

Executive Summary

Arkansas is at a pivotal moment for early childhood care and education (ECCE). Families, early educators, local leads, and community leaders across the state shared a unified message: the current system, while filled with dedicated people and promising practices, is strained by underinvestment, uneven access, and administrative complexity. Through a statewide engagement effort conducted by All Children Thrive, Forward Arkansas heard directly from communities about what is working, where systems are breaking down, and what opportunities exist to build an ECCE system that truly supports every child, every family, and every community in Arkansas.

The engagement included nine focus groups with local leads, all varieties of ECCE programs, and parents; more than 300 detailed surveys; and a comprehensive county- and district-level data analysis examining access, affordability, quality, and workforce conditions.

Communities were intentionally selected based on priority indicators, including percentages of children belonging to families living in poverty, experiencing homelessness, with disabilities and developmental delays, and who are multilingual learners.

The following emerged:



Children and Families Face Persistent Barriers to Access and Affordability

Fifty Arkansas counties experience a 40% or greater gap between the number of young children and available licensed care slots. Long waitlists, limited infant and toddler care, and a lack of care during non-traditional hours make it difficult for families to find care that fits their lives. Affordability remains a major challenge as 44% of Arkansas households cannot meet basic needs, and child care costs consume up to 35% of family income in some counties.

ECCE Programs Struggle with Staffing, Paperwork, and System Complexity

Early educators describe deep commitment to children but face low wages, high turnover, and inconsistent benefits. Administrative burdens, including voucher processing, compliance paperwork, background checks, and significant and frequent quality system shifts, often limit time for quality interactions and family engagement. At the time of the focus groups, confusion about the transition from Better Beginnings to CLASS added further uncertainty.

Local Communities Demonstrate Strength and Shared Vision

Across regions—rural, urban, and in between—stakeholders consistently described quality care as relationship-based, culturally responsive, inclusive, and grounded in strong communication. Families and providers expressed desire for training in social-emotional development, behavior supports, and strategies for inclusion. Communities also shared innovative ideas for potential local solutions, including substitute pools, shared transportation, and coordinated communication.

Opportunities for Statewide Impact

Stakeholders shared a set of actionable statewide strategies to strengthen Arkansas's ECCE system:

- **Shared services networks** offering back-office support, shared substitutes, shared purchasing, and shared professional development
- **Modernized communication and data systems** that reduce fragmentation and streamline state-provider interactions
- **Aligned policies and funding streams** across programs such as Arkansas Better Chance (ABC), Early Intervention Day Treatment (EIDT), School Readiness Assistance (SRA), and home visiting
- **Stronger inclusion supports** for children with disabilities, delays, including behavior guidance and supports
- **Community-centered partnerships** that bridge ECCE, K–12, health, philanthropy, and workforce partners



A Path Forward

The state and its partners are uniquely positioned to advance a coordinated, community-centered, public-private partnership model that aligns policy, funding, and data systems, while centering family voice. By intentionally centering children, families and communities most impacted by systemic barriers and elevating proven and potential local innovations, Arkansas can build a more accessible, efficient, and sustainable ECCE system. As a collective effort, partners can champion the needs of communities to ensure every child has the opportunity to thrive.

