made possible by the Helios Education Foundation and the Early Learning Coalition of Orange County. We are grateful to the many organizations and leaders who supported this project and offered their time and expertise at the numerous meetings and workshops that were held to fulfill the research and planning.

ADDENDUM – VISION FOR EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION

This project – made possible with a generous grant from the Helios Education Foundation – was born out of the K-Ready Community Project, a collaborative movement and systems change effort started prior to the pandemic in partnership with the Early Learning Coalition of Orange County. K-Ready is committed to making early childhood a top priority, building, and investing in a better system of care and education for our youngest children to ensure that ALL children start Kindergarten ready to thrive.

We believe that investments in early childhood should be a top priority in our community, on par with other community priorities, like affordable housing, poverty, and hunger.

Why investments in early childhood are so important

Key to Prosperity

The best way to build more prosperous and thriving communities and families is to invest in the education and well-being of their children during the critical early years.

Childcare is Essential

Childcare is a driver of the workforce shortage and slow recovery. Without enough affordable and quality childcare spots, parents (especially women) can't go back to work.

Falling Further Behind

Pre-pandemic, HALF of children started Kindergarten NOT READY. Now, preschool enrollment (0-4) is down due primarily to the teacher shortage, and children are falling further behind.

Pillars of a K-Ready Community

The research and planning project in this paper has focused primarily on addressing the critical issues affecting access to quality early care and education – such as under-investment and affordability, teacher and childcare seat shortages, and provider stability.

As previously stated, investments in early childhood can generate a return on investment of more than 13%. However, to realize these returns, investments must address the developmental needs of the whole child across three pillars – Healthy Beginnings, Access to Quality Early Learning, and Strong Families.

Pillars of a K-Ready Community Cont'd

Healthy Beginnings – All mothers, babies, and children receive the healthcare, screenings, and follow up services they need to be healthy and to meet developmental milestones.

Access to Quality ECE – All children have access to quality early care and education to be ready for Kindergarten. No family will pay more than 10% percent of income for childcare. Teachers are supported and earn a living wage.

Strong Families – Families with young children have the support they need from their communities and employers to provide a safe, stable, and nurturing environment for their children.

Three advisory committees were assembled to identify goals, issues, priorities, and recommendations for each of these pillars. Recommendations in this report were developed primarily by the Early Care and Education team along with other partners. Participants of all the advisory committees are listed below with committee leads in bold.

Healthy Beginnings	High-quality Care & Education	Strong Families
Thelisha Thomas, Healthy Start	**Alfreda Clark, West Lakes Early Learning**	**Mike Bryant, Embrace Families**
Dr. Lloyd Werk, Nemours Hospital	Karen Willis, Community Advocate	Lee Seinhauer, GOBA
Dr. Candice Jones, Edgewater Pediatrics	Cindy Jurie, ELCOC (retired)	Lavon Williams, Orange County
Dr. Claudia Taboada, Nemours	Melanie Kestory, ELCOC	Rachel Allen, Peace & Justice Institute
Dr. Shannon Scott Schellhammer, Winnie Palmer	Pam Clark, OCPS	Sandi Vidal, Central Florida Foundation
Martha Fitzpatrick, Children's Home Society	Ali DeMaria, Winter Park Day Nursery	Joy Chuba, Osceola Children's Advocacy Ctr
Diane Thompson, Valencia College	Thelisha Thomas, Healthy Start	David Cavalleri, FL Alliance for Healthcare Value
Marie Martinez, Howard Phillips Center	Ilene Wilkins, UCP Central FL	Martha Are, Homeless Services Network
Valentine Palmer, Head Start	Kissha Ballard, ECE provider	Ray Larsen, Heart of FL United Way
Kerry-Ann Smith, Head Start	Tammy Tener, FL Family Childcare Home Assoc.	Patricia Reda, City of Orlando
Sara Osborne, Orlando Health	Judy Levin, UCF	Robbie Vogan, Embrace Families
Pat Frank, 4C	Sharon Carnahan, Rollins College	Rebecca Leininger, Embrace Families
Liliana Lopez, Early Head Start	Sonya Hill, Orange Co. Head Start	Maureen Brockman, Embrace Families
	Kim Renk, UCF	Mimi Coenen, Career Source CF (former)
	Kate Byrne, Early Learning Shared Services	JB Boonstra, AdventHealth
	Gerrit Van Lent, FL Children's Movement (former)	

K-Ready Priorities

The Advisory Committees developed recommendations for the key problems and priorities that should be addressed in each of the three K-Ready pillars. Efforts are underway to further develop and fund pilot solutions presented in this report to address the critical issues related to childcare and early learning. Once funding is secured, these pilot and systems solutions will move to implementation in early 2024.

Priorities listed for Healthy Beginnings and Strong Families can be facilitated through community partnerships in parallel with implementation of the ECE pilot IIA.

Healthy Beginnings

Problems:

- Significant disparities exist in access and utilization of healthcare services for mothers and babies

- There is limited awareness of importance of early childhood development and what children need for a strong start

Priorities:

- Expansion of access and utilization of home visitation and telehealth services

- Integrated system of care and navigation for parents and infant well-being

- Knowledge campaigns on importance of early childhood development

High Quality Care and Education

Problems:

- Early care and education centers are facing massive teacher shortages and growing wait lists, making it harder for parents to find quality childcare

- Inadequate funding for early education means that most families can't afford it, and most ECE teachers do not earn a living wage

Priorities:

- Supported providers and enough childcare seats to meet the needs of families

- Teacher workforce pipeline and career development. Appropriate teacher pay

- Public-private funding sources and employer support. Local and state advocacy

Strong Families

Problems:

- Too many families are not getting the support they need to survive or thrive and are not well equipped to prevent or manage setbacks and trauma

- Place matters, yet many neighborhoods do not provide safe, stable, nurturing environments for families and children to live, work, learn, and play
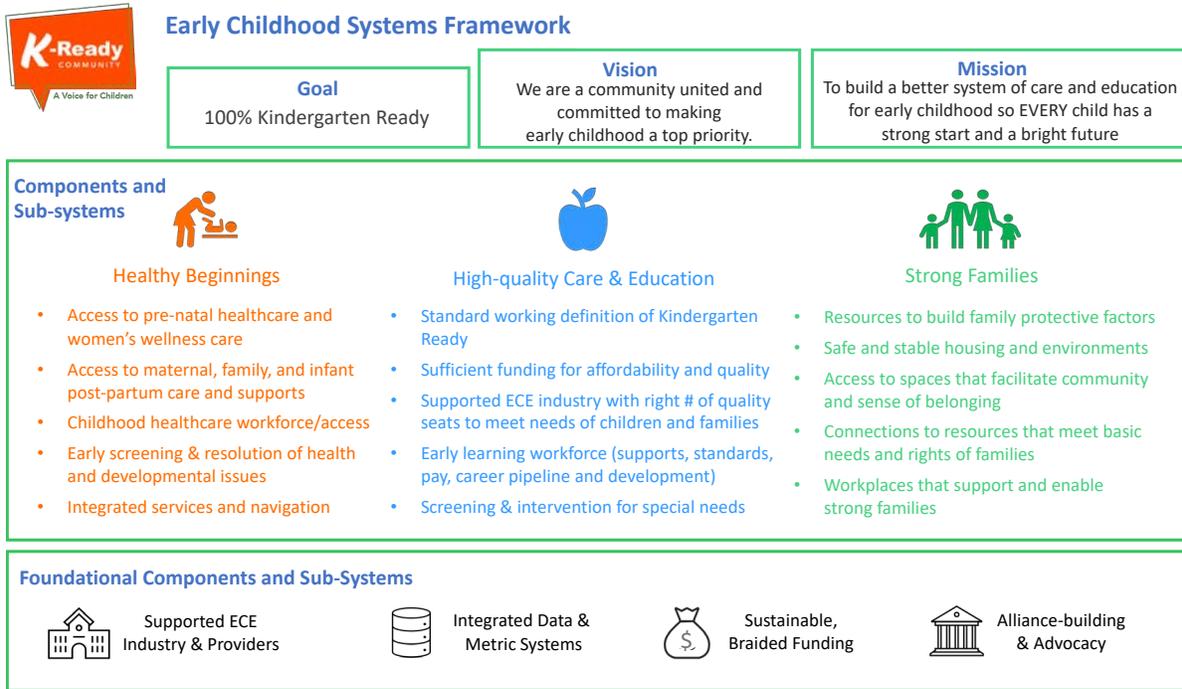
Priorities:

- Resources, training, and support to help build resiliency and protective factors in families

- Commitment and investments in creating safe, supportive, and nurturing neighborhoods

- Centralized access and navigation hubs to connect families with resources and supports

Early Childhood Systems Framework and Scorecard

The work and priorities of K-Ready and this project were guided by an Early Childhood Systems Framework shown below. This framework, developed by the K-Ready team, outlines the key components and sub-systems that should be present in a community to ensure that all children have a strong start and a bright future. The framework reflects a complex system with multiple, inter-related sub-systems and requires integrated and collaborative industry supports, data systems, funding, and advocacy to build and nurture a better system of care and education for children.

Early Childhood Systems Framework

Goal	Vision	Mission
100% Kindergarten Ready	We are a community united and committed to making early childhood a top priority.	To build a better system of care and education for early childhood so EVERY child has a strong start and a bright future

Components and Sub-systems

Healthy Beginnings
- Access to pre-natal healthcare and women's wellness care
- Access to maternal, family, and infant post-partum care and supports
- Childhood healthcare workforce/access
- Early screening & resolution of health and developmental issues
- Integrated services and navigation

High-quality Care & Education
- Standard working definition of Kindergarten Ready
- Sufficient funding for affordability and quality
- Supported ECE industry with right # of quality seats to meet needs of children and families
- Early learning workforce (supports, standards, pay, career pipeline and development)
- Screening & intervention for special needs

Strong Families
- Resources to build family protective factors
- Safe and stable housing and environments
- Access to spaces that facilitate community and sense of belonging
- Connections to resources that meet basic needs and rights of families
- Workplaces that support and enable strong families

Foundational Components and Sub-Systems

- Supported ECE Industry & Providers
- Integrated Data & Metric Systems
- Sustainable, Braided Funding
- Alliance-building & Advocacy

An Early Childhood Scorecard is in development, in partnership with DataKind and funded by Central Florida Foundation with a working model targeted Spring 2024.

Early Childhood Scorecard Concept

Kindergarten Readiness	Occupancy (Enrolled/Cap)	3 & 4-Yr-Olds in Formal ECE	% of Income on Childcare	Pre-natal care access	% Limited Healthcare	% Limited Access to Support	% Children at 200% Poverty
55% (No change)	80% (Declining)	70% (Improved)	30% (No change)	79% (Improving)	50% (Declining)	TBD (No change)	TBD (Increasing)
By Census Tract	By Zip Code Zone	By Census Tract	By Census Tract	By Census Tract	By Census Tract	By Census Tract	By Census Tract
Driver Metrics	Driver Metrics	Driver Metrics	Driver Metrics	Driver Metrics	Driver Metrics	Driver Metrics	Driver Metrics
85% 2030 Goal	90% 2030 Goal	85% 2030 Goal	<10% 2030 Goal	85% 2030 Goal	<10% 2030 Goal	<10% 2030 Goal	<10% 2030 Goal

Let's build and sustain a childcare and early learning infrastructure that provides access to high-quality early care and education for all children and families that need it in the neighborhoods where families live and work in Orange County.

The Business of Childcare
And Early Learning
in Orange County

A Research and Planning Project
Funded by Helios Education Foundation

Key Findings and Recommendations
November 2023