

Early Learning and Childcare Shortages

RLN Issue Update - A Georgia Partnership Initiative

Issue Overview

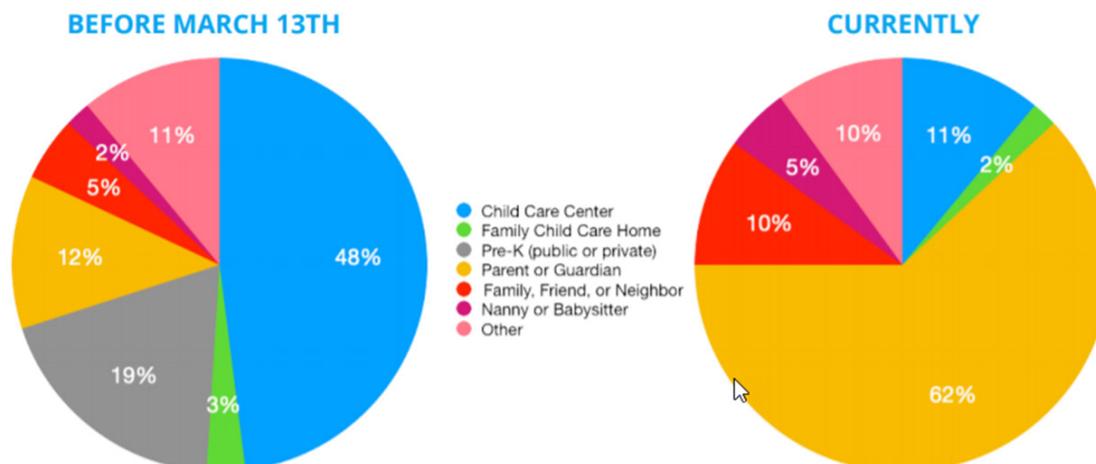
Like many small businesses, the early learning industry has been deeply impacted by the COVID crisis. Nationally, 50% of early learning providers have closed, and those that remain open are operating at significantly lower capacities. In Georgia, the remaining Child Care Learning Centers have seen a 28% drop in enrollment since March 2020. Smaller, home-based Family Child Care Learning centers have experienced a 10% drop in enrollment. The impacts of these trends are multifold: the small business owners are closing their doors and letting employees go, families are without childcare options, and children are without quality early learning and socializations supports from trained professionals.

From an educational perspective, these losses are huge. The early learning segment of the birth-to-work pipeline has received heightened attention in recent years in Georgia, as the importance of early language and literacy skills has been better understood and promoted across the state. We know, for example, that quality early learning care strengthens and supports foundational language skills and that participation in early childhood education is linked to higher graduation rates, higher lifetime earnings, and a decreased likelihood of involvement in the juvenile or adult justice system.

State of Rural Georgia

A 2016 analysis found that 32% of Georgia's zip codes either lack any child care options or have so few providers that there are more than three children for every licensed child care slot. Rural counties are more likely to support smaller, family childcare learning homes serving 6 or fewer children rather than larger child care learning centers. As the pandemic swept through Georgia and families have lost jobs and cut hours, the expense of childcare has been pushed out of reach for many families. Relatedly, many childcare centers have closed, another small business casualty of the pandemic-induced economic downturn. These reductions leave communities in an economic bind—parents, especially mothers, who left work to watch children for economic reasons are now unable to return to work as the economy recovers due to reduced access to childcare.

Table: In May and June of 2020, GEEARS issued an online survey designed for Georgia parents or caregivers with children ages birth-five. The 465 respondents from 78 counties reported a range of disruptions to employment, family routines, and childcare arrangement.



State of Rural Georgia

Rural centers are especially struggling to stay afloat. Family centers (serving 6 children or less) have been more likely to remain open. Centers that are open are often leaning on available grants and are reliant on the Children and Parent Services (CAPS) benefit program now, which reimburses centers for qualifying, low-income enrolled families. However, the CAPS program itself is operating on an over-stretched budget. That is, far more Georgia residents qualify for CAPS services than the state budget can cover, making it a struggle to enroll families even if they qualify.

Educational Impact:

Quality Rated early learning centers do not just provide parents an opportunity to go to work—they also provide young children with early learning opportunities, especially early language and literacy support. As centers have closed, fewer of Georgia's children are getting this foundational preparation for the schoolhouse. School districts are forecasting significant impacts on early literacy, which is known to be tied to overall school achievement, graduation rates, health and economic outcomes for individuals and communities. Rural communities who have lost early learning supports and already struggle with limited resources are especially vulnerable to these impacts and must consider community and policy responses to enable them to ensure strong educational pipelines for their residents.

Parents of small children pursuing higher education through the University or Technical College Systems of Georgia are also affected by shrinking access to childcare centers. While working parents have had to stay home to care for children, those pursuing their higher education are also struggling to find childcare that allows them to continue their education.

Strategies for Success

Georgia Northwestern Technical College and Dalton State College: Each institution conducted surveys of their student body to determine how many were parents of small children. The results highlighted needs previously unacknowledged in their student body- around 50% of all GNTC students had children, the majority of which were 5 years old or younger. At Dalton State, around one third of students had children. These results inspired the institutions to offer services targeting parents. As the childcare crunch has grown, this type of survey and resulting programmatic strategies can be powerful tools to support local economic and educational pipelines.

CTAE: Many rural school districts offer early learning centers through the school system, often in partnership with the CTAE Early Education Pathway. In this way schools are serving the wider community while simultaneously creating a home-grown early child care workforce pipeline.

Get Georgia Reading: This program operates in communities across rural Georgia supporting early language and early literacy efforts. Campaign Communities have access to data, support, and best practices to help the community at large to pull together in support of early literacy. These efforts can be especially important in fighting the challenges the pandemic has created to early learning efforts.

Business Partnerships: There are many opportunities for the business community and chambers to partner with their local childcare providers. Childcare access is a foundational building block for a strong workforce. Employers and chambers are encouraged to reach out to see how they can work with providers towards shared goals of maintaining and increasing access to care to support Georgia's economic recovery.

Additional Resources & Data

Top Ten Issues to Watch in 2021 ISSUE 3: Early Learning – The Foundation for an Inclusive Economic Recovery:

https://1hlp161d4zqn27aufu3ikxut-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/GPEE-Top-Ten-2021_Final.pdf

Information about the CAPS program: <https://caps.decal.ga.gov/en/About>

Search for Quality Rated Childcare in Georgia: <https://families.decal.ga.gov/ChildCare/Search>

Information on the Get Georgia Reading Program: <https://getgeorgiareading.org/>

GEEARS Family Experience Survey: <https://gears.org/wp-content/uploads/COVID19-Family-Experience-Survey.pdf>