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Study Unveils Critical Findings and Calls for Action in Child Care Crisis

Orange County, [Date] — A comprehensive report on the state of childcare and early learning in Orange County reveals alarming challenges in access to quality early care and education (ECE). The findings mirror a nationwide crisis and underscore the urgent need for strategic interventions to address under-investment, affordability, teacher shortages, childcare seat deficits, and childcare provider stability.

A research and planning project, funded by Helios Education Foundation, and spearheaded by the Early Learning Coalition of Orange County and the K-Ready Community Project, was launched in 2022. The project aimed to identify pilot innovations and policy solutions with objectives that included addressing teacher and seat shortages, improving provider sustainability, and ensuring the availability and affordability of high-quality ECE for all families in need.

The study which involved interviews, data collection and surveys discovered chronic issues such as: low teacher salaries, competition from other higher-paying businesses, and insufficient state subsidies that have led to a severe shortage of teachers. This, in turn, has resulted in a scarcity of childcare spots, longer waitlists, lower enrollment, and unaffordable costs for many families. With the recent expiration of federal ARPA (American Rescue Plan Act) funds on top of teacher shortages and lower enrollment revenue, as many as half of all Orange County childcare providers are financially unstable, placing half of the childcare spots at risk.

The findings conclude the ECE industry cannot overcome this crisis alone, and immediate action is required to prevent further setbacks. The goal is to build and sustain a childcare and early learning infrastructure that provides access to high-quality ECE for all children and families in the neighborhoods where they live and work.

Dr. Scott Fritz, the CEO of the Early Learning Coalition of Orange County says, “The ELCOG recognizes the challenges, and we are working with legislators and community partners to improve the workforce in the zero to five space.”

According to the report, there are about 650 licensed childcare providers, along with 85 VPK classrooms operated by Orange County Public Schools. Most childcare providers are small, privately-owned, single-site centers, with 70% classified as centers and almost 80% having fewer than 100 spots. If fully staffed, these providers have the



capacity to serve more than 45,000 children under age five in Orange County, representing slightly more than half of the county's preschool-age population.

“Access to quality early learning environments play an essential role in enabling students to read proficiently by third grade and starting them on a path to college and career success,” said Paul J. Luna, president and CEO, Helios Education Foundation. “Not only is accessible and quality childcare vital for a child’s development, it’s also crucial for empowering families and fostering a thriving community.”

Research Findings — Four Key Challenges:

1. **Under-investment and Affordability:** Current investment levels in ECE do not adequately cover the real cost of quality care, placing a disproportionate burden on small providers, teachers, and parents. Most families struggle to afford quality childcare, with limited access to 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 heightened competition for workers contribute to a teacher shortage, reducing available childcare spots, enrollment, quality, and profitability.
4. **Childcare Spot Shortage:** There is a critical shortage of childcare spots where families live and work. Existing providers are grappling with financial viability issues, putting current spots at risk, and compromising quality.

The report outlines specific recommendations and signals a call to action for stakeholders, policymakers, business leaders, and the community to invest in a better system of care and education for young children in Orange County. “The childcare industry props up all other industries. As a community, we need to make smart investments in this critical infrastructure a top priority -- for the sake of our children, our families, our workforce, and our economy,” says Leslie Hartog, Chief Strategy Officer for the K-Ready Community Project.

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The Early Learning Coalition of Orange County

The Early Learning Coalition of Orange County (ELCOC) is committed to ensuring that every child in our community has access to early education and equal educational opportunities. Our focus is not just on access to early learning, but also on ensuring the highest quality of child care at all our providers' locations. Every child deserves equal access to quality early education to help them thrive.

The K-Ready Community Project

The K-Ready Community Project is a collaborative effort and a movement to make early childhood a priority in Orange County, FL, and to ensure that EVERY child has a strong start and a bright future. Through its partners, K-Ready is driving transformative change through advocacy, collaboration, and a systems approach to problem solving.

Helios Education Foundation

Helios Education Foundation exists to support postsecondary attainment for all students, especially low-income and underrepresented communities in Arizona and Florida. Driven by our fundamental beliefs of community, equity, investment, and partnership, Helios has invested about \$350 million in partnerships and initiatives focused on improving education outcome in the two states we serve.

