

# BLUEPRINT FOR AFFORDABLE CHILD CARE

*New Jersey Doesn't  
Work Without It*



**Start**   
**Strong NJ**  
Affordable Child Care for All



## ABOUT START STRONG NJ

Start Strong NJ is a statewide campaign to put affordable, high-quality child care within reach of all New Jersey families. Inclusive and nonpartisan, Start Strong NJ recognizes that child care is an economic imperative for New Jersey rather than a problem that individual families can solve on their own. Led by Advocates for Children of New Jersey and New Jersey Association for the Education of Young Children, Start Strong NJ brings together parents, early childhood educators, business leaders, researchers, policy experts, and others who want to give every child the strong start needed for lifelong health and well-being.

Learn more and get involved at [startstrongnj.org](https://startstrongnj.org).

*A more comprehensive version of this Blueprint, including links to sources of information, is available on Start Strong NJ's website*



# MESSAGE FROM THE START STRONG NJ CO-CHAIRS

We're proud to share *Blueprint for Affordable Child Care: New Jersey Doesn't Work Without It*.

This moment of new leadership and renewed opportunity in New Jersey brings the opportunity to strengthen an early learning system that's foundational to economic vitality, workforce participation, and the well-being of children and families. As this blueprint makes clear, early learning – what high-quality child care is – isn't a peripheral service. It's essential infrastructure. Yet for too long, providers have been expected to deliver high-quality, affordable care without the necessary sustained public investment, workforce supports, and coordination.

Today's families navigate a reality fundamentally different from generations past. Enormous pressures on time, finances, and work expectations threaten parents' efforts to balance caregiving and earning a living. As this blueprint explains, the twin challenges of time pressures and high costs are too much for families to solve on their own. We need comprehensive public policy that includes sustained public investment.

Child care that's inaccessible, unaffordable, or unstable hampers parents' workforce participation, businesses' productivity, and the broad economy. The consequences are felt by families with children, families planning for children, and communities seeking to grow and thrive. No serious conversation about economic opportunity, workforce stability, or community vitality is complete without addressing affordable, high-quality child care for every family that needs it.

Families across New Jersey deserve freedom of choice among high-quality early learning options, whether in child care centers, family child care homes, faith-based programs, or public preschool, so they can select the setting that best fits their values, schedules, and children. A strong system would offer quality, affordability, and choice in a diverse mixed-delivery landscape.

Over decades working in the early learning field, we've seen the extraordinary commitment and ingenuity of educators and providers. And we've

lived the consequences of underfunded, fragmented, and short-term approaches. Those experiences – plus insights from policy leaders, advocates, early childhood educators, researchers, business partners, and community stakeholders – shaped the recommendations you'll find in this blueprint.

You *won't* find a one-size-fits-all solution. This blueprint provides an assessment of New Jersey's early learning landscape and identifies essential conditions required for the system to function effectively: access to high-quality, affordable early learning for families; well-prepared, equitably compensated educators and staff; and long-term, sustainable funding that recognizes early learning is core public infrastructure. These elements are interconnected; progress in one area can't be sustained without attention to the others.

Today, care for our youngest learners receives only a small fraction of public investment compared to other age groups, despite being the most expensive to provide and the most critical for early development. Besides placing pressure on families, providers, and the workforce, this misalignment undermines the stability of the entire early learning system.

We're encouraged by the growing recognition of early learning as a shared public priority and eager to engage with state leaders at this pivotal time. We offer this blueprint as a tool to support dialogue and action.

We're grateful to Start Strong NJ advisory group members, contributors, and partners who devoted time, expertise, and insight to this effort. Their work made this blueprint possible.

We look forward to partnering with leaders across sectors to create a New Jersey early learning system positioned not just to endure, but to thrive.



**Winifred Smith-Jenkins**  
Advocates for Children  
of New Jersey



**Meghan Tavormina**  
New Jersey Association for  
the Education of Young Children

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We're deeply grateful to members of our Start Strong NJ advisory group, listed below, who shared their expertise and experience to shape this blueprint and inform the policy recommendations.

**Harriet Dichter**

Consultant

**Joan Dillon**

Executive Director, Glassboro Child Development Centers

**Bonnie Eggenburg**

President, New Jersey Head Start Association

**Althea D. Ford**

Vice President, Government Affairs, New Jersey Business & Industry Association

**K. Leanna Jahnke**

Executive Director, Princeton Nursery School

**Nancy Jimenez**

CEO, Children's Garden/ NAFCC-accredited family child care educator

**Dr. Beverly Lynn**

Consultant

**Kim O'Connell**

Retired Child Care Quality Assurance Inspector 2, New Jersey Department of Children & Families

**Bevin Parker-Cerkez**

National Program Director, Child Care & Early Learning, Local Initiatives Support Corporation

**Rebekka Zydel**

President, Coalition of Infant/Toddler Educators

We thank the authors of this blueprint, Jon Shure and Jayne O'Connor, for developing this report, and contributing their deep expertise to this work.

We're also grateful to Start Strong NJ's generous funders – the Burke Foundation, Community Foundation of New Jersey, Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, Maher Charitable Foundation, Schumann Fund for New Jersey, The Henry and Marilyn Taub Foundation, and Turrell Fund.

Start Strong NJ builds on the valuable contributions of the First 1,000 Days Policy Coalition.

Joe Waters and Elliot Haspel from Capita reviewed drafts and made helpful suggestions.

Nancy Vorsanger provided valuable editing assistance.

We appreciate the support of all members of Start Strong NJ:

- Advocates for Children of New Jersey
- Local Initiatives Support Corporation
- Moms First
- New Jersey Association for the Education of Young Children
- New Jersey Business & Industry Association
- New Jersey Chamber of Commerce

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## **07 INTRODUCTION**

---

07 It's About Time...and Money

## **08 A COMMON SENSE CASE FOR ACTION**

---

08 Why Child Care Is a Family, Business, and Economic Issue

## **09 WHY IT MATTERS**

---

09 For Children: Brain Development and Early Learning

09 For Families and the Economy: Parents, Work, and Infrastructure

13 For the Child Care Workforce: Educators as the Backbone of the System

## **14 WHAT NEW JERSEY NEEDS TO DO**

---

14 Three Guiding Principles

## **15 POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

---

16 PRINCIPLE 1: Make High-Quality Child Care Affordable and Accessible for Families

17 PRINCIPLE 2: Compensate and Support Early Childhood Educators as Professionals

18 PRINCIPLE 3: Recognize Child Care as Essential Economic Infrastructure

## **19 A SYSTEM THAT WORKS**

---

## **22 APPENDICES**

---

22 Appendix A: How New Jersey Does Child Care

29 Appendix B: National Momentum: State-Led Child Care Reforms

32 Appendix C: Details on Rutgers Eagleton Poll findings

# INTRODUCTION

## It's About Time... and Money

People today live and work in a world that looks very different from even a decade ago. The pressures on families are enormous. Simply put, there never seems to be enough time – and everything costs more than it used to.

**For working parents – especially those with children under age six – this “time and money” crunch is especially acute.** Work schedules are increasingly unpredictable, caregiving responsibilities are constant, and household costs continue to rise. Parents are stretched thin as they juggle jobs, child-rearing, and daily life, often with little room for rest or recovery and no margin for error if something goes wrong. When families are forced to operate in survival mode, it becomes harder to care for children, stay healthy, and contribute fully at work, at home, and in their communities.

Over time, this strain weakens not only individual households but also New Jersey’s social and economic fabric. Families need greater control over their schedules, the ability to take time off when life demands it, and access to supports that reflect today’s realities. When parents have to work nonstop or piece together numerous jobs just to cover basic needs, that control disappears.

**Decisions about how to raise children – who cares for them when parents can’t be present, and what’s best for their family – are driven by necessity, not preference.**

By the third decade of the 21st century, it’s clear that **this time-and-money conundrum is too complex for families to solve on their own.** Parents deserve the freedom to choose how they raise their children without constantly worrying about whether they can afford care or find it when they need it. That freedom depends on systems that work. Right now, too often, they don’t.



# A COMMON SENSE CASE FOR ACTION

## Why Child Care Is a Family, Business, and Economic Issue

New Jersey should be a place where all families and communities can thrive in a growing economy that offers opportunity, regardless of income, race, geography, or family structure. A place where residents can raise children, pursue careers, and build secure futures. And a place where all children get the strong start they need from their earliest years.

Yet, for too many families, one of the greatest barriers to stability and opportunity is the inability to find or afford high-quality child care. This isn't about babysitting. Child care refers to nonparental care, usually provided by trained, dedicated early childhood educators who offer the nurturing, safety, and stimulation children need during the most critical years of development.

**Families are often forced into an impossible choice: work and struggle to afford care, or stay home and sacrifice income, career advancement, and long-term financial security.**

Either option carries serious consequences. When parents cut back hours or leave the workforce, employers face staffing shortages, reduced productivity, and slowed growth. The ripple effects extend across industries and communities. When families stay at work but child care consumes an

unsustainable share of household income, financial instability increases, workforce stress rises, and long-term earnings potential declines. Ultimately, this situation weakens New Jersey's labor force, economic competitiveness, and tax base.

This is not a question of how parents "should" raise their children. As labor economist Kathryn Anne Edwards said in a recent interview for the Burke Foundation's Starting Early newsletter:

We get so caught up in "what is the role of the government?" and "what is the right type of motherhood?" when those are all distracting conversations. The result is that we hold ourselves back in the economy, in family well-being, and in investment in children – instead of committing to one important thing we can do.

**That "one important thing" is investing in high-quality child care, especially for infants and toddlers.** It supports families today, strengthens businesses, and lays the foundation for a healthier, more productive workforce tomorrow. Yet it remains one of the least supported pieces of our economic and social infrastructure.



### THE MILITARY GETS IT

The Department of Defense provides child care because it understands that the armed forces' readiness depends on reliable care. As the military workforce evolved to include more women, dual-military couples, and single parents, child care became essential to recruitment, retention, morale, and productivity. With nearly one million children having active-duty parents, DoD treats child care as mission-critical infrastructure that reduces absenteeism, improves performance, and strengthens long-term workforce stability. When child care is insufficient, missed duty time increases and retention suffers – especially among women and dual-military families. If child care is essential to national defense, it's essential to the civilian workforce and the broader economy as well.

# WHY IT MATTERS

## FOR CHILDREN: Brain Development and Early Learning

Child care is more than a place for parents to leave their children while they work. **The earliest years of life are the most important for brain development and learning.** During this time, the brain forms more than a million neural connections every second, shaping how children will think, learn, and manage emotions throughout their lives.

As researchers at Harvard’s Center on the Developing Child explain, “brains are built from the bottom up.” Early experiences and relationships create the foundation for all later learning. Responsive, nurturing care – the everyday “serve-and-return” interaction between children and caring adults – strengthens the neural pathways that support language, problem-solving, and self-control.

High-quality early learning environments provide safety, consistency, rich language exposure, and opportunities for play and exploration. They help children develop focus, emotional regulation, and cooperation, skills essential for success in school and in life.

Investing early is both effective and efficient. It’s much better to build strong foundations than to try to fix problems later. **High-quality child care improves children’s health and well-being and generates long-term public savings** by reducing future spending on special education, healthcare, child protection, and the criminal justice system. These earliest years aren’t just preparation for school – they’re preparation for life.

## FOR FAMILIES AND THE ECONOMY: Parents, Work, and Infrastructure

Child care is a cornerstone of New Jersey’s economy. Today, three-quarters of children under age six in the state have all available parents in the workforce. And that number is rising: from 67% in 2017 to 70% in 2022 and 75% in 2024.

Child care enables parents to work, supports business productivity, and fuels broad economic growth. **But for thousands of working parents in New Jersey, finding and paying for high-quality child care is a puzzle without a solution. For most, child care is the single largest household expense** – outpacing rent, car payments, or in-state college tuition. And many families struggle to find care at all. Statewide, licensed child care capacity falls well short of potential need, with especially acute shortages for infants and toddlers. **Licensed child care centers have the capacity to serve only about 27% of New Jersey’s youngest children**, contributing to an overall 18% gap between child care capacity and potential need across ages. These barriers influence decisions about work, family finances, and career advancement.

## CHILD CARE COSTS TOO MUCH FOR MANY FAMILIES:

For many families, the cost of child care far exceeds what is considered affordable. Roughly half of New Jersey families pay more than 7% of their yearly income on care, well above the federal affordability benchmark. Tuition costs, on average, \$20,213 a year for one infant in a licensed center in New Jersey, according to Child Care Aware of America. That means a family at New Jersey’s median family income of \$126,827 spends 16% of its income on care – and that’s if there’s only one child. **For families with two young children, child care costs can consume 30% or more of household income,** forcing trade-offs that undermine financial stability and workforce participation.

The public recognizes the scope of the problem. A recent Rutgers–Eagleton poll (see Appendix C for the full poll results) found that

- Nearly seven in 10 New Jersey voters say it’s difficult to find affordable, high-quality child care.
- Six in 10 believe the lack of affordable options keeps parents out of the workforce.
- Seven in 10 say the shortage of child care directly harms New Jersey’s economy.

To help reduce costs, New Jersey offers subsidies through its Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) for families who work, are in school or job training, or a combination of activities. But CCAP is available to too few families because eligibility for new enrollees cuts off at an income of \$66,000 for a family of 4 in 2026 – far below what it costs to live and work in New Jersey. So, many families have an income above what qualifies for a subsidy but too low to afford high-quality care.

6 <sup>OUT</sup>  
OF 10

NJ voters believe the lack of affordable child care options keeps parents out of the workforce

73%

gap between infant and toddler child care capacity and estimated need in New Jersey

>26%

of Black families report being unable to find child care when they need it

7 <sup>OUT</sup>  
OF 10

New Jersey voters say the shortage of child care directly harms New Jersey’s economy

30%

share of household income consumed by child care costs for families with two young children



## MANY FAMILIES LACK MEANINGFUL CHOICES AMONG TYPES OF CHILD CARE:

They deal with the child care crisis by relying on relatives, friends, or neighbors. For some, especially in Black and Hispanic communities, care from relatives reflects trusted, culturally rooted relationships. But when families rely on relatives because they can't afford or find other options, it signals a deeper problem: Too many families lack real choice.

The National Institute for Early Education Research found in 2025

- Families making less than \$50,000 a year are far less likely to use center-based programs and more likely to rely on relatives.
- Black and Hispanic families are more likely to depend on relative care and less likely to use center-based programs compared to white families.
- More than a quarter of Black families – 26% – report being unable to find child care when they need it.
- Center-based participation is lowest in central and southern New Jersey, revealing persistent regional gaps.

True family choice would mean every parent has a full range of high-quality options: center-based, family child care, or relative care – all supported by stable funding, strong quality standards, and an equitably compensated workforce.

## NEW JERSEY LAGS IN SUBSIDY SUPPORT

**A New Jersey family of four, with two parents working full-time at minimum wage and two young children, pays more than half its annual income on child care – leaving too little to cover housing, food, transportation, and other basic needs.** The state's Child Care Assistance Program restricts eligibility for child care subsidies to families earning no more than double the federal poverty level, a limit of \$66,000 for a family of four in 2026. States are allowed to use federal funds to provide subsidies to families above that level – up to 85% of the Area Median Income (\$134,671 for a family of four in 2025). But New Jersey's income eligibility cutoff for subsidies is less than half that – just 41% of the Area Median Income – among the lowest in the nation.

## THE LACK OF AFFORDABLE CHILD CARE AFFECTS NEW JERSEY'S WORKPLACES AND THE ENTIRE ECONOMY:

Reliable child care reduces absenteeism, improves employee retention, and increases family income, making it possible for more parents, especially women, to fully participate in the workforce. Yet across industries, employers struggle to fill open positions while many communities lack sufficient licensed child care to support a growing workforce.

When families can't find or afford care, parents might be forced to reduce hours or leave jobs altogether. The result is lost wages and financial insecurity for families, reduced productivity for businesses, and lower state tax revenue to fund public services.

**By making work possible, child care functions as essential economic infrastructure** – just like roads, schools, and utilities. It supports every other part of the economy. When child care is unstable or inaccessible, the economy feels the strain. Parents and employers learned this the hard way during the COVID-19 pandemic. New Jersey's child care sector never fully recovered from that shock, and core problems remain unaddressed.

New Jersey's child care sector itself generates \$4.1 billion a year in economic activity and supports about 67,000 full-time jobs. But the state still faces a significant shortage of available care, particularly for infants and toddlers. The cost of this shortage isn't abstract. It's estimated that New Jersey's child care crisis costs the state's economy \$5 billion a year in lost wages, tax revenue, and business productivity – on top of the everyday stress families experience.

New Jersey isn't alone in confronting these challenges, but it's falling behind other states in addressing them. Across the country, a growing number of states – red, blue, and purple – are establishing dedicated revenue sources for child care, driven in part by business leaders concerned about workforce recruitment and retention. As a pharmacy owner in Missouri told The Washington Post in a December 2025 article, "A lack of child care impacts every aspect of the economy. Think of how many people want to work and can't because they can't afford child care." States' actions reflect growing recognition that child care is no longer a private concern, but a core economic issue requiring public solutions.



# \$5 BILLION

Amount New Jersey forfeits each year in lost wages, tax revenue, and business productivity

# 67,000

Number of full-time jobs supported by New Jersey's child care sector

# ~50%

of New Jersey families pay more than 7% of their yearly income on child care

## FOR THE CHILD CARE WORKFORCE: Educators as the Backbone of the System

Early childhood educators support children during the most critical period of development and make it possible for parents to participate in the workforce. Yet they are among the lowest-paid workers in New Jersey. **The median wage for a full-time early childhood educator was just \$37,114 in 2023** – far below the statewide median of \$54,859 – leaving many educators unable to meet basic needs.

As a result, New Jersey’s child care educators are more than twice as likely as other workers to live in poverty. Nearly 40% of infant-toddler educators earn so little they qualify for such public benefits as Medicaid or SNAP, and half regularly struggle to pay for such essentials as housing, food, medical care, and utilities.

Low wages, inadequate benefits, and chronic financial stress drive high turnover among early childhood educators, limiting the supply of care and undermining programs’ stability and quality. This instability makes it harder for families to find reliable care and harder for providers to keep their doors open. Nearly one in four child care lead teachers in New Jersey reported looking for a new or additional job in the past three months. The most common reason for their job search was to find a job that pays more.

For too long, the workforce has been treated as an afterthought rather than the foundation of the child care system. But educators aren’t just one component of child care. They are the system. Without a stable, well-compensated child care workforce, no investment in access or quality can succeed. **Supporting early childhood educators is not simply a moral imperative – it’s an economic one.**

## Why is child care so expensive if the people providing it are paid so little?

Economists describe child care as an example of “market failure” because it costs more to provide than most families can afford to pay. With the cost of child care mostly borne by individual families, the private market, on its own, could never provide enough affordable, high-quality care to meet the needs of all New Jersey families.

### **Child care is labor-intensive, by necessity:**

Programs need enough well-trained staff to provide sufficient attention, care, and nurturing for young children – especially infants and toddlers. The work can’t be outsourced, automated, or done by artificial intelligence.

**Fixed costs are high:** Child care providers must pay for facilities that meet stringent standards, licensing and compliance costs, insurance, food, utilities, and more. These are crucial for children’s health and safety, and they are expensive.

**The result: The only way to keep prices within reach for families is to pay low wages and offer limited benefits for educators—locking the system into a cycle that is neither affordable nor sustainable.**



# WHAT NEW JERSEY NEEDS TO DO

## Three Guiding Principles

Many states, including New Jersey, have taken important steps to modernize their child care systems, including increasing subsidy rates, providing one-time compensation support for educators, investing in facilities, and piloting new funding approaches. These actions demonstrate that meaningful reform is possible and politically viable. But one-time investments aren't sufficient; lasting impact requires sustained, predictable public funding that treats child care as essential infrastructure.

New Jersey's child care crisis is not the result of a single failure. Nor can it be solved with isolated fixes. It reflects a system designed for a different era – one that no longer aligns with how families live, how the economy functions, or what children need to thrive. Addressing this challenge requires a clear, durable framework to guide decision-making, investment, and policy.

To build a child care system that works for families, educators, employers, and the broad economy, New Jersey must ground its approach in three guiding principles.

### **Child care must be affordable and accessible for every family that needs it.**

Families can't participate fully in the workforce or plan for their future when the cost of care rivals housing or higher education or when care is unavailable where and when it's needed. In a functional system, all families could obtain high-quality care without sacrificing financial stability or being forced into impossible choices – whatever their income, wherever they live in New Jersey, and regardless of their work schedules.

### **Early childhood educators must be compensated and supported as the professionals they are.**

The stability and quality of child care depend entirely on the workforce. Educators who nurture children during the most critical years of development must be paid at a level that reflects their skill, responsibility, and value to society. Without professional-level compensation, benefits, and career pathways, the system will continue to experience high turnover, inadequate supply, and uneven quality.

### **Child care must be recognized as essential economic infrastructure and funded accordingly.**

Child care isn't a private convenience or, for thousands of families, optional support. It's a prerequisite for a functioning economy. Like schools, transportation, and utilities, it requires sustained public investment, coordinated governance, and long-term planning. Treating child care as infrastructure acknowledges its role in enabling work, supporting business growth, and strengthening New Jersey's economic competitiveness.

These principles are interconnected. Progress in one area can't be sustained without progress in the others. Together, they provide the foundation for the policy recommendations that follow – and for a child care system designed to meet the realities of family life and economic participation in the 21st century.

# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations translate the guiding principles of the Start Strong NJ Blueprint into state policy. Each recommendation would help strengthen New Jersey's child care system by making child care affordable and available for families; building a stable, well-compensated early childhood workforce; and boosting the state's economic infrastructure. These recommendations are mutually reinforcing; progress in one area depends on progress in the others.

*A more comprehensive version of this Blueprint, with additional context for each recommendation, is available on Start Strong NJ's website.*



## **PRINCIPLE: Make High-Quality Child Care Affordable and Accessible for Families**

- **Fully fund the state Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP).**  
CCAP should serve as a reliable economic support for working families—not a rationed benefit. New Jersey must fully fund CCAP to ensure all eligible families can receive assistance and to prevent enrollment freezes that destabilize both families and providers, such as occurred in summer 2025.
- **Update CCAP eligibility rules to reflect the state’s cost of living.**  
Because CCAP serves parents working full time or pursuing career-advancing education, expanding the program would bolster New Jersey’s economy. Raising the income level at which families are eligible for subsidies would stabilize more working families struggling to make ends meet and enable more parents to work.
- **Subsidy rates shouldn’t distinguish between types of providers.**  
Subsidies, which providers receive as reimbursement from the state, should follow the child, not the setting. Family child care providers should be reimbursed at rates comparable to centers for care of the same age group, reflecting the true cost of quality.
- **Reduce family copayments.**  
Copayments increase financial strain on families and create administrative barriers that discourage their participation. Increasing reimbursements to providers by enough to reduce family copays would improve continuity of care and ease financial hardship – especially for lower-paid families.
- **Simplify application and recertification processes for child care assistance.**  
Families should be able to apply for and maintain child care assistance without facing duplicate paperwork, as many do now. Coordinating eligibility verification for various public benefits would reduce barriers for families and administrative burden for the state.
- **Expand and modernize family child care capacity.**  
With their more flexible hours, family child care providers are the only options for many families whose work schedules don’t conform to center-based care and for communities that lack enough licensed child care spaces. Family child care providers should be allowed to serve more children – up to a reasonable cap – based on space, staffing ratios, and quality standards.
- **Strengthen New Jersey’s paid family and medical leave insurance system.**  
New Jersey should implement its recent expansion of job protection so more parents can take leave without fear of losing their position as well as simplify the application and approval process. The state should also strengthen coordination of family leave with other child care support and expand outreach so more residents – particularly lower-wage workers and fathers – are aware of these benefits.
- **Expand state tax credits for families.**  
New Jersey should increase the dollar amount and raise the income eligibility level for two state tax credits: the Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit and the Child Tax Credit. These steps would help more families afford care by reflecting today’s child care prices and cost of living, recognizing the share of families’ budgets that go toward child care, and making more families eligible for credits.

## PRINCIPLE: Compensate and Support Early Childhood Educators as Professionals

- **Establish a state-funded compensation framework tied to experience and credentials.**  
While closing the compensation gap in full would be a significant undertaking, such phased, incremental steps as supplements for the lowest-paid workers, a wage ladder that aligns with New Jersey’s Early Childhood Career Lattice, or pilots in specific communities could ensure progress is made.
- **Establish compensation parity across settings and ages.**  
New Jersey should have a compensation structure that aligns pay for early childhood educators with that of public school educators with similar qualifications, using public funds and tax credits to close the gap. Early educators should be paid based on their role, skills, and experience – not whether they work in a child care center, family child care home, or mixed-delivery preschool setting, nor based on the age of the children they serve.
- **Build no-cost, high-reward career pathways.**  
Educators need more access to scholarships, apprenticeships, and earn-while-you-learn programs to advance professionally without incurring debt. Tying this professional growth to meaningful wage increases would increase retention in the field by increasing educators’ economic security.
- **Support educators’ economic stability through benefits, subsidies, and other mechanisms.** New Jersey should make early childhood educators eligible for subsidies to defray the cost of care for their own children, regardless of their income, and explore refundable tax credits and avenues to affordable health insurance to help educators remain in the field. No system can be stable if its workforce can’t meet their families’ basic needs.



## **PRINCIPLE: Recognize Child Care as Essential Economic Infrastructure**

- **Convene a blue-ribbon commission on child care and early learning in general.**

The state should establish a time-limited commission representing families, providers, educators, employers, and state agencies to deliver a roadmap for improving financing, governance, and other elements of child care in New Jersey, with a commitment to legislative and state agency action.

- **Strengthen mixed-delivery preschool programs.**

The state should fully cover indirect costs borne by community-based providers that partner with school districts to offer preschool. The state should encourage district-provider partnerships, and promote and coordinate leadership to work with community-based providers and local school districts, with sufficient authority to resolve disputes in a way that protects providers from fear of retaliation. These steps would help make sure public preschool expansion supports – rather than destabilizes – community-based providers.

- **Develop a long-term, sustainable financing strategy.**

Moving beyond short-term funding cycles by identifying stable revenue sources and coordinating federal, state, and local financial support would enable permanent support for affordable, high-quality child care and equitable compensation for educators.

- **Integrate child care into state economic and infrastructure planning.**

State agencies should include child care providers as eligible entities for relevant small business, workforce development, facilities, and community investment opportunities to promote sustainability in the field.

- **Create coordinated governance for early childhood systems.**

New Jersey should explore consolidating early childhood governance or establishing a state department to align funding, regulation, data, and accountability across numerous agencies. Today's fragmentation undermines efficiency and long-term planning.

- **Invest in data systems and transparency.**

Creating integrated, cross-agency data systems to track access, affordability, workforce conditions, and quality, and publishing regular public reports, would help drive accountability and informed decision-making.



# A SYSTEM THAT WORKS

These recommendations aren't meant to be standalone fixes. Affordability depends on a stable child care workforce. Stability of that workforce depends on sufficient, predictable funding. Adequate funding and coordinated governance require treating child care as essential infrastructure.

Taken together, these recommendations offer a practical, evidence-informed path to a child care system that reflects the realities of family life, strengthens New Jersey's economy, and provides every child the opportunity to start strong, no matter where in New Jersey they live or their families' income.



New Jersey's child care challenges aren't the result of individual family choices or provider shortcomings. They're the predictable outcome of a system built for a different economy and a different era. Today, **child care is essential infrastructure that makes work possible, supports healthy child development, and sustains the state's economic competitiveness.** But the current system makes families shoulder costs they can't afford and calls upon educators to sustain a critical industry on wages too low to reflect the value of their work. That's not a sustainable model for families, for businesses, or for the state.

**New Jersey has the opportunity to build something better: a child care system grounded in stable investment in child care as a public good, with fair and predictable funding; strong accountability; and real family choice among centers, family child care, and trusted relative care.** It must function as a connected system from birth through the early learning years, building the foundation for success in kindergarten, school, and life. It should be affordable and easy for families to navigate. Child care providers should be able to rely on predictable payments. When child care is stable, families are more secure, employers are more competitive, and communities are stronger.

**The question isn't whether New Jersey can afford to invest in child care. The question is whether New Jersey can afford not to.** Every year we delay, families are pushed out of the workforce, providers close their doors, and the state loses economic ground. The path forward is clear: Treat child care as the essential infrastructure it has become and fund it accordingly.

New Jersey's future workforce is being cared for and shaped every day in child care centers, family child care homes, and by trusted family, friend, and neighbor caregivers. Decisions we make now will determine whether families, businesses, and communities can thrive for generations to come. **Because when child care works, New Jersey works.**



# ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Jon Shure's** career has put him at the intersection of public policy and communications in a number of venues. He began as a reporter for The Record newspaper in Bergen County and went on to be Governor Jim Florio's communications director. After working for The Century Foundation, a policy think tank in New York City, Jon founded New Jersey Policy Perspective and for 12 years was President. He led NJPP's development as an influential state research and advocacy organization and now co-chairs the NJPP board. He left NJPP for the Center on Budget Policy Priorities in Washington, D.C., where, as Director of State Communications, he helped members of the State Priorities Partnership hone their skills in strategic communications. Most recently, Jon was a Senior Director at Taft Communications in New Jersey. He holds a Bachelor's degree in industrial and labor relations from Cornell University and a Masters in journalism from the University of Missouri. Jon was an adjunct political science professor at Rutgers University in New Brunswick and a visiting fellow at the Eagleton Institute of Politics.

**Jayne O'Connor** is a communications professional whose experience centers on public policy and corporate communications as well as work with nonprofit organizations. She began her career in legislative affairs, working for the New Jersey Office of Legislative Services and Office of the Attorney General. She served for six years as Deputy Communications Director, then Press Secretary, for Governor Christine Todd Whitman. Jayne went on to become Director of Corporate and Business Communications for Bristol Myers Squibb, where she managed the company's corporate philanthropy and community relations in New Jersey as well as handled issue management and crisis communications. After serving as Executive Director of Strategic Marketing and Communications for Capital Health, Jayne joined Taft Communications as Vice President and later became Managing Senior Director at the combined RF|Binder Taft Communications. She holds Bachelor's and Masters degrees in political science from Rutgers University and serves as a senior advisor for RF|Binder Taft and an independent communications consultant. Throughout her career, Jayne has served on numerous boards of nonprofit organizations.



# HOW NEW JERSEY DOES CHILD CARE

New Jersey's child care system is a complex, patchwork structure shaped by numerous funding streams, regulatory frameworks, and delivery models. Families and child care providers navigate a layered mix of public and private options that vary significantly depending on location, income, and a child's age.

## Categories of Care

**Stay-at-home parents:** In New Jersey, one category of child care – in which a parent stays at home to care for a child – represents a relatively small percentage of families. New Jersey ranks among the highest for the percentage of young children with all available parents in the workforce – unsurprising in a state whose cost of living is among the nation's highest. And that number is rising, from 66% of children under six with all available parents in the workforce in 2014 to 75% in 2024. For most families, New Jersey's child care landscape consists of three types of care, described below.

**Family child care:** A family child care program serves no more than five children under age 13 in the provider's home. New Jersey family child care providers can choose to be either registered or unregistered, with registration required for a provider to accept children whose care is subsidized through the state's Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP). To register, providers must complete a background check and 18 hours of free preservice training covering such topics as child development, health and safety, discipline, nutrition, programming, and communicating with parents. Providers must also pass a home inspection that reviews safety, supervision, recordkeeping, and quality of care, including the number and ages of children served. Unregistered providers operate without state oversight and are paid entirely through private arrangements between families and providers. For parents who work nonstandard hours, family child care often is the only type of care that offers the schedule and flexibility to meet their needs. The average yearly cost in New Jersey for child care in a full-time family care setting was \$12,502 for an infant in 2024 and \$11,113 for a toddler.

**Center-based child care:** Center-based child care providers serve six or more children and must be licensed by the New Jersey Department of Children and Families. The number of children a center serves ranges from fewer than a dozen to more than 100. Licensing requirements are extensive, covering staff qualifications and ratios, background checks, health and safety standards, facility specifications, and regular inspections. The average yearly cost at a full-time center-based setting in New Jersey was \$20,213 in 2024 for an infant and \$19,448 for a toddler.

**Family, friend, and neighbor care:** Family, friend, and neighbor care is when a relative or friend provides child care through an informal or formal arrangement. Families eligible for CCAP may use their subsidy to pay a family member, friend, or neighbor to care for their children if the caregiver meets such requirements as completing a background check and taking brief training. This option can be critical for families with nontraditional work hours or cultural preferences for home-based care.

New Jersey, unlike most states, lacks an intermediate licensing category between family child care – five or fewer children – and licensed child care centers. Other states have intermediate or tiered categories for family child care that enable providers to serve higher numbers of children in a homelike setting, often with related regulatory requirements.

In 2024, 76% of children age five and under in New Jersey were enrolled in some form of care – 64% of infants and toddlers and 82% of preschool-aged children. At least 13% of New Jersey children are in some combination of these categories of care.

## Child Care by Age

For children younger than three, families face a maze of private child care options. Since there are only enough licensed child care spots to serve a small fraction of the state’s infants and toddlers, families must hope they’re fortunate enough to find a spot for their child that is affordable and in a convenient location. Early Head Start and CCAP subsidies are the only options for families who can’t afford approximately to pay \$20,000 per year. But Early Head Start is available only to families with incomes below the federal poverty level (\$33,000 a year for a family of four in 2026) – and it has capacity for fewer than 4,000 children. As of December 2025, because of underfunding, CCAP isn’t accepting applications from most families – even those who are eligible under the state’s rules. So, in reality, low-paid families often have limited to no options.

Some of New Jersey’s child care licensing regulations differ based on the age of children in care, with stricter standards for facilities, staff-to-child ratios, and other requirements for infants (under 18 months of age) and toddlers (18 months to two-and-a-half years).

Some early child care programs in New Jersey are licensed to provide care for children from infancy through age six or older. Others are licensed only to care for children beginning at age two-and-a-half. Child care for three- and four-year-olds is often referred to as preschool or pre-K.

## Mixed-Delivery

Over the past three decades, New Jersey has moved toward statewide universal public preschool – an effort that grew out of the Abbott court decisions on school funding, which required universal, high-quality preschool for three- and four-year-olds in the state’s highest-poverty districts. To implement universal public preschool, the state chose what is known as a mixed-delivery approach, in which school districts may offer preschool in their own facilities, partner with community-based child care centers that provide publicly funded preschool classrooms in their facilities, or both.

Public preschool operates on a public school schedule and calendar, meaning approximately six hours per day, Monday through Friday, from September to June, with closures for holidays, staff training, and school vacations. Many community-based child care centers that provide publicly funded preschool classrooms offer care for preschool children before or after school hours and during the summer, which better meets the needs of working families, but families must pay for this wrap-around care.

The Murphy administration started expanding public preschool to more districts, with the goal of eventually offering free, high-quality preschool to families statewide. As of now, just over half of eligible New Jersey school districts offer publicly-funded preschool for three- and four-year-olds. Many of these districts lack capacity to serve all eligible children. As a result, families often face lotteries or other enrollment mechanisms that limit access. Families that don’t get a public preschool spot continue to pay for private preschool if they need or want it.



One concern about public preschool expansion is the risk of undermining the stability of community-based child care providers or reducing the availability of infant-toddler programs. The issue is that public preschool can draw three- and four-year-olds away from community child care providers. Because care for this age group is less expensive to provide, community providers often set tuition for them at a level that offsets the higher cost of providing infant-toddler care. So, losing three-and-four-year-olds could make it harder for some community providers to stay in business, which would result in fewer child care spaces available for parents with infants or toddlers. Such destabilization is more of a risk in districts that offer public preschool but opt not to partner with community child care providers in a mixed-delivery approach.

## Paying for Child Care

Overlaying and cutting across these different types of child care in New Jersey are various funding mechanisms. While each funding stream serves a purpose, their combined complexity makes the system difficult to navigate, unstable for providers, and often unaffordable for families.

The Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP), New Jersey's subsidy vehicle, helps low-paid working parents and parents in school afford child care. It's funded through a mix of federal funding streams and state dollars. Child care providers may choose whether or not to accept subsidies, which reimburse care up to a maximum amount set by the state. Under state rules, only families in which all parents are working or attending school or job training full-time qualify for a subsidy. Depending on their income, families receiving a subsidy may be required to make a copayment directly to the child care provider. New Jersey's income cutoff for subsidy eligibility is among the lowest in the nation, limiting CCAP eligibility to families with incomes below twice the federal poverty level – a cutoff of \$66,000 for a family of four in 2026. Federal program rules allow New Jersey to provide subsidies for families making up to \$134,671 a year for a family of four, which is 85% of the state's median income for that family size. New Jersey hasn't allocated enough state funds that would be required for this to happen.

Funding for preschool-age children adds another layer. New Jersey's publicly funded preschool system, which is being expanded toward universal preschool, is supported mostly through state education aid and, in some cases, funding from local school districts. Preschool dollars flow directly to public school districts, which then pay private child care centers that offer public preschool through mixed-delivery partnerships. While public preschool funding means parents don't have to pay for preschool during the school day and year, families still have to pay for care before and after school hours, during school vacations and holidays, and over the summer.

Additional federal funding streams supplement the system: Head Start provides direct funding to certain child care providers to serve preschoolers in families below the federal poverty level. Early Head Start operates similarly and serves infants and toddlers under age three. Head Start and Early Head Start, combined, serve only about 12,000 young children in the state.

Of course, tuition payments from families make up a large share of providers' incomes. But since most families can't afford to pay the actual cost of providing child care, individual providers often stay in business by blending funding streams, when possible. Some providers operate as nonprofit or tax-exempt entities and are eligible to receive donations or private grants to supplement tuition and other funding streams.

Most families pay something for child care – with many paying entirely out of pocket, as only 20% of families using child care receive assistance from the state. Families who receive subsidies often have

copayments or need to pay the difference between the state reimbursement rate and the provider's tuition charge. Families with children in public preschool often need to pay for before- or after-school care and care in the summer and on school holidays.

## A Complex Regulatory and Governance Structure

Opening and operating a licensed center-based or registered family child care program in New Jersey requires contact with a regulatory and administrative system that involves numerous state and local agencies, each responsible for a defined component of oversight, approval, or program administration. While each entity plays an important role in protecting children's health and safety and ensuring programs' quality, the system as a whole is complex and daunting. Providers must devote considerable time and energy to understanding, then complying with, its many requirements.

### CENTER-BASED CHILD CARE

At the core of the system, the **New Jersey Department of Children and Families** (DCF), through its Office of Licensing, is responsible for issuing child care licenses and enforcing compliance with the Manual of Requirements for Child Care Centers (N.J.A.C. 3A:52). These requirements govern staff qualifications, staff-to-child ratios, background checks, program activities, health and sanitation practices, recordkeeping, and physical plant standards. Compliance is verified through regular inspections and requirements for extensive documentation.

Before a license can be issued, providers must secure a series of facility-related approvals, many of which fall outside DCF's authority. Municipal zoning and planning offices determine whether child care is a permitted use at a given site and may require variances or special approvals. Municipal construction officials oversee compliance with the State Uniform Construction Code and issue Certificates of Occupancy based on the ages of children served and the building's use classification.

Additional state agencies are involved in ensuring buildings' safety and environmental health. The state **Department of Community Affairs** issues the Life Hazard Use Certificate of Registration. The Department of Health oversees drinking water requirements and, when applicable, Safe Building Interior Certification and Indoor Environmental Health Assessments conducted by licensed consultants. In certain circumstances – particularly for older buildings or sites with prior commercial or industrial use – the **Department of Environmental Protection** requires a Preliminary Assessment under its Technical Requirements for Site Remediation (N.J.A.C. 7:26E).

Local agencies are also involved. Child care providers must obtain a Fire Safety Inspection Certificate from the local fire department or fire official and, when applicable, a Health Certificate from the local or county health department, particularly for centers that prepare or serve food.

Beyond licensing and facility approvals, providers participating in public funding streams must engage with additional agencies and systems. Providers interested in accepting child care subsidies or participating in New Jersey's Quality Rating Improvement System – designed to raise the quality of child care throughout the state – must work with the state **Department of Human Services**, Division of Family Development. Participation in the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) requires engagement with the **U.S. Department of Agriculture**, administered at the state level by the **New Jersey Department of Agriculture**.

Providers seeking to offer publicly funded preschool must comply with state **Department of Education** regulations and work directly with their local school districts, which control participation, funding, and contracts under mixed-delivery arrangements.

In summary, licensed child care centers in New Jersey must coordinate across numerous state departments, local governments, and program systems – each with distinct rules, timelines, data systems, and points of contact. Approvals are often sequential rather than obtained all at once – with participation in one program frequently triggering more rounds of compliance and reporting obligations. As each agency oversees a defined component, there's no single point of accountability for aligning processes or monitoring the overall health of the child care system. This makes it difficult to assess systemwide capacity, track delays in adding capacity, or analyze the impact of regulatory and funding decisions on provider sustainability and family access.

## FAMILY CHILD CARE

Family child care (FCC) in New Jersey operates under a regulatory framework distinct from licensed child care centers and governed by the Manual of Requirements for Family Child Care Registration (N.J.A.C. 3A:54). While FCC registration is technically voluntary, participation is required for providers that want to receive child care subsidies, participate in quality initiatives, or be connected to state and local referral systems. As a result, many FCC providers navigate a multilayered system of oversight, approvals, and compliance.

Unlike center-based providers, FCC providers don't register directly with the state. Instead, they must work through a state **Department of Children and Families**-approved sponsoring organization that serves as intermediary between the provider and the Department's Office of Licensing. Sponsoring organizations process applications, conduct inspections, issue Certificates of Registration, provide required training and technical assistance, monitor compliance, and investigate complaints. DCF, in turn, oversees and monitors sponsoring organizations, in what amounts to a two-tier oversight structure rather than a single point of accountability. In New Jersey, the sponsoring organizations are the CCRRs.

To become and remain registered, FCC providers must meet extensive requirements related not only to caregiving practices, but also to their homes and household members. These include criminal history and Child Abuse Record Information background checks; health examinations and tuberculosis testing; CPR, first aid, and preservice training; letters of reference; and documentation related to substitute and alternate caregivers. Any change in household composition or caregiving staff can trigger additional reporting and approval requirements.

FCC providers are also subject to detailed health, safety, and environmental standards that can be complex to implement in a private residence. Requirements govern allowable space, supervision, fire safety and emergency egress, storage of hazardous materials, sanitation, outdoor play areas, and emergency preparedness. Providers must maintain written emergency plans and conduct and document regular evacuation, shelter-in-place, and lockdown drills – requirements that mirror institutional expectations but are applied within a family home.

Environmental and interior health requirements add another layer to the process. FCC providers may be required to submit documentation that no further environmental remediation is needed for the site, consistent with requirements overseen by the state **Department of Environmental Protection**. In addition, the Office of Licensing may, on a case-by-case basis, require a Safe Building Interior Certification or other interior environmental approval issued by the **Department of Health**, particularly when interior environmental conditions warrant review.



Ongoing compliance requires additional administrative demands. Sponsoring organizations conduct announced and unannounced inspections, including pre-renewal inspections, biennial monitoring visits, and random annual monitoring of registered providers. FCC providers are subject to complaint investigations and must maintain detailed records related to children’s enrollment and attendance, health and safety, injuries, training, and program operations.

FCC providers who want to accept child care subsidies must also engage with the state **Department of Human Services**, Division of Family Development (DFD). FCC providers receiving subsidies are included in a state-recognized collective bargaining unit for subsidy-related matters. A portion of subsidy payments may be withheld to cover union dues or representation fees, reducing net operating revenue.

FCC providers who want to participate in the state Quality Rating Improvement System, also administered through DFD, must meet additional quality standards, documentation, training, and monitoring requirements that operate independently of FCC registration and subsidy administration. Participation in the state Quality Rating Improvement System is voluntary, but closely tied to opportunities for professional development, coaching, and quality-related financial support. Participation in the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) introduces another administrative structure. CACFP is administered by the **U.S. Department of Agriculture** and overseen at the state level by the **New Jersey Department of Agriculture**, typically through separate sponsoring organizations. FCC providers participating in CACFP must comply with nutrition standards, maintain daily meal and attendance records, undergo monitoring visits, and meet civil rights and training requirements that aren’t integrated with FCC registration, subsidy participation, or Quality Rating Improvement System processes.

In summary, FCC providers who seek to operate legally and obtain public supports must navigate parallel systems: registration through a sponsoring organization; environmental and interior health approvals; subsidies and collective representation; quality improvement initiatives; and nutrition program requirements – each with distinct rules, timelines, documentation, and oversight entities. As with center-based providers, there’s no single point of accountability for aligning these processes or monitoring their combined impact on providers’ participation, administrative burden, or financial sustainability. As a result, FCC providers – many of whom operate alone in their homes – must deal with a fragmented system influencing decisions about whether to register, accept subsidies, participate in quality initiatives, or even remain in the child care field.

This document is intended to provide a high-level overview of major system components and is not a comprehensive inventory of all programs, policies, funding sources, regulatory requirements, or administrative structures that exist across the state.



# NATIONAL MOMENTUM: STATE-LED CHILD CARE REFORMS

Noting that “a growing acknowledgement of the economic and labor concerns related to child care has fueled political momentum for state-backed initiatives,” The Washington Post reported in December 2025 that about two dozen states last year passed new child care programs, “often backed by business leaders concerned with recruiting and retaining workers.”

Approaches vary across the nation, but what states have in common is a growing recognition of the importance of child care in today’s economy. At least 11 states recently allocated millions of dollars to subsidy or voucher programs that give families money to pay for child care, The Post reported, and “others approved funding aimed at helping child care operators, increasing the number of available spots, creating new funding streams for child care or establishing public-private partnerships.”

“We have seen more states invest their own dollars in child care over the last five years than ever before,” Julie Kashen, a senior fellow at the Twentieth Century Foundation, told The Post. “We have seen it in red, blue, and purple states.”

**Below is snapshot of representative state efforts:**



## **CONNECTICUT** **ENDOWMENT**

Connecticut instituted the nation’s first state early childhood endowment and funded it with \$300 million from the state surplus. In years to come, the endowment will receive unappropriated surplus funds, with yearly drawdowns of up to 12%. As a permanent, independent investment vehicle for child care and early childhood education, the endowment is isolated from the uncertainty of the annual state budget process. The fund will go toward free Head Start child care for families making under \$100,000 a year, limiting child care costs to 7% of household income for families over \$100,000 per year, expanding child care capacity for infants and toddlers, and improving accountability by requiring providers to participate in a state quality improvement system.



## **NEW MEXICO** **UNIVERSAL CARE**

In November 2025, New Mexico became the first state to offer free universal child care, funding it with revenues from oil and gas extraction. The initiative makes child care available to all families regardless of income. The state is also creating a low-interest loan fund to build, expand, and renovate child care facilities; targeting growth in the child care system to focus on infants, toddlers, low-income families, and children with special needs; partnering with employers and school districts to expand child care options for working parents; launching a statewide campaign to recruit licensed and registered home providers; and raising rates of reimbursement to providers to reflect the true cost of care.



## **NEW YORK** **CAPITAL PLUS EXPANSION**

In January 2026, New York Governor Kathy Hochul announced plans to spend \$4.5 billion on statewide universal child care as part of an effort to expand state-funded child care for three-year-olds and eventually two-year-olds. Last year the state launched the \$100 million Child Care Capital Construction Funding Program, which includes money to build child care facilities and expand existing ones. It follows previously adopted programs to expand access to affordable child care to 170,000 children statewide, increase reimbursement for providers, and establish tax credits employers can use to help meet employees’ child care needs.



**COLORADO**  
**EXPANDED EDUCATOR**  
**TAX CREDIT**

When Colorado began offering a state income tax credit of up to \$1,200 to early childhood educators and other child care providers, it became the first state to include informal family, friend, and neighbor care providers. To be eligible, providers must have a gross household income of less than \$75,000 for single filers or \$100,000 for joint filers who provide at least 720 hours of child care in a year.



**MASSACHUSETTS**  
**GRANTS TO PROVIDERS**

Massachusetts expanded state subsidies and made permanent grants that provide monthly payments directly to early education and child care providers. The grants, which support more than 90% of early education and child care programs in the state, helped many providers stay open during the pandemic, increased compensation for early educators, and expanded the number of child care slots statewide.



**MISSOURI**  
**EMPLOYER PARTNERSHIP**

Under Missouri’s state-funded Child Care Works initiative, employers can offer child care benefits to workers and share the cost with parents and the state. Funded by a \$2.5 million allocation in the state’s current fiscal year budget, the pilot program will subsidize up to 450 seats in early childcare centers across Missouri. The focus is on supporting families that don’t qualify for state subsidies, with incomes up to 5.5 times the federal poverty level. It’s estimated that families could save up to as much as 75% on their child care costs.



**MONTANA**  
**PERMANENT TRUST**

Montana used a state budget surplus to put a \$10 million permanent child care trust in infrastructure legislation. The trust’s uses include technical assistance grants, recruitment and retention efforts, grants to support providers pursuing training and continuing education, quality improvement initiatives, and expanding the availability of before- and after-school care.



**WASHINGTON, D.C.**  
**PAY EQUITY FUND**

The District of Columbia created the Early Childhood Educator Pay Equity Fund to augment child care workers’ compensation by \$5,000 to \$14,000 annually, depending on their role. Early findings show a 7% increase in employment in the child care sector and improved retention.



## NEWS RELEASE

### **Majority of voters think the issue has a large impact on the state's economy, according to October 2025 Rutgers-Eagleton poll**

A sizeable majority of voters, regardless of political party identification, say that finding quality, affordable child care is difficult in New Jersey and a significant barrier to parents' employment with effects on the state's businesses and economy, according to a Rutgers-Eagleton Poll in collaboration with Start Strong NJ.

"When voters talk about affordability in this election, child care is part of that story," said Ashley Koning, an assistant research professor and director of the Eagleton Center for Public Interest Polling at Rutgers University-New Brunswick. "While it's not always discussed explicitly, child care is inextricably intertwined with economic well-being and opportunity for many voters."

"These survey results won't surprise hardworking parents in New Jersey who struggle to balance economically supporting their families and giving their children the strong start they need in life," said Atiya Weiss, executive director of the Burke Foundation in Princeton, N.J., which helps fund Start Strong NJ. "The findings should convince policymakers that child care is essential infrastructure, just like roads, schools, broadband, power lines, and many other things we invest in as a society for the well-being of communities and the state's economic health."

Nearly 7 in 10 likely voters say it is "very" (34%) or "somewhat" (34%) difficult to find quality and affordable child care in New Jersey. A majority of voters, regardless of partisanship, gender, race and ethnicity, age, income, and education, feel it is at least somewhat difficult to find care. Nonparents and parents alike agree, though parents are more likely to say it is difficult (77%) than nonparents (65%).

Slightly more than 6 in 10 voters say finding quality, affordable child care in the state poses a "major barrier" for parents who want to work (61%). Twenty percent say this is a "minor barrier" and 5% say it is "not a barrier at all."

A plurality of voters, regardless of partisanship, gender, race and ethnicity, age, income, and education, say finding quality, affordable care is a "major barrier" for working parents. There is no statistically significant difference between parents and nonparents.

Seven in 10 voters think the lack of quality, affordable child care in New Jersey has a "great deal" of (31%) or "some" (39%) impact on the state's businesses and economy. Ten percent say it impacts the economy "only a little" and 6% say "not at all."

Again, a majority of voters regardless of partisanship, gender, race and ethnicity, age, income and education, say the lack of quality, affordable care has at least some impact on the state's economy. There is no statistically significant difference between parents and non-parents.

Among those for whom the questions were applicable, 51% say they or someone they know has had difficulty finding quality child care in the past five years and 63% say they or someone they know has had difficulty affording quality child care in the past five years.

There is a sizeable 15-point-or-more gap between knowing and not knowing someone who has had difficulty finding child care across all demographic groups, with the exception of Republicans and voters ages 65 and older. In the case of Republicans, 42% know someone who has had difficulty and 34% don't. Thirty-nine percent of those 65 and older know someone who has had difficulty and 30% don't.

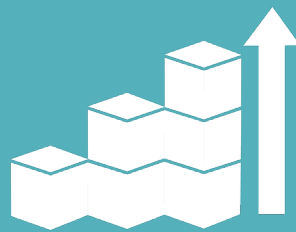
A majority of voters regardless of partisanship, gender, race and ethnicity, age, income, and education, say they or someone they know has had difficulty affording care. Parents (73%) are more likely than nonparents (58%) to say they or someone they know has had difficulty affording care.

“What’s striking about these findings is how broad the consensus is – for once, this isn’t a partisan issue, it’s a practical one,” Koning said. “Voters recognize that when child care isn’t accessible or affordable, it limits opportunity for parents and affects the state’s economic health – themes that have defined much of this campaign.”

Results are from a statewide poll of 795 voters contacted via live calling and texting from October 3 to October 17, 2025. The likely voter sample has a margin of error of +/- 4.7 percentage points. The registered voter sample has a margin of error of +/- 4.6 percentage points.

*Full questions and tables are available  
on Start Strong NJ's website*





# Start Strong NJ

Affordable Child Care for All

[StartStrongNJ.org](http://StartStrongNJ.org)