



Workforce Solutions Capital Area Child Care Scholarship

Family & Provider Perspectives on Strengths, Opportunities
for Improvement and Ongoing Community Engagement

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Introduction

Workforce Solutions Capital Area (WFSCA) partnered with Start Early Consulting in May 2022 to engage families and providers and learn about their experiences with Child Care Scholarship (CCS).

In 2021, WFSCA received feedback at a public meeting from a small set of families and providers about their challenges navigating the CCS program that surprised them. In response to this feedback, WFSCA wanted to confirm the extent of these challenges by gathering data from a wider group of families and providers who interface with the CCS system. They also wanted to learn from families and providers how to continue to get this feedback from them on an ongoing basis so that WFSCA can continuously improve the services they offer, rather than feeling surprised by one-off feedback. For these reasons, WFSCA engaged Start Early Consulting to speak with families, providers and community members about their experiences with the child care system and their ideas for a comprehensive system of family, provider and community engagement and partnership.

As a result of this project, WFSCA hopes to use the feedback for improving the system and put in place channels for continuous feedback loops with its clients and stakeholders. They hope that these ongoing feedback loops will allow them to proactively address issues providers and families are experiencing and to adjust their services to respond to the community's changing needs. They also hope that these systems of engagement will allow them to build stronger, trusting relationships with a broad set of families and providers who have not historically had access to channels to safely share their challenges. Finally, WFSCA wants to demonstrate that they are open to feedback and change and also be transparent about what improvements are not in their locus of control to directly implement.

Process

Start Early Consulting began this project with a set of discovery interviews with staff at local governmental, non-profit and advocacy organizations to learn about the landscape of the child care system in Austin/Travis County. Some of these non-profit organizations provide direct support to Austin families who are navigating the CCS eligibility process, such as Capital Idea and American Youth Works. Start Early Consulting also spoke 8 members of the staff at Baker Ripley. Through these interviews, Start Early Consulting engaged a total of 23 community members from organizations and entities that interact with CCS, acknowledged above.

Following the discovery interviews, Start Early Consulting convened 2 provider focus groups, 2 family focus groups, and 17 interviews with families and providers, with options to participate in either English or Spanish. 40% of family participants and 55% of provider participants chose to participate in Spanish. Through these interviews and focus groups, 20 families and 22 providers were engaged in sharing their experiences and providing feedback.

EXHIBIT 1: FAMILY PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS

Race/Ethnicity	CCS Experience	Child Care Use
50% Hispanic/Latino	6 Receiving Assistance	9 Currently in Child Care
20% Black/African American	2 On Waitlist	5 Searching for Child Care
5% White	1 Previously on Assistance	2 Not Searching or in Child Care
25% Prefer not to say	3 No Waitlist or Assistance	4 Unclear*
	8 Unclear*	

**Families shared their CCS experience and child care use in the initial sign-up form for focus groups and interviews. Almost all Spanish-speaking families responded in the sign-up form that they were not receiving CCS and that they were not in or searching for child care; however, it became clear during their focus groups that many of them currently or previously received CCS and had children in child care. They are marked as “unclear” because the sign-up form did not accurately capture their experiences.*

EXHIBIT 2: PROVIDER PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS

Race/Ethnicity	CCS Experience	Setting
82% Hispanic/Latino	12 Currently serve families with CCS	14 Child Care Center
9% Black/African American	7 Want to serve families with CCS in future	7 Family Child Care Home
4.5% White	2 Served families with CCS in past	
4.5% Asian	1 Not interested in serving families on CCS	

Family Experiences

Strengths

For families in child care, they reported loving their child care center/home. They felt that staff partnered and communicated well with them. Providers, particularly at-home providers, were willing to be flexible and responsive to their needs, such as adjusting their schedule if the parent’s work schedule adjusted or letting moms bring in their own breastmilk. Families also reported being pleased with their centers striving for quality ratings through TRS or going for NAEYC accreditation.

For families receiving CCS, they reported that CCS was a vital support and the only way they would be able to afford child care. They reported generally respectful customer service from staff answering phone calls and emails at Baker Ripley. Families also said there were certain processes that went smoothly, such as transferring from one child care location to another while on CCS. If families were connected to a specific, consistent caseworker, they reported that all parts of the process went more smoothly and communication was more responsive.

Another key strength is that WFSCA and Baker Ripley have already begun implementing improvements to CCS. WFSCA transitioned from the previous contractor to Baker Ripley due to prior complaints, which has resulted in clearer policies and more accurate processing. Baker Ripley then clarified the waitlist process, simplified and shortened the application, added text messaging to improve communication with families, and offered a translation line for families who speak different languages. They have also added a new team that provides family support, a resource guide, and referrals to help families with needs beyond child care.

Challenges & Ideas for Improvement

Awareness: Most families reported hearing about child care assistance through happenstance, rather than through systematic efforts to connect them to this resource. One family had not heard of the child care assistance program at all. Families also reported not being aware of alternate ways to be eligible for support, such as child care assistance for essential workers.

Families and others suggest...

- More systematic communication, advertising and outreach about child care assistance and the various ways to be eligible
- Partnering with programs already working with families with young children such as WIC, community clinics, diaper banks, food pantries, and other non-profit organizations and asking them to share information about CCS
- Hosting in-person events, setting up booths at community events, and sharing information about CCS in community hubs (e.g., libraries, grocery stores, parks)
- Providing more clarity about different requirements for the various ways families can gain child care assistance
- Having Baker Ripley staff assess families for potential eligibility for various child care assistance options at key junctures, like entry to the wait list, initial application and recertification (e.g., 90 day job search, essential worker)

Affordability: Families reported that child care, particularly infant care, in Austin is unaffordable and essentially a “luxury,” especially during this time with inflation and skyrocketing rents in Austin. Families also face difficult choices when seeking jobs or to advance their careers due to the cost of child care. Because of the big gap between being just over-income to be eligible for CCS and being able to afford the full cost of child care, some families felt a disincentive to seek a higher-paying job that may bump them over the income limit, lose CCS and no longer be able to afford child care. Families may also only be able to find jobs that pay in cash, which they feel limits their ability to prove eligibility for CCS.

Families suggest...

- Increasing the number of child care scholarships available.

- Raising the income limits for families to qualify.
- Taking major costs, such as rent, medical costs, etc., into account when calculating family income.
- Extending eligibility for CCS for essential workers outside the city limits to the entirety of Travis County.

Waitlist & Delays: Families report that the long waiting time to receive CCS is both a logistical and emotional burden. They understand that availability of funding contributes to the delays, which is out of WFSCA's control; however, not having an estimate of when they will get off the waitlist prevents them from planning ahead financially, with their careers, and with finding an open spot at a child care. The communication from WFSCA about the waitlist adds to a sense of discouragement and confusion. Families' introduction to CCS is a "waitlist application," and being told that you are applying to be on a waitlist can discourage families from applying at all. Then, once on the waitlist, some families reported receiving no communication from WFSCA even as they sat on the waitlist for years. WFSCA's partners at community organizations also reported feeling like the way the waitlist works is an enigma.

Contractor staff at Baker Ripley report that inefficient systems contribute to delays in processing applications; for example, each waitlist application is received online but then must be re-entered manually into a different system. Baker Ripley also implemented an issue tracker, but this ends up being inefficient because multiple calls or emails from the same family are entered and assigned separately. Contractor staff report that the biggest contributor to delays is challenges with hiring, training, adequately compensating and retaining frontline staff. Due to American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding, they will soon clear the waitlist and have open enrollment, and contractor staff is worried that they will not be ready due to staff shortages.

Families and others suggest...

- Shorter waitlists or a waitlist that prioritizes families with certain characteristics, e.g., single parents, families experiencing homelessness.
- Posting an estimate of the length of time a family can expect to be on the waitlist on the WFSCA website where they complete the initial application.
- One-time scholarships for families to use for childcare while on the waitlist.
- WFSCA make referrals more systematically to other early childhood programs like Head Start or private programs with their own scholarships if families will not be able to access CCS or will have to wait a long time. WFSCA and other major early childhood programs could enter into data sharing agreements.*
- Increasing frontline staff who process applications, providing adequate compensation and benefits to retain them, and training so staff are prepared to handle complicated scenarios and gray areas around eligibility.*

Process & Paperwork: Families reported that the process of receiving CCS was long and complex. Some families felt it was unclear who to submit forms to because they did not have one person assigned to their case. There are also clear misunderstandings of the process because families and others said that you will be removed from the waitlist if you do not call every three months, but Baker Ripley staff said that is not the case. One parent reported that when she called every three months to stay on the waitlist, the staff could not find her in the system each time, and had to re-enter her information.

Most important to note is that several families in one focus group and four families who were interviewed reported submitting paperwork on time, being told that paperwork had not been submitted or had been submitted too late, and losing CCS. In all these cases, they appealed the decision or showed that their paperwork had in fact been submitted on time (if sent by email) and had their CCS reinstated. Although the family did not commit the error, they suffered the consequences and were only able to stay in their child care due to the kindness of their provider.

In addition, Spanish-speaking families noted that the process of verifying income, although understandably necessary, was challenging for parents who are paid in cash, do not pay income taxes or do not have a social security number. Finally, families reported not having clarity on how long they had access to CCS and not receiving adequate information or warning to prepare for loss of CCS.

Families and others suggest...

- An online portal where all documents can be uploaded and saved in one place.
- Clearer explanation of the documentation needed through the process, such as:
 - Clarity on proof of income
 - Full list of acceptable documents, not just a few examples
 - Common examples of what is not acceptable
 - Visuals for correct birth certificate, college schedule format, etc.
- More flexibility in documenting employment and income (e.g., notarized letters for those who do not get checks)
- Staff who can fill out paperwork alongside families who need more help.
- Ample communication about eligibility status, how long CCS will last, and upcoming recertifications
- Opportunities for in-person or Zoom meetings so case managers and families can develop stronger, more empathetic relationships.
- Finding ways to reduce stress throughout the process

Language Barriers: Families in the focus group hosted in Spanish reported that navigating the process to receive CCS is difficult without English proficiency. The terminology is complex, and the information provided, the website, and follow-up is mostly in English. There is also a perception that there is a preference for English speakers throughout the enrollment process. Parents did not understand why child care providers are now able to offer bilingual programming due to the demand in Austin, but information about resources for families like CCS is not available in a bilingual format. Baker Ripley staff reported that the new translation line is helpful, but it is overwhelming for the few bilingual staff to have to translate others' emails and other documentation.

Families and others suggest...

- Hiring more bilingual frontline staff.
- Translating more of the information, resources, and potentially the entire website into Spanish.

Equity: Families in the focus group hosted in Spanish raised the issue of a lack of equity in accessing child care. They felt that immigrant, Spanish-speaking moms were at the “bottom of the ladder” when it came to accessing resources for high-quality and affordable child care. Other

partners in the community also said they had heard from families that they were not treated in a culturally responsive or trauma-informed way when dealing with customer service representatives or eligibility specialists at Baker Ripley. They said families felt as if some frontline staff saw CCS as a “handout” and CCS recipients as entitled.

Families and others suggest...

- Support the customer service representatives/eligibility specialists at Baker Ripley from a racial equity and trauma-informed lens, including training but also better salaries, mental health days, group problem-solving, and coaching.*

Finding High-Quality Child Care: Families reported that once they got off the waitlist to receive CCS, they faced a too-short time frame to find an open child care slot. Families struggled to find time to call around for openings, especially with many centers only answering phone calls during parents’ working hours. All families found waiting lists at high-quality child care programs, with waitlists for infant care often being more than a year long; some families found waitlists at all child care programs, regardless of quality. Finding child care that met their needs was also difficult, with limited options for evening hours, overnight or drop-in and centers limiting families receiving CCS. Several families were ultimately not able to find an open slot in time and subsequently did not receive CCS. Some families were only able to find a spot at a center that just provides the basic care, not education or enrichment. Throughout their child care search, families reported not receiving much support from WFSCA, beyond referrals to the Texas Health and Human Services Child Care Search webpage and the Texas Child Care Availability Portal.

Families and others suggest...

- More support from WFSCA in finding a quality center with availability, such as a list of programs that accept CCS with frequently updated availability, and specifically availability for CCS slots, or at least time estimates of the waitlists at each center accepting CCS.
- Lengthening the window to find a child care provider once off the CCS waitlist.
- Giving families advanced notice that they will be coming off the CCS waitlist so they can start looking early for a provider.
- Supporting more centers to build an environment where children can grow and learn (e.g., more books, tablets, letters/shapes/numbers).
- Supporting centers to better engage families, such as:
 - Getting families to connect with one another to increase their own social support networks.
 - Providing opportunities for families to visit centers and family child care homes to better understand the environment, how children are learning, and to understand ways in which children are being taught that be different culturally than what is happening at home, e.g., “time out.”
 - Classes or events where parents and children do activities together in classroom with teachers/providers.
- Increasing pay for child care providers so they will stay in their jobs and improve their practice; provide more training so they stay “fresh” with best practices.

Supporting Children with Special Needs: Finding high-quality high child care was particularly difficult for the 4 families we interviewed that had children with special needs who needed individualized support. Several families were told by centers or before-/after-school programs that they could not accept their child due to their individual needs. Case managers at Any Baby Can's Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) program had to support parents in calling different providers to see if they would accept their child. When families did find a provider, they reported their child receiving lower quality care, such as being ignored or isolated, no inclusive support or accommodations, or providers having low expectations for their child. Even if families were able to receive CCS and find a provider, they struggled with additional out-of-pocket costs like special therapies or 1:1 aides required by the provider. Some parents were unaware of the rights they have under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and of other resources in the community available to help them as parents of children with special needs.

Families suggest...

- More case managers who can specifically support families with children with special needs and help advocate for their needs.
- WFSCA facilitating connections among families with children with special needs so they learn from and support one another.
- More training for providers that accept CCS on how to support children with all types of special needs.
- WFSCA building stronger relationships with community organizations that are already supporting and advocating for children with special needs.

Provider Experiences

Strengths

Providers spoke positively about the support provided by WFSCA to accept subsidy. For example, providers appreciated the many resources provided to assist with the process of accepting funds, and the person who supported family child care providers through the process was reportedly very helpful. Several providers felt that hand holding through the process was necessary and much appreciated. For more savvy providers, they felt that the process to gain access to a contract with WFSCA was smooth and easy.

Providers had glowing reviews of the quality improvement supports offered by WFSCA. They found the mentors and written resources like the TRS manual to be very helpful in attaining and maintaining a quality rating. Providers noticed clear increases in quality in programs/classrooms that were preparing to receive a TRS rating. Multiple providers also highlighted the direct assistance program as key strength that provided materials and facilities improvements that contributed to quality. They were also happy with the increases this year in direct assistance, which one provider reported helped her eliminate her supply fee to parents. Providers were also highlighted the Jeannette Watson wage supplements, which helped them provide staff a living wage, and they appreciated that a change was made when the field complained about qualification requirements.

Providers also found the professional development opportunities offered by WFSCA to be a strength. They turn to WFSCA as a trusted source of professional development. They found the workshops and “tips” provided to be helpful, such as circle time training and read-alouds, and they found professional development resources to be consistent with providers’ mission of loving children first. The recent child care symposium was attended by some providers, and it was highly regarded. WFSCA also clearly tries to accommodate providers’ schedules by offering virtual options and sessions at multiple times.

Finally, providers appreciated WFSCA’s efforts to improve communication and provide quality customer service to providers who accept CCS. They noticed WFSCA starting the monthly provider meetings, emailed newsletters with services and resources, and better use of technology. They reported that they can tell that WFSCA is trying to listen to providers’ concerns and develop solutions. Like families, they found WFSCA staff to be responsive and helpful particularly if they had a specific contact with whom they could develop rapport and build a relationship.

Challenges & Ideas for Improvement

Consistency with Enrollment and Revenue: When families lose CCS, it creates a gap in providers’ revenue that can be hard to plan for. Providers felt that it was difficult to track families’ CCS status and when they were about to lose care, especially with all the different ways that families qualify for CCS (e.g., child care scholarship, continuity of care, 90-day job search, essential worker). Providers also reported that children sometimes lost care due to missing five days, but there are often emergencies and special situations that families are contending with that cause these absences that providers wished WFSCA would try to understand more compassionately. With all these reasons for families’ changing CCS eligibility, providers did not think getting monthly, static lists of families on CCS was frequent enough to plan financially and instructionally. In addition to the difficulty in financially planning, providers reported that this churn in children who go in and out of care due to CCS eligibility is also hard on staff, families and children. Staff get burnt out more quickly, children lose friends and lose what they learned, and families lose the social support networks and relationships they build with other parents at the child care program.

Providers and others suggest...

- Contracted slots so that providers have consistency in funding.
- An online portal (like the Workforce Solutions Rural Capital Area portal) where they can check on families’ CCS eligibility status in real time, see key documents, the funding source for each family, and get notifications to track upcoming due dates.
- More information and clarity on how the continuity of care funding works and how to access it to reduce disruptions in care.
- No cap on the number of families with CCS a provider can serve (note: there is not a cap, so this is a misunderstanding amongst some providers).
- More frequent, timely and proactive communication to families and providers on their eligibility status and to prepare for recertification.

Process & Paperwork: Similar to families, providers reported struggling with delays in the process to determine families’ eligibility and with errors made by WFSCA in processing families’ paperwork. The majority of providers who participated in interviews and focus groups reported

that they served families while waiting for paperwork from WFSCA to confirm that they were still eligible for CCS. Although providers said they were encouraged not to serve families until they received official notice that they qualified/were recertified for CCS, providers still served these families while they waited and risked not receiving funding because they did not want families to suffer the consequences of delays they saw as caused by WFSCA. All providers in the focus groups and interviews said that they had lost money due to lapses in care that were the results of errors made by WFSCA, such as not fixing errors in paperwork like birthdates, requesting the same documents multiple times or incorrectly claiming a family submitted paperwork past a due date. Several providers reported advising families to use email to submit paperwork to WFSCA so they had a clear paper trail with dates and times that they could use to prove they followed the process correctly. Providers said they often felt like they were playing the role of case manager for families.

Providers reported feeling frustrated that even when mistakes were made by WFSCA, either the providers themselves or families experienced the negative consequences. Two providers said that they received retroactive pay for families that had been incorrectly removed from CCS, but they had to “fight for it.” Providers said they had to experience the brunt of parents’ frustration with the CCS system even though they did not have the power to fix it. Ultimately, providers said they understood that errors will be made, but they felt like when they themselves make mistakes, there are significant consequences; however, when WFSCA makes mistakes, they get grace. Providers would like this same grace extended to them.

Providers suggest...

- Easier process to receive retroactive pay when justified.
- If there will be a significant consequence for a provider or a family, such as a provider losing funding or a family losing their eligibility for CCS, take extra care, establish clear procedures, provide opportunities for communication to address the issue, and potentially have managers sign off before taking serious action.

Staffing: Unsurprisingly, a major challenge providers reported was recruiting and retaining early childhood professionals at their programs. It was challenging to find trained, reliable staff, and for their current staff, turnover is high. Providers said compensation is still far too low, and this lends to their difficulty recruiting staff because even retail jobs can pay two to three times more than working in child care. Additionally, during this time of inflation and rent rising steeply in Austin, compensation is not keeping up with the high cost of living.

Providers and others suggest...

- The Workforce Board promote careers and jobs in early care and education like they do for manufacturing and other sectors.
- Expanding support for compensation of child care providers like the Jeannette Watson wage supplements.
- Supporting a system of substitutes that can step in when staff are ill or need time off, including for family child care providers.
- Provide professional development opportunities, particularly for smaller centers and family child care providers, that build providers’ skills in hiring and interviewing so they can expand their businesses.

Reimbursement Rates: Providers felt the reimbursement rates from WFSCA were too low and did not match the rate they charge nor the full cost of quality care, especially as the costs of

running a business are rising. One director said the reimbursement rate only represents 50% of her full cost. They said the low rates negatively impact their ability to hire and provide quality care. Family child care providers particularly felt that the rates they receive are too low compared to centers. In fact, low reimbursement rates was the primary reason cited by smaller providers in the Spanish-speaking focus group that they had decided not to accept families with CCS. They want to be able to expand and accept CCS, but they feel they cannot afford to. They recognized that they would get a higher rate if they received a TRS rating of two, three or four stars, but it also costs money they did not have to attain that level of quality.

Providers and others suggest...

- Increasing reimbursement rates so that providers are paid equivalently to what parents without CCS would pay.
- Providing financial support to providers to achieve higher levels of quality through TRS.

Texas Rising Stars: With the upcoming policy change that all providers who accept CCS must be rated in TRS, family child care providers are especially feeling the pressure to become rated; however, they are unsure of the supports available to them and sometimes find it challenging to attend the events and meetings that are there to support them. They are grateful for the grace period but are still uncertain on the timeline to become rated. They are also worried as they see supports for them are decreasing if they are not in TRS yet, such as the CPR training no longer being free to those providers who are not yet TRS rated. Despite these challenges, they know the label of quality is important, and they want to be able to offer this benefit to their families.

Providers suggest...

- Establishing a more concrete timeline and clearer expectations for family child care providers, including how their process may be different from centers, to be rated in TRS.
- Expanding financial support to raise quality.

Training Opportunities: Although the professional development provided by WFSCA was highlighted as a strength by providers, some providers did not always find training opportunities to be as accessible as possible. For example, they noted that in-person trainings were typically delivered at WFSCA's office on the North side of Austin. For those working on the South side, it was not possible to get to the North location in time for trainings if they left work at 5:00 pm. Some providers also stated that trainings were not offered from September to January for reasons that were unclear, so during this time, they either have to pay out of pocket for training or they just cannot access it.

Providers and others suggest...

- Increase the number of locations and times during which training is offered. Saturday was cited as a good options too, because on weekdays, staff are exhausted by evenings.
- Dividing some trainings by novice and experienced providers.
- Provide date, time and location options well ahead of time for providers to select from.

Language Barriers: Providers reported that all the information and resources provided by WFSCA were helpful, but most were offered in English and were not available in Spanish. For example, emails about scholarships and supports to get a CDA, monthly newsletters, most trainings, and monthly provider meetings were all in English. One provider reported that she stopped attending the monthly provider meetings because she could only understand about 50% of what was said.

As WFSCA attempts to involve more family child care providers in the system, these language barriers will become even more acute.

Providers and others suggest...

- WFSCA hiring more bilingual staff and trainers.
- Holding more meetings and trainings in Spanish or including live translation.
- Translating more of the information and resources on the WFSCA website.

Equity: In addition to the language barriers described above, several providers felt that WFSCA trainings do not always center diversity and equity as much as they should. First, they felt there simply were not enough trainings that focused on diversity and equity as their primary content. Furthermore, in all trainings regardless of content, these providers reported that there was not enough racial diversity of the trainers or diverse representation in the training materials. Finally, providers pointed out the issues of equity that teaching assistants face. They experience inequities in resources and pay with teachers and directors always coming first. They have insufficient paths to increased pay due to language barriers and their ability to get further education and certifications. More simply, they do not always get all the emails and newsletters with helpful resources that other providers get.

Providers and others suggest...

- More trainings on diversity and equity, beyond inclusion.
- More racial diversity in trainers and those who are represented in the training content.
- More trainings on working with children with wide range of disabilities, such as speech and language delays or physical disabilities in addition to trainings already offered on autism.
- More supports for teaching assistants

Relative Providers: As families have looked for less formal avenues for child care especially since the pandemic, more relatives of young children are now providing child care. Community partners who were interviewed noted that relative providers struggle to get through the process to accept CCS. They face long delays in getting approved, although this is largely due to waiting for licensing inspections. They receive a very low reimbursement rate, just \$14 per day of care provided. They are encouraged to become a registered home provider to get three times that rate, but the process is typically too arduous for a relative provider to navigate.

Staff Well-Being: Providers felt that greater appreciation and care is needed for the teachers and assistants that are the backbone of the child care system. If they are not taken care of, then they will not be able to provide quality care to children.

Providers and others suggest...

- More support for providers time off and holidays.
- An avenue to share stresses and challenges with WFSCA even if they are not able to be fixed immediately.
- Supports for providers' health and mental health.
- Supports for affordable housing for staff as essential workers in the child care field.

System of Family, Provider, and Community Partnership

Building on the strengths of Workforce Solutions' prior efforts and current interest, this section outlines recommendations to create a system for meaningful family, provider and community engagement and partnership. A strong system would help WFSCA ensure transparency, provide pathways and routines for communication and feedback, and create meaningful opportunities for families and providers to be involved and collaborate in improving the child care scholarship program and the quality improvement system. By centering families' and providers' experiences and potentially sharing power with those the system is intended to benefit, WFSCA will be more successful in achieving positive outcomes for children and families, as well as the Austin community.

Summary of Challenges and Hopes

In the fall of 2021, parents, providers, and community members raised significant concerns about WFSCA's child care scholarship program at a public Early Childhood Council meeting. Beyond the specific child care concerns that were shared, this meeting itself and how these concerns were handled, demonstrated some opportunities to improve the relationships and communication between WFSCA and the community (so WFSCA is not surprised by feedback and is in partnership with the community, proactively collaborating on improvements).


In Start Early's discovery interviews with community members, several strengths were noted about how WFSCA engages the community and responds to feedback, including facilitating regular provider advisory groups meetings and participating in other community meetings. Also, the engagement of Start Early itself was viewed as a positive sign that the issues raised were being taken seriously. Several concerns and hopes for change were also identified about Workforce Solutions' and Baker Ripley's approach to hearing and responding to community feedback. Interviewees stated they wanted to see greater:

- Empathy in hearing about challenges (vs guarded responses)
- Humility in acknowledging or admitting concerns (vs defensiveness)
- Customer service orientation and authenticity in seeking to understand the issues and find solutions (vs bureaucratic responses, insincerity)
- Systemic approaches to addressing challenges (vs case by case approach, wanting to only follow-up on specific incidents identified)
- Transparency about feedback receiving, challenges experiencing, and ways handling the issues (vs secrecy)
- Urgency and responsiveness (vs seeming to move slowly), acknowledging that greater manpower may be needed to do so

Responding to feedback and engaging with families and providers in these ways would help build trust and credibility with the communities served. Further, involving families and providers in prioritizing and developing solutions and collaborating with them over time to continuously improve the system will strengthen and demonstrate WFSCA's commitment to serving children, families and the community.

WFSCA is already shifting from “informing” families and providers toward “consulting” with them by inviting feedback through surveys, focus groups and meetings. The [Community Engagement Spectrum](#) is a helpful framework that describes how WFSCA can move further toward actively involving and collaborating with the community for more positive outcomes.¹

Community Engagement Spectrum

Increasing Community Impact on Decision-Making 				
Informing	Consulting	Involving	Collaborating	Empowering
Keeping the families and providers informed.	Listening to input and feedback. Letting them know how their ideas influenced decisions.	Working with them to ensure their ideas are considered at every step and reflected in decisions. Letting them know how their involvement influenced decisions. Engaging as partners to implement solutions.	Enabling families and providers to participate in co-creating solutions, partnering in decision making and implementing.	Giving families, providers, community members sole decision-making authority. Supporting their decisions and working to implement solutions.
e.g., newsletters, websites	e.g., surveys, focus groups, meetings	e.g., community organizing, leadership development, workshops	e.g., advisory board, seats on governing board	e.g., full community governance, leadership, partnership

Recommendations

Below are recommended steps, strategies, and examples about how WFSCA could develop a robust system for engagement and partnership with families, providers, and communities to respond to current and emerging issues and create a more effective system over time:

- Provide multiple opportunities for engagement - both anonymous and direct. Both families and providers who participated in the focus groups and interviews advised that WFSCA provide multiple opportunities for them and others to share their honest feedback about their experience anonymously, without fear of repercussions regarding their child care scholarship or reimbursements. This would include surveys, interviews, focus groups and listening sessions facilitated by outside organizations or trusted providers. In addition, they also want the chance to be directly involved in advising on or developing solutions, such as through the provider advisory meetings and a family council.
- Seek input and partnership with representative groups - both engaged and not yet engaged in the system. To really understand how the system is working and for whom, make a plan to regularly engage families who are receiving child care scholarships, families who are on the wait list, families who have applied but were denied or who didn't complete the process, and families who are likely eligible for child care assistance but have not been engaged in the system at all. Also seek to engage child care providers who are serving families with scholarships and those who are not, those who are rated in the Texas Rising Star system and those who are not, those from family child care homes, small and large center-based settings. Ensure the outreach and engagement opportunities are offered in multiple languages. Continue outreach efforts until those engaged are representative of the eligible populations in terms of race/ethnicity and language. Seeking this engagement from some of the less engaged/harder to reach groups, not just those who have been successful in navigating the system, will help WFSCA understand more about the barriers that families and providers face. This will help increase equitable access and improve experiences and outcomes.
- Invest time and effort in building trust. Apply a racial equity and trauma informed lens. Consider how individuals with different backgrounds, identities and languages interact with WFSCA's policies and programs. For families and providers to be involved, WFSCA will need to work on building trust and a sense of safety with individuals and with historically marginalized groups in the community. Take care with how you want them to feel and how they will benefit through the process, not just with the feedback you want from them. Acknowledge past harm and hardships and seek ways to build more inclusive, welcoming, and fair processes that will serve families and communities better.
- Partner with providers and organizations who are trusted by families. To reach families and to build or repair relationships in the community, partner with culturally- specific organizations and organizations that are serving Black/African American, Latinx/Latino/Hispanic, and Asian communities and are trusted by families. They have direct connections and unique insights. They could likely support outreach to families (and smaller child care providers in their communities) to gain their input and feedback.

They could potentially facilitate periodic focus groups, interviews and listening sessions. They may also be able to provide support for a family council/workgroup and/or for developing family leaders.

- Create/utilize a family council, workgroup, or other family-led body to influence decisions. There was consensus among those interviewed and in the focus groups that this would strengthen the system. Having a standing family council, creating work groups to address specific issues, and/or partnering with existing parent-led groups in different communities would demonstrate a commitment to centering family voice and a shift to partnering with families. Be transparent about the scope of their role and their level of influence in different areas. But also ensure, whatever the structure and scope, that family voice has real impact in decision making on policies and practices that affect them, and the family representation is not just tokenism.
 - Determine where the family council/workgroup would sit and how it would be connected in the system. One of the first steps is to determine where the family council would sit within the structure of the system and what would be the scope of their focus. Would the family council/workgroup be connected directly to WFSCA? Would it be created as part of the Early Childhood Council for the city of Austin? Or would WFSCA utilize existing family leadership groups/advisory bodies, leveraging their strengths and those opportunities? Would WFSCA use one strategy in the short-term while building capacity for something different in the long term? Any of these options could be effective depending on how they are implemented. A key consideration, again, is who are the trusted partners needed to bring families to the table and help them feel comfortable to participate? How can these partners advise on and be involved in supporting family participation and partnership? Also, depending on where it sits, how will the council/work group focus specifically and sufficiently on child care issues, as well as connect to the other parts of the broader early childhood/family support system?
 - Provide compensation. Parents require and deserve compensation for their time and expertise in helping to improve the system. This could be in the form of cash, check, electronic payment, or a gift card (e.g., HEB card). Ideally, compensation would include consideration for an hourly rate (including for any preparation) as well as compensation for transportation or child care separately (if in person). Families in the focus groups mentioned a range of \$25-\$75 per meeting would make it worth their time. The compensation model should ensure that family eligibility for public benefits is not compromised. The rate and method could be explored with family and community leader input.

- Ensure accessibility/remove barriers to participation. To support and encourage family participation, parents suggest:
 - Either hold meetings in multiple languages or ensure translation is provided.
 - Provide evening/weekend options.
 - Host meetings in convenient locations with access to transportation or even at child care centers.
 - Offer meals and child care (for in-person meetings, after hours).
 - Virtual options may be easiest (ensure technical assistance is available).
- Provide training and mentoring for family leaders. To build parents' confidence to speak up, to ask questions, and to advocate effectively for the changes that they think are needed, provide a formal orientation to the parent council/workgroup as well as more in depth family leadership training. Ensure this training is offered in Spanish and English. Consider partnering with organizations in the Austin area that already provide this kind of training and support for different populations. They could help recruit graduates or current participants in their family programs and/or train a specific cohort of parents to serve on the parent council/workgroup. Family leaders would also benefit from mentoring, coaching, or a peer-to-peer group to support their effective and ongoing participation in the family council/workgroup.
- Prepare family leaders for each meeting/issue. To help family leaders participate effectively in council/workgroup meetings, they should have the opportunity to preview the agenda and meeting materials in advance. A designated person or mentor should be available to connect with family leaders in advance to answer questions or to debrief meetings as needed.
- Minimize jargon. Using industry terms and complex language can be intimidating families and create a power imbalance. To support family leaders' effective participation, to create a welcoming and inclusive environment, use plain, understandable language and make it a group norm for anyone to pause the meeting for clarification or to ask questions at anytime.
- Conduct parent surveys. In addition to meetings, parents suggested surveys to solicit regular feedback. They stated that surveys are convenient, can be done on their own time and allow them the chance to share their experiences and needs anonymously. To increase parent participation in surveys, families suggest:
 - English and Spanish language surveys.
 - A small incentive for them to respond in a certain amount of time.

- A survey that is timed to individuals' touchpoints in the scholarship process (getting on the wait list, enrollment, recertification) when they may be more motivated to respond; sent via text.
- A survey that is open to families in the community about their child care needs and experiences; sent via text, email, and flyers to community partners, providers, and places where families are with a QR code to easily respond by phone.
- Tell parents how you will use their feedback and how it will benefit them and their children.
- Continue Monthly Provider Advisory Group Meetings- Providers appreciated these monthly opportunities to meet directly with WFSCA and want them to continue.
 - They suggested to:
 - Consider ways to engage providers that need more support, find out their needs (not just the same providers typically attend, those functioning at a higher level).
 - Offer an evening option, especially for family child care providers.
 - Offer a virtual option, especially for evening meetings and for those not on the northside.
 - Offer multiple meetings in English and Spanish or provide for translation.
 - Consider an incentive to encourage more providers to join (e.g., money or materials).
 - Send email and same day text reminders.
 - Plan a reset of this meeting. Past meetings have included updates and opportunities for providers to ask questions. To engage providers in more two-way communication, explicitly let them know that you want to continue to share information and that you also genuinely want their feedback and partnership in improving the system. To start, let them know you want to collaborate with them on next steps from the feedback gathered by Start Early over the summer. This can include asking for their priorities, exploring options, sharing transparently what is feasible and what will take more resources, time, or policy change at the state or federal level to address, and planning solutions together. Ask them for their ideas on group norms or ways to help them feel comfortable in sharing their honest feedback and ideas in these meetings.

- Consider provider participation in a council/work group. While the monthly meetings are open to all, it may be helpful to ask for some provider representatives to participate in a council or in a work group to address ways to improve the child care system. Similar to family leaders, consider compensation and accessibility for providers to participate in a more intensive collaborative process. Ensure the meeting materials and minutes are available to all.
- Continue provider surveys. Providers want WFSCA to continue annual surveys on trainings and to offer anonymous surveys on their experience with the child care scholarships and their ideas for improving the system. They also suggested periodic focus groups by a third party to share their experience and ideas more in depth but still anonymously.
- Share and utilize data collected- Share data publicly and with the provider advisory group and family council/workgroup on a regular basis (e.g., quarterly, 2x annually, annually) about children, families, and providers served and their experiences. See the sample slides [here](#) using the data Start Early received in the summer of 2022. Commit leadership and direct service staff time at Baker Ripley and WFSCA to collaboratively analyze and use the data for continuous improvement of procedures, processes, staff training and support, etc., in order to improve family and provider experiences and outcomes. Share out about how you are using the data and what steps you are planning to learn more or to advance improvement.

Best Practice Examples

To learn more about ways to incorporate robust family and provider leadership to create more effective and equitable regional early childhood systems, see these examples below:

[Virginia Ready Regions-](#) The state of Virginia has implemented a new regional infrastructure to build and strengthen the early childhood system and improve access and outcomes for children and families. The Ready Regions are charged with supporting coordinated enrollment, quality improvement, partnership development, and family engagement. The Ready Region leads manage and disperse grants from state and federal sources simplifying distribution and oversight, and enabling flexibility to address local needs and priorities. Importantly, each Ready Region is expected to implement a shared governance model that includes robust family representation on the governing board and/or a family council that shares decision making power. The Virginia Early Childhood Foundation provides training and technical assistance to the Ready Regions to support implementation of this new model.

[Michigan Great Start Collaboratives and Parent Coalitions-](#) The Great Start Collaboratives and Parent Coalitions in Michigan are a good model of family engagement and leadership in decision making at a local/regional system level. They are a partnership of local school districts, organizations and parents working together to establish, strengthen, and maintain a coordinated and comprehensive early childhood system in their community, in order to help all families

provide a great start for their children from birth to age eight. The parent coalitions are a sister group to the collaboratives to represent the voice of the family, child and community, and provide a customer/beneficiary perspective for the professionals in the collaborative. They also provide information, education and resources to parents raising young children.

Next Steps for Improvement

Now that family and provider feedback and ideas on ways to improve the child care system have been gathered, the next steps are for WFSCA to examine the findings internally and with direct service staff at Baker Ripley and to demonstrate externally that leaders and staff are listening and ready to work in collaboration with families and providers on improvement.

Before implementing ideas and expecting improvement, it is important to take time to better understand the issues to be addressed and to include families and providers early and often in the process. Direct service staff will also have important insights and so should be engaged in a discussion of this feedback. Importantly, the tone for internal discussions with direct service staff should be one of learning and improvement, not blaming. The focus of the discussion should be on systems, procedures, processes, not individuals' behaviors. Together, you can then identify what is already happening to address these issues, what are some feasible steps for improvement (low hanging fruit, quick wins), and what are some ideas that are harder to implement, due to policy barriers, resources available, etc.

Communicating back to the Community- At the final presentation and/or through existing and new channels, WFSCA can work on communicating back to families, providers, and the community what was heard, the genuine desire to improve the services for families and providers, and the steps you are already taking to address some of the concerns and ideas for improvement. Acknowledge that addressing some of the challenges or ideas, are not fully in the power of WFSCA, due to current resources or policy barriers. However, state you are looking forward to working with the families, providers, and other partners in the community to identify priorities and work on developing solutions together.

Working on Improvements- Keeping in mind the recommendations above about developing a system for ongoing family and provider partnership, create opportunities for families and providers to be involved and to continue to provide input and feedback on the strategies for improvement. For example, work with families to continue to simplify and clarify the application process for English- and Spanish-speaking parents. Below are some guiding questions to support your collaborative work on improvement, informed by user centered design, improvement science, and racial equity impact assessments.

Guiding Questions

- Observations/Questions/Reactions regarding the feedback
 - What were you already aware of? What resonated for you?
 - What surprised you?
 - What questions does this raise for you about peoples' experiences or ideas?
- Interpretations/Root Cause Analysis
 - What are the problems we need to solve?

- What is working (and isn't), for whom, under what conditions?
- Are there disparities in terms of race/ethnicity or language?
- Why is this problem is happening? ([5 Whys/Root Cause Analysis](#))
- What systems, processes, or procedures are reflected in/involved in this feedback?
- Identifying Areas for Improvement
 - What is already happening to address these issues?
 - What are feasible ideas and steps WFSCA/BR can take toward improvement? Any low hanging fruit or quick wins?
 - What are more difficult issues to address, due to potential policy barriers, resources available, etc.?
- Prioritizing and Developing Ideas for Improvement
 - Which of the issues and ideas are the most important to address?
 - What are the specific change ideas?
 - Regarding specific ideas:
 - Would this idea if implemented address the issue/solve the problem?
 - Would it address the root causes? Would it reduce disparities?
 - What unintended consequences could result from this solution?
 - Is the idea realistic, adequately funded with mechanisms to ensure successful implementation?
 - Regarding more difficult issues to address, due to potential policy barriers, resources available, etc.
 - How have other systems addressed this issue or implemented this idea? Are there innovative ideas to explore?
 - Who are potential partners? What other public or private funding could be used or raised to implement this idea locally?
 - Is this a state level issue? How could this issue be raised to state leaders?
 - Are there partial solutions or ways to mitigate the issue that could be explored?
- Testing and Implementing Improvements
 - How will we pilot or test out this idea/solution?

- What supports will be needed to implement this idea/solution effectively (leadership/administrative support, staff training, guidance, trouble-shooting support, communication to the field, etc.)?
- How will you know if this change is actually an improvement? What will be the indicators of success?
- How/when will we check back to see how this is working and if further improvement is needed?

Conclusion

Taking this time to systematically gather family and provider feedback was a significant step for the Austin area child care system. This process demonstrated that WFSCA values family and provider experiences and perspectives, and genuinely wants to improve the system. Now WFSCA and Baker Ripley have the opportunity to set a new tone and create new ways of working with families, providers, and the community. Making this shift toward greater family and community partnership will take dedicated time and staff capacity. WFSCA has great staff and partners, and there are many passionate people in the community who want to support this effort and see it succeed. Through implementation of the recommendations above, WFSCA can strengthen trust, foster greater collaboration, and ultimately produce more positive and equitable outcomes for children and families.



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Endnotes

¹ Leading Inside Out/Collective Impact Forum/FSG (2017). *Community Engagement Toolkit*. Retrieved on May 25, 2022 from <https://collectiveimpactforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Community-Engagement-Toolkit.pdf>