

CHATTANOOGA- HAMILTON COUNTY CHILD CARE NEEDS ASSESSMENT REPORT

FALL 2021



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

WHO WAS INVOLVED?

Early Matters Chattanooga and School Readiness Consulting are grateful to the parents, teachers and providers, and other community leaders who contributed to this needs assessment. We could not have created this report without the opportunity to learn about what it's like to raise young children in Chattanooga-Hamilton County.

We recognize that parents are young children's first and best teachers and central to the early childhood system. This needs assessment is a culmination of the stories and challenges that parents shared in focus groups and interviews. We thank every parent for their honesty and willingness to share their truths on behalf of all parents and families in Chattanooga-Hamilton County.

Additionally, a small and diverse group of parents and providers participated as Community Council members, giving us the opportunity to see the successes and shortcomings of the system through their eyes, which has been immeasurably valuable. We are grateful to them for lending their stories and images to the photovoice project.

Community leaders, city officials, and early childhood teachers and providers gave us clear insight into Chattanooga-Hamilton County's early childhood landscape. Their shared advocacy for early learning and diverse perspectives illuminated the community's deep commitment to young children and families.

Gratitude is also shared with the Access to Quality Child Care working group of Early Matters Chattanooga, who led the efforts to see this needs assessment to fruition and have continued to dedicate their time and energy to creating a Chattanooga-Hamilton County in which all children have equitable access to high-quality early care and education.



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LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

WHY? A land acknowledgment is a practice of honoring the native and Indigenous people whose land we rely on to work and live. Land acknowledgments are a powerful way for non-Indigenous people to respect the first people of our communities and demonstrate a commitment to truth.

It is vital to honor and recognize the importance of Indigenous history and culture within our communities. Early Matters Chattanooga acknowledges the

occupation of the original lands of the Cherokee people, the first people of what we know in colonized terms to be Chattanooga-Hamilton County. We pay our respect to all native peoples who were forcibly displaced from their homelands, the land upon which we gather, live, and work.

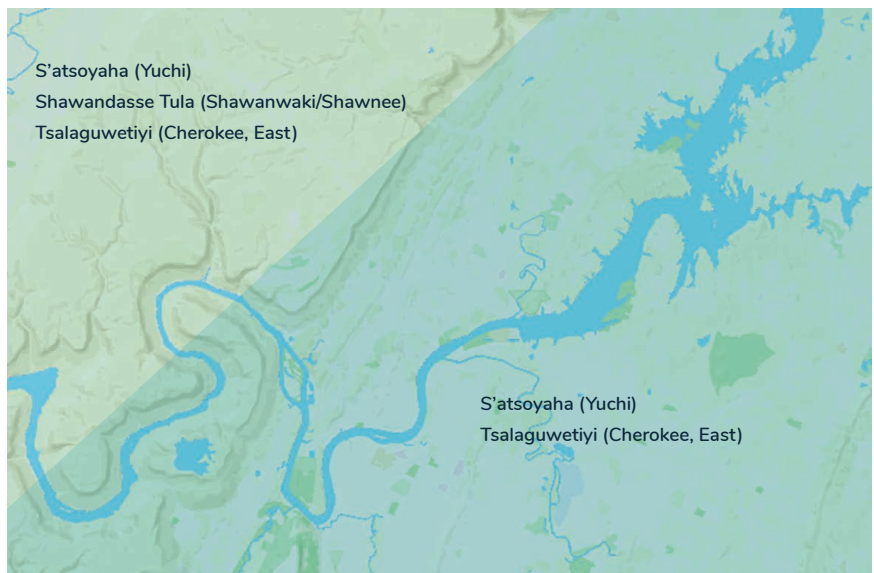




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EARLY MATTERS CHATTANOOGA



Children are born with great potential for development and learning. The evidence is clear—experiences during the first few years of life have a profound and lasting impact. During the period from birth to age three, the developing brain forms more than one million new connections per second.¹ These connections form the foundation for all future learning.

Positive early childhood experiences make a difference. Research shows that brain development is influenced by each young child’s environment and experiences.² Positive early childhood experiences—especially within high-quality early childhood services—are essential for child health, learning, and overall well-being.

For young children to thrive, families must have the resources and support they need. Families are the primary source of children’s earliest learning experiences and their means of connection to all that they need to thrive. Early childhood services can support family stability and strong parent-child connections—the primary context in which children learn, develop, and form secure attachments during their earliest years.³ When families are connected to the early childhood programs and services they need, it not only benefits children but also enables families to participate in the workforce and access other services in the community.

Unfortunately, not all children and families have equal access to positive early childhood experiences. Families across the United States face high costs and limited availability of early care and education. These challenges are exacerbated for families with no or limited incomes, those living in rural areas, and those that lack access to reliable transportation. Inequitable distribution of wealth and resources, the increasing financial strain on low- and middle-income families, and persistent racial segregation contribute to a reality in which early childhood opportunity gaps occur systematically and impact the community broadly. Meanwhile, chronic underfunding of the early childhood system ensures that high-quality early childhood experiences remain out of reach for many children.



However, political and organizational leaders across public sectors in Chattanooga-Hamilton County refuse to accept this as an inevitability. Instead, those entrusted with decision-making that impacts children and families desire for Chattanooga-Hamilton County to be the best city-county for a child to be born and raised. They recognize that, if Chattanooga-Hamilton County is to be a city-county where families, programs, and communities are thriving, now is the time to build a strong local network of early childhood and family supports and continue to advocate for resources where they are needed most. To ensure that the children of Chattanooga-Hamilton County have what they need to thrive, community leaders and decision-makers must first understand the critical issues young children and families face. Equitable and sustainable solutions to the systems are achieved when we prioritize those who have historically been farthest from opportunity.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY “EQUITY”?

Equity is an outcome . . . not an effort or an intention. Advancing equity in early learning means undoing the conditions that have historically prevented many children from reaching their full potential based on race, income, and other social factors. As a result of this undoing, these factors would no longer predict how successful children can be in school and life.

Early Matters’ Commitment to Equity . . .

“Today’s babies are our next generation of leaders and in TN 36% of babies are children of color. As a group of organizations serving Black and brown children and their families in our community, we acknowledge the historic and systemic racial disparities in policies, programs and employment that have led to inequitable access to quality early childhood services. This lack of access has now grown more dire because it is estimated that 44% of Tennessee childcare slots could be lost due to COVID-19. We believe equitable access to early childhood programs and services is a key factor that leads to thriving families, thriving programs, and a thriving community—making Chattanooga-Hamilton County the best place in the nation for a child to be born and raised.”

The Early Matters strategic plan outlines data-informed strategies to promote equitable access to quality early childhood services through systems building and advocacy efforts. Early Matters Chattanooga commits to working with today’s leaders to restructure early childhood systems that hinder children’s success, without barriers such as systemic racism, and in their place, build systems that advance access, equity, and justice for the babies who have consistently been denied.

CHATTANOOGA 2.0 AND EARLY MATTERS CHATTANOOGA



Chattanooga 2.0 was formed in 2015 as a cradle-to-career collaborative aimed at transforming education and workforce development outcomes. This cross-sector partnership is led by stakeholders representing community, business, nonprofit, public, faith-based, and educational institutions. Chattanooga 2.0 was established to ensure that all children and youth receive a quality education and career opportunities that help them realize their full potential.

One of seven Chattanooga 2.0 Action teams, Early Matters Chattanooga is a coalition made up of more than 20 child- and family-serving organizations invested in early childhood and positively impacting the systems that ensure happy and healthy childhoods in Chattanooga-Hamilton County, Tennessee. Working together, these organizations promote equitable access to early childhood programs and services through systems building and advocacy efforts.

The Access to Quality Child Care working group is one of three workgroups of Early Matters Chattanooga and is responsible for leading this needs assessment. This early childhood needs assessment is one way Early Matters is building on its Strategic Plan and theory of change toward achieving equitable access to early childhood programs and services. Having access to early childhood programs and services is a key factor that leads to thriving families, thriving programs, and a thriving community—making Chattanooga-Hamilton County the best place in the nation for a child to be born and raised.

Early Matters Theory of Change

THE CHALLENGE

Within the current early childhood system in Chattanooga, not all children have access to the services and supports they need to thrive within their families, programs, and communities. To address this challenge, Early Matters Chattanooga works through systems-building and advocacy to elevate the standard of access to high-quality early childhood services and improve child outcomes for young children and their families. Grounded in a commitment to equity, Early Matters prioritizes expanded access for children and families of color, those from low-income backgrounds, and others who have historically lacked access to the early childhood system.

THE STRATEGIES

EQUITY-FOCUSED SYSTEMS-BUILDING

ADVOCACY

Landscaping, Mapping & Advising	Evaluation, Research & Improvement	Increasing Sustainability Through Community Partnership	Building Political Will & Driving Policy Change	Elevating Family & Community Champions	Leveraging Collective Voice to Advance Key Messages
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THE RESULTS

High-quality comprehensive needs assessment and landscape analysis made accessible to all stakeholders Needs-assessment activities and results that consistently maintain a clear focus on Chattanooga's most marginalized populations	Established child outcomes and indicators for collective work Increase in communication and sharing of data between entities and agencies Increase in quality and disaggregation of data to support collective work with an equity focus	Increase in racial diversity of coalition membership and leadership Meeting agendas that are focused on cross-sector collaboration and collective goal	Coalition members are prepared to carry forward a clear and consistent message about Early Matters' policy platform Coalition members are broadly aware of changes in the policy and advocacy environment and implications for their work	Increase in community engagement and awareness of early childhood issues Increase in family representation and participation in advocacy efforts	Increased conversation and skill-building among coalition members around racial equity Advocacy messages consistently prioritize and highlight justice and equity
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THE OUTCOME

Expand access to high-quality early childhood services for all of Chattanooga's young children and their families

THE IMPACT

Thriving families, thriving programs, and thriving communities make Chattanooga the best place in the nation for a child to be born and raised

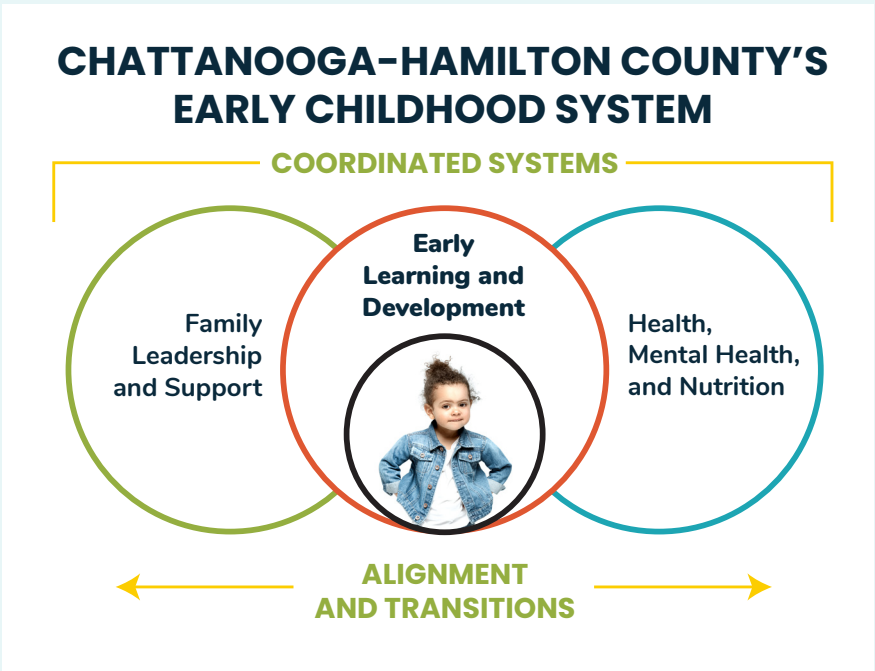
WHAT IS THE EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEM?

Chattanooga-Hamilton County's early childhood system consists of the many structures and programs that impact young children and their families. The early childhood system broadly refers to the system of programs and services designed to support young children's learning, health, and development—including workforce preparation and parenting, economic, and other supports for the adults who care for young children.

In Chattanooga-Hamilton County, the early childhood system is

composed of a network of nonprofit and private-sector entities, city and county agencies and departments, institutions of higher education, and other public and private entities. This distribution of early childhood services across agencies and sectors means that in order to have efficient and comprehensive early childhood services, there must be intentional connection, collaboration, and communication.

While the early childhood system includes a full range of services and supports for children prenatal to five, for the purposes of this needs assessment, we are focused on early learning and development.

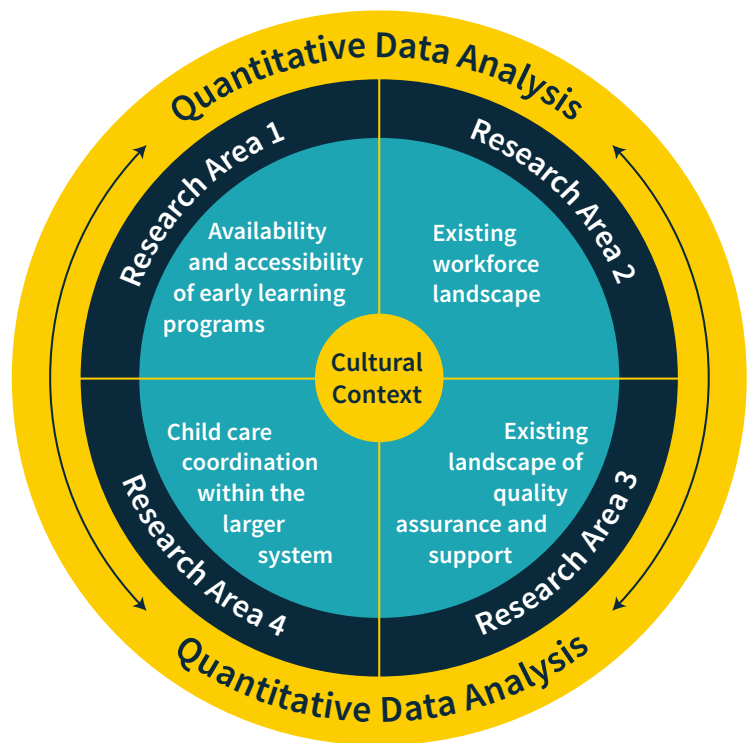


Early Matters is focused on coordinating efforts across the county and supporting collaboration and alignment across child- and family-serving sectors. These efforts are grounded in the belief that, for all children and families to thrive, early childhood program and systems leaders across Chattanooga-Hamilton County must work in tandem to meet the diverse needs of children and families, while prioritizing those who have historically been furthest from opportunity. As part of its strategic plan, Early Matters has prioritized its strategy of landscaping, mapping, and advising by commissioning this needs assessment. The ongoing documentation of early childhood efforts in Chattanooga-Hamilton County is necessary to know which parts of the system can work better for children and families.

In service to Early Matters' commitment to building a more equitable early childhood system, it has partnered with School Readiness Consulting (SRC) to conduct this needs assessment, which serves as an opportunity to acknowledge the assets, barriers, and current conditions for the early care and education of young children and families in Chattanooga-Hamilton County. By understanding what resources exist and what conditions could be improved for children and families, Early Matters is positioned to make equity-informed recommendations and advise on effective and timely child and family-centered policy. As such, this needs assessment focused on the following research areas:

- **Research Area 1:** What early learning program options are **available and accessible** by families within the community, and where are the gaps?
- **Research Area 2:** What is the existing **workforce** landscape, and what supports are needed to prepare a highly qualified workforce?
- **Research Area 3:** What is the existing landscape of quality assurance and support, and what is needed to ensure **high-quality programming**?
- **Research Area 4:** How is child care **coordinated** within the larger system of child and family supports, and where are the gaps?

OVERVIEW OF NEEDS ASSESSMENT PROCESS



The needs assessment process included quantitative analysis of available early childhood data and qualitative analysis through both a series of interviews with parents, families, early care and education providers, and community leaders and a photovoice project with parents and providers. The following report provides the key learnings from the needs assessment process and recommendations for the early childhood system.

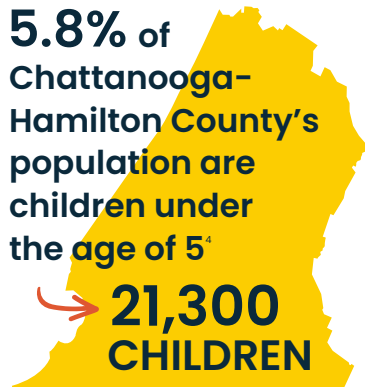
CULTURAL CONTEXT

Stable and connected families, safe and well-resourced communities, and high-quality early childhood programs and services are all essential to forming a strong, supportive ecosystem for children as they grow and learn. To gather a clear understanding of the research areas, we must first recognize who the children and families are and what it's like to raise young children in Chattanooga-Hamilton County.

WHO ARE CHATTANOOGA-HAMILTON COUNTY'S CHILDREN AND FAMILIES?

Chattanooga-Hamilton County families and communities show that they prioritize young children and work hard to create the conditions for them to thrive. Families have wisdom as their children's first teachers and primary caregivers and are dedicated to giving their children a strong start. From the churches they attend, to how their young children are cared for, to the day-to-day experiences they provide, these historically accumulated and culturally developed funds of knowledge are valuable to the early childhood system.

CHATTANOOGA-HAMILTON COUNTY STATS



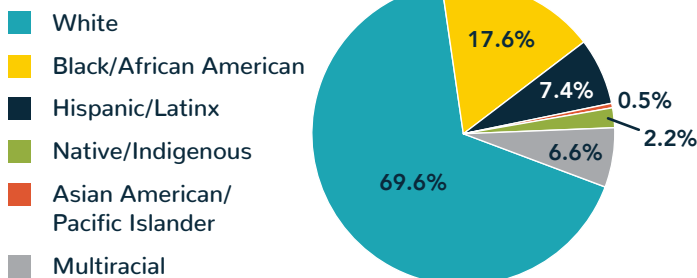
75% of children under the age of 5 have all available adults working full-time

→ As compared to Tennessee, in which 64% of children under age 6 have all adults working full-time.⁵

MEDIAN INCOME
\$55,070

“We have people in Chattanooga who want to see the same for kids of all backgrounds, all socioeconomic levels, and there are people who work very hard to serve [their] community.”
– **Community Leader**

Racial demographics^{6*}



* This data has been retrieved from the 2020 Census Data for Hamilton County, the percentages add up to slightly higher than 100% due to how individuals chose to self-report racial and ethnic identity.

32.6% of households are led by a single parent⁷

13% of children speak a language other than English at home

18% of children have an individualized education program (IEP)

1 IN 6 CHILDREN HAVE ONE OR MORE DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES⁸

WHAT HELPS YOUNG CHILDREN AND FAMILIES THRIVE?

Chattanooga-Hamilton County is an early education community.

Families, providers, and communities agree that there are beautiful places and cultural institutions available for families that aid in their young children’s development. From libraries, to museums, to places of worship and recreation, Chattanooga-Hamilton County boasts many resources and spaces that make it a place where families can thrive. The ways in which families participate in their communities and the stated intention from community leaders to move toward a more equitable system illuminates how Chattanooga-Hamilton County is advancing to be the best place in the nation to be born and raised. As part of Chattanooga-Hamilton County’s dedication to early education there are strong advocates who are creating the conditions for young children and families to thrive.

While advancing an equitable early childhood system persists as a challenge, there are efforts across Chattanooga-Hamilton County to recognize the ways inequities have shaped the experiences of young children and families and to build an equitable pathway forward. We see this in efforts by, community leaders like the Chattanooga Chamber, which is driving a newfound commitment to racial equity through the “CEOs for Racial Equity Pledge.” Many child- and family-serving organizations, businesses, and leaders have made the commitment to equity inside of organizations and the broader community. This burgeoning commitment to racial equity is further fostered by Chattanooga 2.0 and its partners’ commitment to understanding and eliminating the disparities in educational outcomes between white children and children of color in the county.

“We have many recreation leagues, many community volunteers, and programs for the county. Up until a few years ago Chattanooga was known for pollution and now it is known for green space.”

– Parent

“We are just starting to get involved in our local government. My husband and I have started going to city council meetings just to try and get more information on what we can do as parents and as citizens to advocate for a better environment, a better neighborhood for our kids to grow up in.”

– Parent

Families of young children continue to make the most of what they have to invest in their young children.

Amidst the global pandemic of COVID-19, local and national political change, and increased public discourse around equity and inclusion, families in Chattanooga-Hamilton County work hard to create the best possible conditions for their young children to thrive. Even in the midst of great challenges, families in Chattanooga-Hamilton County leverage the resources they have to ensure that their children have opportunities for early

learning. From supporting their children’s health and nutrition to early literacy and cultural identity, families know that they are not only their child’s first teacher but their best one. Families make this investment because they know that the experiences and relationships that young children have in their first five years of life are the building blocks for all learning and development.

“I would say every moment is a learning moment. So of course, we know that education or knowledge building is not a one-way street. So [families] might feel that it’s all on the daycare facility. But I love to incorporate learning also in the car, walking up steps—we counting, we doing colors. If we’re walking out in the community, we’re looking at the nature. I try to narrate everything we do so that they hear more words. And that, of course, builds their vocabulary. So, I will always preach the fact of self. Self-practices that you do while fixing dinner, while tucking in the bed at night. The 20 minutes a day is completely a little to ask when you’re thinking about 24 hours. So just the small things that we can do to enlighten them as well.”

– Parent

WHAT STANDS IN THE WAY?

While the young children in Chattanooga-Hamilton County benefit from a wide variety of resources within their families and communities, the system’s biggest challenges continue to negatively impact families and their young children.

POVERTY

Childhood poverty has lifelong impacts on the children of Chattanooga-Hamilton County. Children living in poverty often experience hunger, illness, and instability. During the most profound time of brain development, children deserve to have access to adequate nutrition, health, education, and care.

12.8%
of Chattanooga-Hamilton County's population lives in poverty.



Out of the children ages 0-5 in Chattanooga-Hamilton County:

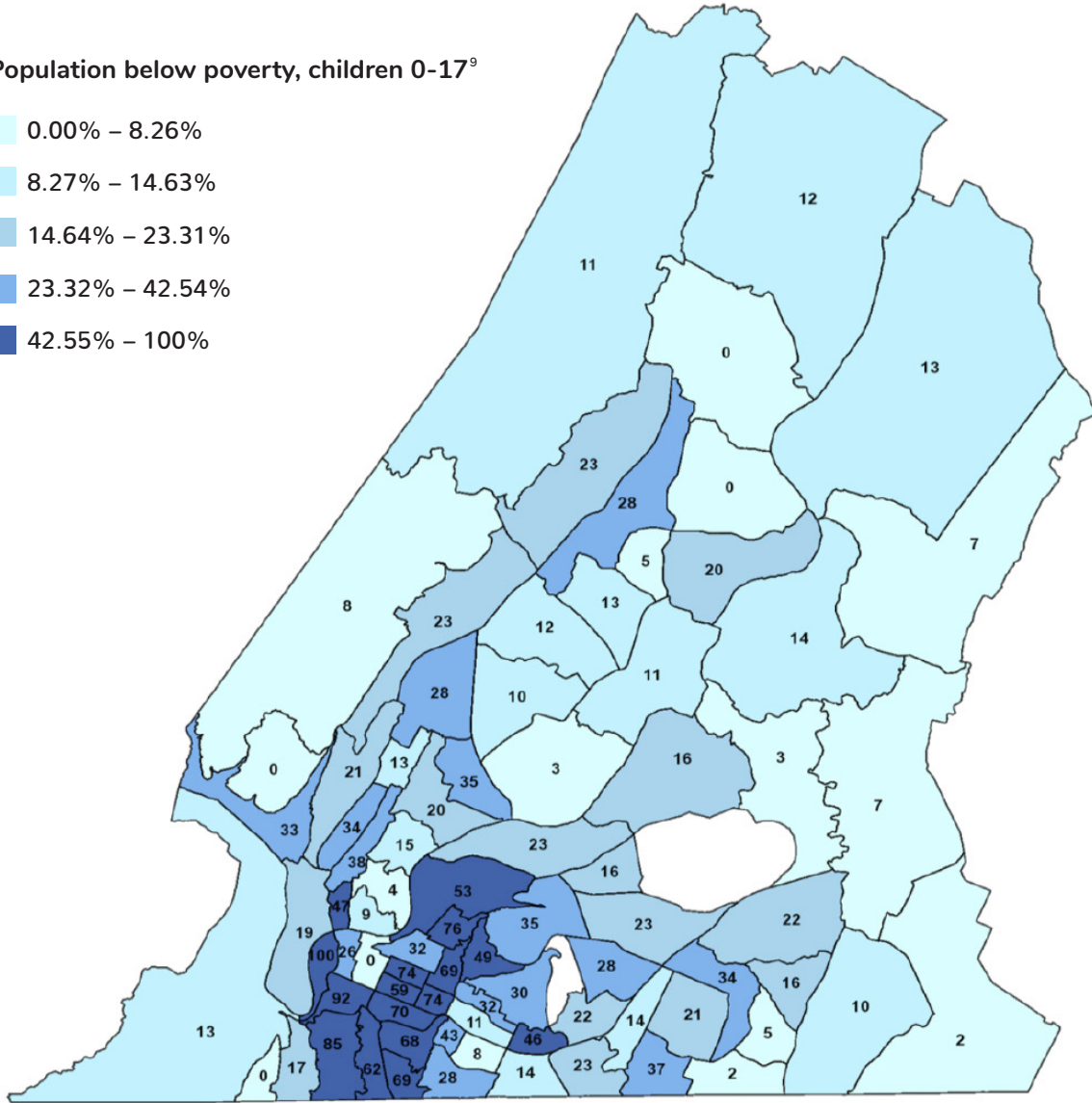
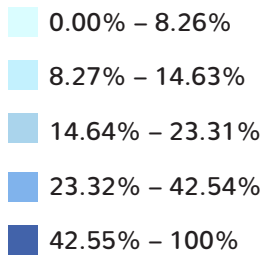
8.6% live in deep poverty (< 50% of poverty rate)

20.5% live in poverty (100% of poverty rate or less)

48.7% live in near poverty (100%–200% of poverty rate)

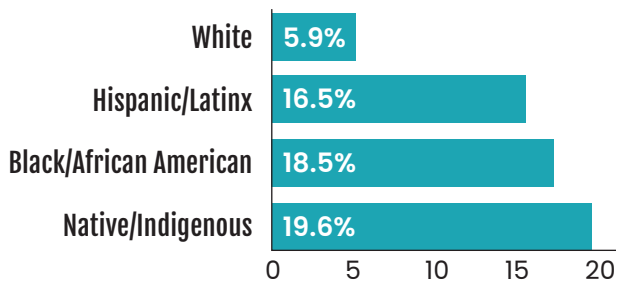
CHILDREN UNDER 18 IN POVERTY IN CHATTANOOGA-HAMILTON COUNTY BY CENSUS TRACT

Population below poverty, children 0-17⁹

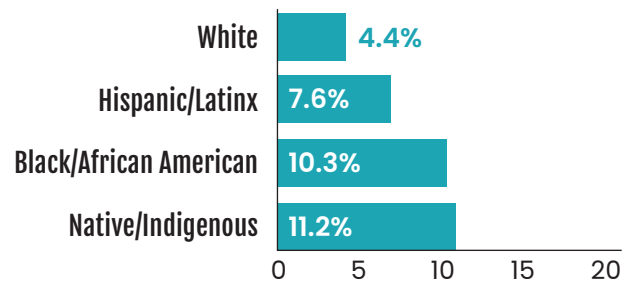


CHATTANOOGA FAMILIES BY POVERTY LEVEL (FPL) AND RACE/ETHNICITY

AT OR BELOW 100% FPL



AT OR BELOW 50% FPL



RACIAL SEGREGATION

The neighborhoods where children live and grow are both separate and greatly unequal along racial lines in ways that have profound impacts on opportunities for healthy child development and well-being.¹⁰

The lowest-income areas are **District 4 (\$24,506)** and **District 5 (\$38,178)**.

These districts also have the highest population of Black residents, at **60.35% (District 4)** and **58.35% (District 5)**.

“Many early childhood education programs are often economically segregated, and this results in an unintentional segregation of children by race and ethnicity. This segregation is also present in the greater Chattanooga community. [. . .] We need to make learning opportunities available to all young children through increased funding.”

– Parent

FOOD INSECURITY

Not having consistent access to enough food means children lack sufficient access to the nutrition they need to grow and develop. In order to achieve positive health and behavioral outcomes, all children need consistent and sustainable access to nutritious foods.

17.6%
of Chattanooga-Hamilton County’s children experience food insecurity

→ **13,140 children**

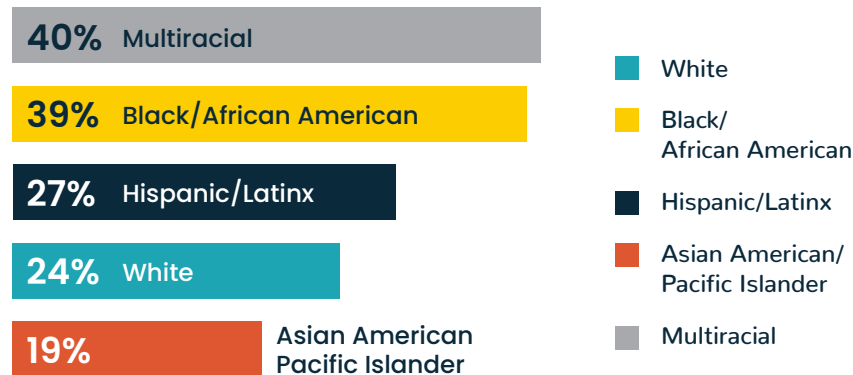
33%
of the food-insecure children in Chattanooga-Hamilton County are likely ineligible for federal nutrition programs¹¹



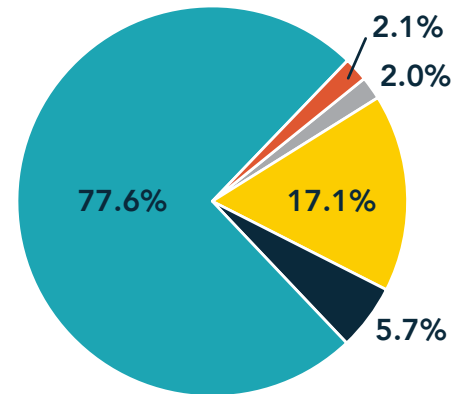
UNDEREMPLOYMENT

For many families, lack of employment means loss of income, unstable housing, and food insecurity. Young children are particularly impacted as negative events accumulate over time. Underemployment can occur for many reasons, including hiring discrimination and child care needs. These rates are not representative of the skill or desire of particular families or communities.¹²

Tennessee children whose parents lack secure employment are:



Racial demographics of Tennessee:



INFANT AND MATERNAL HEALTH DISPARITIES

The health of pregnant people and infants is a key predictor of the overall health of a community. Disparities in maternal and infant mortality demonstrate both systemic disparities and underinvestment in family support and health programs.¹³

Summary of 2016 Maternal and Infant Health Indicators by Race and Ethnicity

	Hamilton County	White	Black	Hispanic/Latinx
Number of births	4,288	3,199	943	521
Delayed or no prenatal care	38%	35%	47%	63%
Pregnancy smoking	10%	10%	11%	1%
Low birth weight	10%	8%	19%	9%
Preterm births	12%	10%	18%	12%
Teen birth rate per 1,000 females (age 15-19)	23	22	32	55
Infant mortality rate per 1,000 births*	7	5	13	0

* Infant mortality figures are based on 3-year rates (2014-2016).

<https://health.hamiltontn.org/Portals/14/DataPublications/Docs/2019%20Report%20Final%202019-02-28.docx.pdf>

Although by many accounts the landscape of Chattanooga-Hamilton County has changed for the better, many families have reason to feel forgotten.

As new jobs have been created and communities have grown, there are many opportunities for the residents of Chattanooga-Hamilton County. The revitalization of community spaces and continued investment into businesses and cultural centers positively impact the lives of children. However, along with this growth has come an increased demand for family- and child-serving services—one that has not been adequately met.

In the eyes of many families, early care

and education has seemingly been overlooked as part of the infrastructure needed to make prospering social and economic opportunities accessible to families with young children.

Families experience interconnected challenges inside and out of the education and early learning systems.

When systems fail to meet the needs of families, they put families at risk of experiencing poverty, food insecurity, lack of employment, and other challenges. In isolation, any one of these challenges can impact a family's opportunities and ability to access early care and education, but far from occurring in isolation, these challenges frequently interlock and reinforce one another. In Chattanooga-Hamilton County, families are often juggling multiple jobs and commuting with unreliable transportation, just to afford the basic things their families rely on. While resources and financial supports are available for some, many are left ineligible and must make tough choices about how they will prioritize resources to meet their family's needs. Compounding the issues, the COVID pandemic has layered on additional strife, particularly for families, early childhood programs, and communities that were already facing poverty, food insecurity, underemployment, and more. Indeed, COVID-19 laid bare the multitude of challenges that families face, the inequities that persist along lines of race and other social factors, and the pivotal role that early care and education has in stabilizing families and communities.

“I think when they were bringing these businesses in and they had all these public people, the county people, and stuff, trying to recruit these businesses and innovation, and we had the fastest internet in the country and all this stuff, I think they just forgot about that part. Forgot that all these people would be bringing families with them, and so they needed to have these other social structures in place that just weren't.”

– Parent

“There's so many children that come in [to the child care center] that they're just starving after the weekend. I would love to have some kind of way to be able for them to come by and pick up lunches or something on the weekends. They want seconds and thirds and fourths and fifths. It's sad and has gotten worse in the pandemic.”

– Provider



“It’s being pretty difficult [during the pandemic]. My children have been enrolled in child care since August or since July of 2020 and they’ve been sent home for everything. They’ve been sent home for other students’ symptoms. So, when they sent home, they’re getting sent home at 10:00, 11:00, random times in a day. So I’m having to clock out of work every time.”

– Parent

Black and brown families face an outsized impact of system challenges. Not all families and children share access to or benefit from the resources available. These disparities are seen across Hamilton County.¹⁴ From food insecurity and rates of poverty to infant and maternal health, Black and brown families experience a disproportionate negative impact. Chattanooga-Hamilton County continues to be a community that is deeply segregated by race and socioeconomic status. One-quarter of all Hamilton County schools are 90 percent or more one single race. While exact numbers are currently unknown for the early childhood sector, we know that families often choose child care near their homes, work, and older siblings’ schools in ways that would lead one to assume that racial segregation exists prior to kindergarten.



“My heart hurts for the disparities that we see over and over. I moved to the area and within the last 10 years, there’s a brand-new elementary, brand-new middle. They already had a brand-new high school and then I go to a predominantly Black area, the roof is leaking, the bathrooms are torn up. The school is old and nothing is being done.”

– Parent



“It would be lovely for me to be able to say, ‘You can move anywhere in the city of Chattanooga and your child’s educational needs will be met from birth to high school.’ And I can’t say that, which is really sad.”

– Early Childhood Leader

“We live in a city where racial conversations and equitable conversations are tough conversations. But I’m a firm believer that if you are truly doing what is right for all, and for the common good of humanity, and you believe in supporting those who have experienced disparities or have been disadvantaged, then you have to get uncomfortable with them. You can’t do the work comfortably. You have to lean into the discomfort to effect change, that is the only way.”

– City Leader





PHOTOVOICE SPOTLIGHT

Not all children and families have access to safe, high-quality recreational facilities

“Children should have safe playgrounds, regardless of what neighborhood they live in. Children need to be able to have playground areas that are accessible to all ages, disabilities, regardless of ethnicity and income status. Broken playground equipment must be addressed. No child should have to play on an unsafe playground. Playgrounds are an important part of development. When something is broken, it must be fixed. Children must have access to well-maintained and developmentally appropriate playgrounds. The gross motor skills, social skills, and language development that occurs on the playground are all so important to the success of all children. All children more than ever need physical activity for exercise, stress release, and mental health. The neighborhood that you live in should not determine the quality of playgrounds that you have access to. Chattanooga-Hamilton County can and needs to maintain playgrounds when they are broken and build accessibility, playgrounds in the neighborhoods, our children deserve it.”

– Provider & Photovoice Project Participant



“Family activities, the skate park in downtown Chattanooga is a wonderful free family activity. However, many residents are unable to enjoy the skate park due to the location and unreliable public transportation throughout the county. Free family activities are beneficial for all—it is important to have more family activities that include the entire family throughout the city. They can’t just be located downtown. We must invest in neighborhoods that are in need of new parks, skate parks, green spaces to ensure positive quality family opportunities for all.”

– Provider & Photovoice Project Participant



WHAT MAKES SENSE FOR FAMILIES IN CHATTANOOGA-HAMILTON COUNTY?

Due in large part to the strength of collaboration and advocacy efforts by Early Matters Chattanooga, there is strong support for policies that strengthen the early childhood system and understanding that early care and education is a critical need for the children and families of Chattanooga-Hamilton County. Early childhood system leaders have created a strong foundation of advocacy that drives community and political will for change. At the same time, it has become increasingly clear that leaders must do more to recognize and integrate the differing needs, values, and prevailing wisdom of families across Chattanooga-Hamilton County communities. Uncovering the truth of how families and children experience life in Chattanooga-Hamilton County and the early childhood services that are provided are key to disentangling what's best for each and every child and family and how best to achieve good outcomes particularly for those

who face systemic and historical exclusion. An over-focus on top-down solutions risks leaving out the critical knowledge that families possess about what their children need to truly thrive. To advance equitable solutions for all children, families themselves must be at the center of decision-making so that meaningful and culturally relevant solutions are created. By centering the knowledge, priorities, and agendas of families, particularly Black and brown families, we can envision beyond our current system and structures that provide needed resources and support to all families in Chattanooga-Hamilton County.



LOOKING AHEAD...

There have been continual advances in the understanding of the importance of the early years in Chattanooga-Hamilton County. While the early childhood system is not solely responsible for creating equitable conditions for young children and families in Chattanooga-Hamilton County, it is time for decision-makers to dig into why advancing equity on behalf of children and families is the right choice for all families. Investing in the early years and preventative supports is not only an investment for the future, it's the right thing to do for children. With disagreement between political leaders, decision-makers, and neighbors about what it means to build a thriving Chattanooga for all children and families, the early childhood sector can continue to improve equitable access and availability, increase program quality, support the workforce, and improve coordination between child- and family-serving systems.

ACCESS AND AVAILABILITY

In order for young children and families to thrive, they need and deserve access to early care and education services that meet their needs.

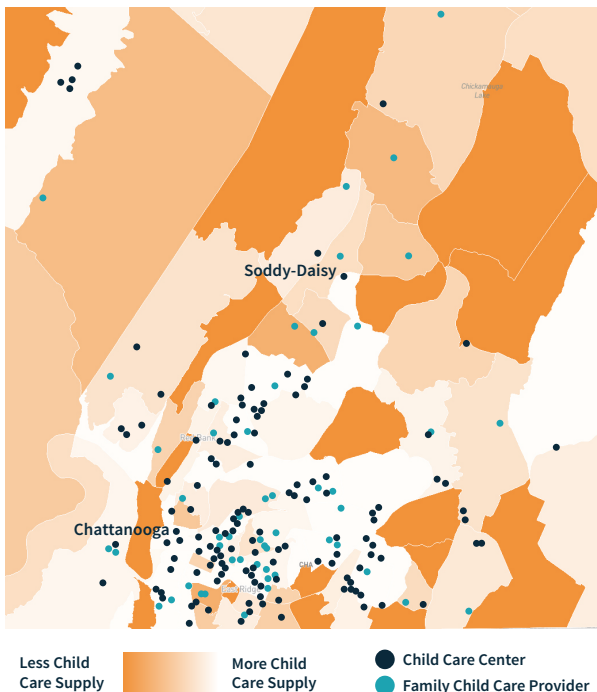
WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT ACCESS AND AVAILABILITY IN CHATTANOOGA-HAMILTON COUNTY?

There are **14,297** REGULATED CHILD CARE SPACES in Chattanooga-Hamilton County for **21,300** CHILDREN UNDER THE AGE OF 5¹⁶

→ Community leaders & state-level data suggest that there are significant access gaps.



61 PERCENT OF CHILDREN AGES 3-4 IN TENNESSEE **AREN'T ENROLLED** IN CHILD CARE OR SCHOOL



Licensed child care is concentrated in certain areas, leaving many Chattanooga-Hamilton County communities without care options close to home.

\$10,800/YEAR

The typical cost of center-based care for an infant in TN

20% of the median household income in Chattanooga-Hamilton County

72% of the income for a single parent earning minimum wage¹⁷

For families with an infant and a child in pre-K, child care costs rise to

35% of the median household income in Chattanooga-Hamilton County

129% of the income for a single parent earning minimum wage¹⁸

WHAT DID WE HEAR FROM PROVIDERS AND FAMILIES?

- Demand for early care and education continues to be greater than the supply in Chattanooga-Hamilton County
- Families struggle to access affordable and high-quality early care and education
- Families struggle to find and access care

Chattanooga-Hamilton County has worked hard to prioritize early care and education, and there is still significant work to do to ensure that all families have access.

“Now we’re getting to a place where we finally have more child care options. If you don’t have wealth and you’re not connected in Chattanooga, you at least have some options now for early learning for your kid to get off to a good start. And I think the saddest thing to me is that there are so many parents in Chattanooga who still want to make sure that their kid is off to a great start. And just can’t do it financially, or for any number of barriers that we have systematically in Chattanooga as a city in the South. And that’s kind of where we’re at. More people are getting access and opportunity, but we’re nowhere near where we need to be.”

– City Leader

WHAT IS THE CALL TO ACTION FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD LEADERS?

Envisioning a “no wrong door” approach to streamline connections to services and support families entering and navigating the early childhood system.

Creating dedicated capital resources to build supply in child care deserts by renovating current facilities and investing in existing programs.

Expanding eligibility and resources for early childhood education (ECE) “scholarships” and other efforts aimed at alleviating the financial strain of child care tuition for low- to middle-income families.

Utilizing public-private support to offer financial incentives that help providers of all types serve priority populations through the strategies named above, and/or differential payment rates, bonuses, or one-time grants.

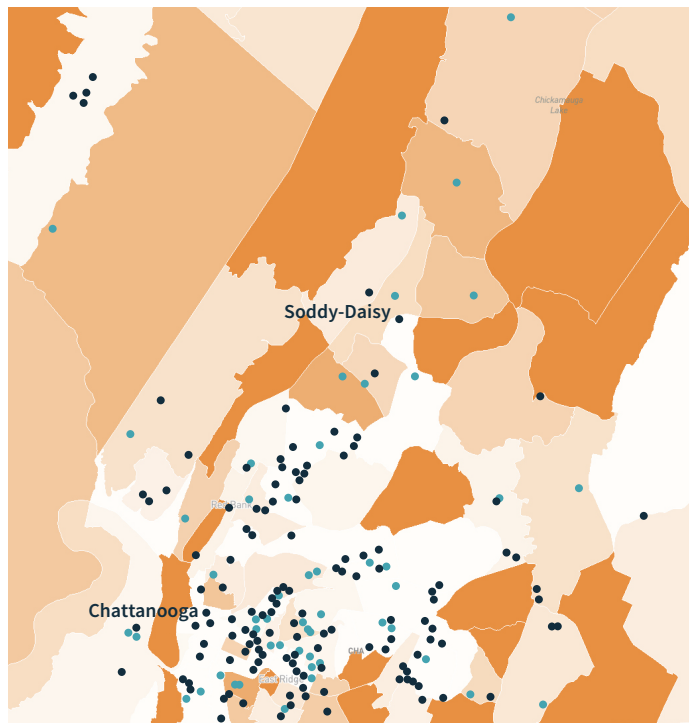


*Young children and families in Chattanooga-Hamilton County benefit from a mixed delivery system. This means that there is a variety of types of early care and education options for the varying needs and wants of families. It is important to note that **there is no local mechanism** to know the exact number of child care seats available by age and specifically for children under age 5. The availability of care above is based on regulated and licensed care as served and monitored by the Tennessee Department of Human Services and does not denote families’ ability to access seats.*



ACCESS AND AVAILABILITY

In order for young children and families to thrive, they need and deserve access to early care and education services that meet their needs.



Less Child Care Supply More Child Care Supply ● Child Care Center ● Family Child Care Provider

There are currently 14,297 regulated child care spaces in Chattanooga-Hamilton County for 21,300 children under the age of 5.^{19*} Community leaders and state-level data suggest that there are significant access gaps.

There are 202 licensed or approved child care providers in Hamilton County

202

Offer pre-K (4 years)

153

Offer toddler care (1 year – 3 years)

121

Offer infant care (less than 1 year)

17

Head Start sites

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EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION LANDSCAPE



CHILD CARE CENTERS provide care for 13 or more children. Approximately 158 child care centers are licensed in Hamilton County. Families are eligible for the child care payment assistance program, Smart Steps, if they meet income requirements and work or go to school for more than 30 hours a week, which reduces their child care cost to a co-pay based on a sliding scale.²⁰ This means a family of three must have an annual income of \$46,692 or less.

FAMILY CHILD CARE HOMES provide care for at least five but not more than seven unrelated children. Up to five additional children related to the primary caregiver may also receive care in family child care homes. Approximately 14 family homes are licensed by DHS in Hamilton County.

GROUP HOME CARE: Care provided for 8 to 12 children and multiple adults. Approximately 32 group home care providers are licensed in Hamilton County.

FAMILY FRIEND AND NEIGHBOR CARE: Care provided in a child's own home. Care that operates less than three hours a day. Care for fewer than five unrelated children.

PRE-K: Care the year before kindergarten that could be provided by the K-12 education system. Hamilton County provides voluntary pre-K for four-year-olds, with priority given to low-income families and children with other characteristics, such as experiencing homelessness or in foster care.

HEAD START: Chattanooga Head Start/Early Head Start serves 998 infants, toddlers, and preschoolers across Hamilton County. Services are offered through city-operated sites, partnerships with local high-quality child care programs, and a partnership with Hamilton County Department of Education Voluntary Pre-K. Children from birth to age five from families with low income, according to the Poverty Guidelines published by the federal government, are eligible for Head Start and Early Head Start services. This means a family of three must have an annual income of \$21,960 or less.



WHAT IS HAPPENING IN CHATTANOOGA-HAMILTON COUNTY TO SUPPORT ACCESS AND AVAILABILITY?

City leaders continue to prioritize early childhood education. In 2018 former Chattanooga mayor Andy Berke announced that the city would create 1,000 high-quality early childhood education seats by spring of 2021, a goal surpassed with 1,136 seats as of March 2021. Berke’s administration also formed the Office of Early Learning to strengthen a high-quality early learning system in Chattanooga. These new child care seats have been created through capital support for providers from the Chattanooga Office of Economic Development, and about \$800,000 in grants came from the Quality Matters Fund.²¹ During his time in office, Mayor Berke elevated early childhood to a city government department, prioritizing the young children and families of Chattanooga. The now Department of Early Learning works within the government and across the provider community to broaden and deepen early learning opportunities for Chattanooga families. Continued financial investment from the city and county and an emphasis on early childhood education from new city mayor Tim Kelly demonstrate the ongoing commitment to early childhood education.

Cross-system collaboration drives action toward increasing access to early care and education. Early Matters continues to convene systems leaders to bring voice to the needs of the system. As city leaders prioritize early childhood education, Early Matters leverages its expertise and collective power to drive the importance of increasing access to high-quality early care and education in Chattanooga-Hamilton County. Families and community leaders note that Chattanooga-Hamilton County is a giving place where there is care and concern for the well-being of children. Early childhood systems leaders are seen as advocates who have the ability to leverage their expertise and power to make real change on behalf of families.

“Without [the child care scholarship] program, I would be forced to struggle to make ends meet or to change daycare centers, which would negatively affect my children. This scholarship allows my children to attend the child development center that I know and trust, which in turn allows me to better focus on my work during the day—for it’s when my workday ends that my real job as a mother begins.”²²

– Parent



“The county became a leader in the forefront of city government offices for early learning. And within our office, we have helped to increase access to high-quality learning by at this point almost 1,200 seats within the past two years. So, over the period of four years of Mayor Berke’s last term, we’ve been able to do that. We’ve been able to provide and enhance the parent engagement component of that, and what that looks like in educating awareness and preparedness for kindergarten readiness, and early learning access.”

– Community Leader

WHAT IS NOT WORKING AS WELL AS IT SHOULD?

Families often find it difficult to locate the programs and services that are right for their families.

It is well supported in the research that early childhood programs have the greatest return on investment for children, families, and communities when intervention happens early.²³ However, there are many ways in which systems are ineffective in connecting families with timely early childhood services and supports. Families report word of mouth and relationships with their child care providers as the primary ways of connecting to early childhood resources and financial supports. While this works well for some families, it also means that those who are not already connected to the early childhood system are less likely to hear about the resources and programs they qualify for.

Many families’ first experience with the early childhood system is one of lack of availability, long waiting lists, and cumbersome enrollment processes. When these first experiences are unsuccessful and the system fails to connect families to the services they need, it erodes their trust in the early childhood system. In order to ensure that young children have care when they need it, families in Chattanooga-Hamilton County must be proactive in their search, planning, and advocacy—a challenge even for families well versed in the education system. For families who lack the time to plan, the knowledge and skills to advocate for their children, or who

“When I became pregnant with my first child, colleagues told me I needed to get on waiting lists for the ‘best’ child cares. We were on five waiting lists before my son was born. Nine months after he was born and, in another place, I got a call that a spot had finally come available over a year later. My friend who did not take the same advice to get on waiting lists early was forced to extend her unpaid maternity leave by two months before a spot came open for her.”

– Parent

experience language and other barriers to communication, navigating the early childhood system is even more complex. When the early childhood system isn't responsive to the needs of families, it can lead to costly delays in the services that young children urgently need and countless missed opportunities to promote the development, learning, and well-being of Chattanooga-Hamilton County's young children.

Families face a lack of child care options, undermining their ability to seek and retain employment.

The undersupply of early childhood services across Chattanooga-Hamilton County was a key concern of all families and providers whose perspectives and experiences are reflected in this needs assessment. Although the number of families accessing high-quality care has increased over the past four years, the additional child care seats still have not kept up with demand. In Tennessee 48 percent of children live in child care “deserts,” which is to say areas with more than 50 children under age five that contain either no child care providers or so few options that there are more than three times as many children as licensed child care slots.²⁴ In

Chattanooga-Hamilton County child care deserts exist predominately along borders of the county, with little to no licensed early care and education providers in the northern and eastern census tract.²⁵ A lack of appropriate early care and education settings not only limits early learning opportunities for young children, but also has major economic impacts for families who need reliable care in order to work. COVID-19 has made it clear that families need early care and education more than ever to reengage in the workforce and restore economic stability. Families, particularly women, are leaving the workforce because of a lack of child care. Ninety-nine percent of families surveyed in Chattanooga-Hamilton County said that their employment was adversely affected by child care gaps.²⁶

Increasing the number of seats has been an important step, but there is still a need to expand access to available seats. Without addressing the access challenges, any attempt to address availability will not reach the families most in need of support or advance sustainable and equitable increases to care. Access is how we understand the ability of families to utilize available early childhood resources. There are a variety of barriers that families face in accessing early care and education, including transportation and location, cost, the benefits cliff, and hours of operation.

“It’s a complex system, I know, but the problem is that the end result, particularly for employers as parents try to navigate through [the early childhood system], they leave the workforce. And then for companies, we’re losing talent, we’re bleeding out talent and that’s a real issue. It’s a real issue.”

– Business Leader/Parent

“There is not enough child care [in Chattanooga-Hamilton County]. When we moved to Chattanooga, my son was two and we could not find anywhere to put him in. I had him on numerous daycare wait-lists and he never got in. There’s just not enough spots, I know a lot of people on wait-lists.”

– Parent

WHAT ARE THE ACCESS GAPS?

These barriers to access illuminate the priority populations for Chattanooga-Hamilton County’s early childhood expansion efforts.*



Transportation & Location

Because child care is not readily available in all communities, some families must travel to find the care that meets their needs. When families lack reliable transportation, access gaps are created.

48% of people in Tennessee live in a child care desert, meaning that there are more than three times as many children as licensed child care spots.²⁷

“The number of kids that are involved in Head Start and early learning programming here in Chattanooga, if I remember correctly, is a little lower than you would hope. And then we have certain sections of town where you have as many as 80% of the kids are single-parent households. And so you look at the early learning spots in those areas of town, and you see they’re already behind the eight ball [because they don’t have access to early childhood programs].”

– Parent



Cost of Care

Providing high-quality child care requires significant investment in labor, training, and infrastructure. Parents pay a large portion of these costs, as public financing is inadequate and fragmented, and private and philanthropic funds are not sufficient to fill the gap.²⁸

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, **child care is affordable if it costs no more than 7% of a family’s income.**

➔ **By this standard, only 13.8% of Tennessee families can afford infant care.**²⁹

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The high cost of child care in Chattanooga–Hamilton County is changing the way families plan for their futures.

➔ Fewer than 1 in 5 reported receiving financial support for child care from either their employer or the Tennessee Child Care Payment Assistance Plan.

Less than 6% of licensed child care programs in Chattanooga–Hamilton County offer a sliding fee scale for families, where tuition is adjusted based on household income.

“Child care is expensive and that’s what has put us on hold with having another child. Luckily, my husband works, but it’s still expensive.”

– Parent



Benefits Cliff

In order to support families in the most financial need, child care subsidies and other supports have been created to offset the high cost of early care and education. However, the supports and resources do not cover all families, with many staying in low-paying jobs to maintain this benefit. While Chattanooga–Hamilton County itself does not have control over eligibility guidelines for state and federally administered programs, local policies can be conscious of benefits cliffs and tailor supplemental supports in strategic ways to narrow the gap for low to middle-income families.

“There’s also a barrier with parents who start making a little bit more money, which is the benefits cliff, that we’re dealing with. People are trying to move up the ladder, but it’s like once they start to get ahead, then their child care is taken away. You can’t afford child care just because you make \$2 more, and so that puts the family in a position where they have to choose whether they are going to stay home and take care of their child or go to work.”

– Community Leader



Hours of Operation

Families’ child care needs are often based on their work and school schedules. When programs do not provide care during their work hours, families must find alternative arrangements that add complexity to the already challenging task of seeking child care.

11% of licensed programs offer child care that extends after 6 p.m., and **less than 5%** offer child care before 6 a.m.³⁰

➔ This makes finding and accessing care for families who work nontraditional hours challenging.

“When you have two people working, he works 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., she works 3 p.m. to midnight. And how do we get our kid to the place?”

– Parent

“There are a handful of regular preschool hours. So, like the 9 to 12, 9 to 2 for the older kids, two days a week or something like that up here, but we really needed the flexibility of the full daycare option.”

– Parent



Services for Children with Special Needs

Children with special needs face an outsized challenge in accessing child care. Nationally, parents of young children with special needs are three times more likely to experience job disruptions because of lack of access to child care. This means families rely on informal and patchworked arrangements for child care, which impacts their careers and financial well-being.



It is estimated that **18% of children** in Chattanooga-Hamilton County Schools K-12 are considered special needs.

➔ Community leaders suggest that **more than 700 kindergartners** will need an individualized education program (IEP) each year.

“Children with special needs want to be included and in doing so can be easy. Children can be afraid of differences or something that seems out of the ordinary, but including children with special needs can change this perspective and help to create a more inclusive environment for all children. There are not many special needs inclusive programs within Hamilton County for pre-K children, very often children don’t know how to interact with other children with special needs, which can cause special needs children to feel isolated or left out. Hamilton County needs to start implementing more special needs programs starting in pre-K. So inclusion can start earlier. This would look like integrating special needs children into typical classrooms and providing additional training for teachers and coordination between therapists in schools. This can also start with early intervention programs throughout the county.”

– Parent

While communities and states across the nation grapple with the high cost of high-quality early learning opportunities, this awareness must be met with the public will to address the barriers that stand in the way to access. In Chattanooga-Hamilton County and across the state of Tennessee, there is still a belief among some that early care and education is a privilege and responsibility of families, not the critical infrastructure to ensure thriving communities.

WHAT IS THE CALL TO ACTION FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD LEADERS?

Decision makers have the opportunity to take action as increasing numbers of families struggle to find and access early childhood opportunities that meet their needs. As such, the county may consider the following recommendations:



Envisioning a “no wrong door” approach to streamline and support families entering and navigating the early childhood system. When service providers across the early childhood system and the community are knowledgeable and prepared to help families connect to the various services they need, information and enrollment efforts are streamlined and families can more easily navigate the system. A “no wrong door” approach ensures that at every entry point to the EC system (doctor’s office, WIC, home visitation, churches, and other community-based institutions), there is available and reliable information.



Creating dedicated capital resources to build supply in child care deserts by renovating current facilities and investing in existing programs. Increased availability of child care will depend on the local government’s willingness to fund the expansion of programs that meet the needs of families. To build availability that also builds access, the county needs to understand the true operating costs of early childhood programs, including facilities implications.

Expanding eligibility and resources for ECE “scholarships” and other efforts. There are many families whose income level makes them ineligible for subsidy but who cannot reasonably pay the full rate for early care and education in Chattanooga-Hamilton County. Expanding access to financial supports and targeting these toward families who are most impacted by the “cliff effect” can immediately narrow the pool of families for whom cost is the primary barrier to access.

Utilizing public-private support to offer financial incentives that help providers of all types serve priority populations through differential payment rates, bonuses, or one-time grants. Increasing the availability of care will have the greatest impact on families who are currently farthest from access. As an example, the county could maintain a targeted supply of funds to use for grants to address barriers for center-based and family child care providers that might be interested in starting to serve priority population families—such as the cost of special equipment and meeting safety and licensing requirements.

PROGRAM QUALITY

To realize the potential benefits of early learning, programs must be of high quality—meaning that they meet the needs of children and families and promote positive outcomes.

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT QUALITY RATED PROGRAMS IN CHATTANOOGA-HAMILTON COUNTY?

Under Tennessee's Report Card and Rated License System, every licensed child care provider must receive an annual evaluation as part of its licensing process. This program is required for all licensed providers after they have been licensed for one year.

66 PERCENT OF CHILD CARE PROVIDERS WHO OFFER INFANT CARE ARE 3-STAR ★★ ★

86 PERCENT OF CHILD CARE PROVIDERS WHO OFFER TODDLER CARE ARE 3-STAR ★★ ★

72%
of 3-star programs
are located within
Chattanooga



High-quality full-day pre-K in Tennessee costs \$10,750 per child each year³²



WHAT DID WE HEAR FROM PROVIDERS AND FAMILIES?

- Policies surrounding quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS) can have the effect of reinforcing inequitable conditions for programs and communities.
- Families and early childhood professionals have shared differing views of what quality means for young children.
- Early childhood teachers and programs need additional support to offer early learning experiences that respond to the diverse needs and characteristics of children.



PHOTOVOICE SPOTLIGHT

Bringing High-Quality Early Childhood Experiences to All Children

“All children must have access to hands-on experiences to improve the quality of their educational experience. For all children to benefit from hands-on experiences there must be an equitable distribution of resources to providers.”

– **Provider & Photovoice Project Participant**

“[We need] quality child care with supports across the board regardless of if they are in-home daycare, a for-profit daycare, a state-run daycare, regardless of that, trying to make everybody equal where all the children can receive the same quality.”

– **Provider**

“My wish is ensuring that every child has a quality, engaging, phenomenal teacher in front of them every day. So, that teacher is highly trained, highly knowledgeable about developmentally appropriate practice, and is really meeting the children’s needs during that time that they’re with them.”

– **Early Childhood Stakeholder**



WHAT IS THE CALL TO ACTION FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD LEADERS?

- **Creating channels of bidirectional communication with families** to better understand family perspectives and values surrounding early care and education settings.
- **Prioritizing flexible quality improvement resources to programs** that meet the needs of children and families yet face financial barriers to achieving high QRIS ratings.
- Increasing professional learning opportunities for early childhood teachers that **address issues of racial and cultural bias, cultural sensitivity, and meeting the needs of diverse learners.**

PROGRAM QUALITY

For young children and families, access to early care and education settings is critical, but access alone is not enough. To realize the potential benefits of early learning, programs must be of high quality—meaning that they meet the needs of children and families and promote positive outcomes. High-quality programs inspire trust and partnership with families through culturally competent family engagement, appropriate use of curriculum and instruction, and safe, nurturing environments.

QUALITY RATING AND IMPROVEMENT

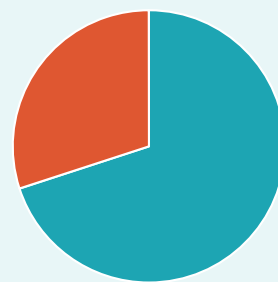
While there is no common or perfect definition of quality, state early childhood systems administer quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS) to standardize expectations and identify programs that meet quality benchmarks. In Tennessee, QRIS includes two programs—the Child Care Report Card Evaluation Program and the Star-Quality Child Care Program. The Child Care Report Card Evaluation is required for all licensed child care programs in Tennessee. As part of the licensing renewal process, the program is assessed for essential indicators of quality (e.g., health and safety, staff qualifications and compensation, and developmentally appropriate practices). The Star-Quality Child Care Program is voluntary and intended to recognize child care programs that meet higher standards of quality. Through this system, programs can receive one, two, or three stars. Each star shows that a program meets increasingly higher standards, which is intended to signal to families which programs are best equipped to provide high-quality environments and experiences for young children.

- ★ In Chattanooga-Hamilton County, there are **100 child care programs**
- ★ that have received a **rating of 3 stars.**
- ★ → This represents **67% of fully licensed child care programs in the county.**

Of the 100 3-star programs, 72 are located within Chattanooga.

This means that almost three-quarters of the programs rated as “high-quality” are concentrated in one part of the county. This suggests that programs outside of the metro center face geographic and related barriers to accessing quality improvement supports—and that highly rated programs are largely inaccessible to families in more rural Hamilton County communities.

Of 3-star programs...



70% CHILD CARE CENTERS
30% FAMILY CHILD CARE HOMES AND GROUP HOMES

This is despite modifications to ensure the relevance of indicators for home-based settings—suggesting that center-based programs have an advantage over home-based programs in achieving state-defined quality benchmarks.

QRIS represents the perspective of the state on what it means for a program to be “high-quality” and is linked with tiered child care subsidy reimbursement rates and other incentives for programs. As such, program quality ratings have significant implications for the way that states and localities resource programs, prepare educators, and provide services to children and families.

WHAT IS HAPPENING IN HAMILTON COUNTY TO SUPPORT PROGRAM QUALITY?

There are strong local models of program quality. As a county that values and works to prioritize the care and education of young children, Hamilton County boasts programs that are nationally recognized as examples of high-quality environments and practices. Signal Centers has been providing services to Chattanooga-Hamilton County for more than 60 years, offering year-round early care and education for children six weeks to five years old, providing transportation, and accommodating children with special needs. Chambliss Center for Children is also a well-recognized program offering both 24-hour child care and care for children of educators across Chattanooga. Beyond creating additional high-quality seats, the investments that the local early childhood system has made in the capacity of these exemplary child care programs enables them to then offer capacity-building resources to other early care and education programs countywide. This includes off-site operations support to smaller child care programs, child care resource and referral, and the WAGE\$ base salary supplement program.

Child care reimbursement rates are increasing.³³ As of October 1, 2021, a 10 percent reimbursement rate increase will apply to all child care providers participating in the Child Care Certificate Program. This rate change will increase access to quality child care for Chattanooga-Hamilton County families and support providers in completing the Child Care Certificate Program. Additionally, a 15 percent differential has been added for children identified with diagnosed disabilities and special needs. This means that programs serving special needs children will receive greater resources to provide high-quality care.

Chattanooga-Hamilton County makes resources available to licensed child care programs to support quality improvement. In addition to support offered through programs such as Chambliss Center and Signal Centers, the county has taken steps to offer practical and administrative resources to strengthen local programs. For example, Chattanooga’s Office of Early Learning has made enhancement grants available to programs as part of the charge to increase the availability of seats, ensuring that ongoing expansion is occurring with an emphasis on program quality. Recognizing that a program’s ability to meet the needs of young children and families rests heavily on their financial and organizational health, child care business owners can access tools and mentorship to support business management and operations, program administration, and human resources. And, in support of early learning’s role to build children’s knowledge and skills toward kindergarten readiness, the Office of Early Learning recently distributed evidence-based, kindergarten standards-aligned preschool

curriculum widely to child care centers along with technical assistance for implementation.³⁴ Within the early childhood system, there are a myriad of systemic factors that create and perpetuate financial strain for child care small businesses, leaving many without the financial resources to achieve important quality benchmarks and offer services that garner the trust of families. Therefore, a network of locally administered supports dedicated to improving facilities and practices is essential for advancing program quality.

“We’ve worked a lot in our office though to provide the creative curriculum to most of the early learning facilities that we work with, so that the children are all having the same curriculum to help kind of level the playing field there.”

– City Leader

“You want your kids to feel safe, you want your kids to feel like there’s a place for them to be. When you drop your kid off there, they’re waving bye. ‘Bye Mama, bye,’ and they don’t even care that you’re leaving. That makes your heart feel better.”

– Parent

Early childhood leaders in Chattanooga-Hamilton County work to gather family perspectives on what quality markers matter most. Throughout the current needs assessment process and prior strategic efforts, Early Matters and its partners have consistently recognized that families hold valuable and culturally informed wisdom about what is best for their children and their communities. A nuanced understanding of family- and community-driven conceptions of quality enables the county to go beyond pushing programs to achieve a unilateral set of quality benchmarks. It enables them to channel quality improvement resources in ways that are responsive to the types of settings and experiences that families want for their young children.

WHAT IS NOT WORKING AS WELL AS IT SHOULD?

Despite its founding in good intentions, policies surrounding QRIS can have the effect of reinforcing inequitable conditions for programs and communities. In Tennessee, as in many states, higher QRIS scores are linked with higher child care subsidy reimbursement rates to providers. While this tiered reimbursement structure is intended to incentivize quality, it also has the unintended effect of perpetuating quality and resource gaps between providers in higher and lower-income communities. As a result, in communities where programs rely on child care subsidies as a primary funding mechanism and cannot demand higher rates from families, programs often struggle to meet quality benchmarks. Similarly, home-based programs are often the most underresourced of settings, as they are unable to create an economy of scale and are particularly vulnerable to fluctuations in enrollment and on-time tuition payments—contributing to their underrepresentation among 3-star programs. This unfairly cuts many providers off from higher reimbursement

rates and other vital quality supports. As such, this system design perpetuates conditions where the socioeconomic characteristics of the community (i.e., income, race, and place) determines programs' access to support and resources, and thus, the quality of programming children can access in their communities. Indeed, overreliance on QRIS as a determinant of how resources are distributed to programs is one of the many ways that the early childhood system has relegated children of color and those from low-income families to underresourced early care and education settings.

“And also you have some agencies that can't afford [quality] . . . That's why we process so many grants to try to help them with their equipment, their software, and even with staff compensation to help provide high-quality early childhood education.”

– City Leader

“I will say, there are some of our child care centers that people are paying \$200 and \$300 a week that are not necessarily that good. I have seen some child care centers that don't have big buildings, don't have the gorgeous interiors, don't have any of that, and the providers are really good. So there's a disparity right there.”

– Early Childhood Stakeholder

Families and early childhood professionals have shared differing views of what quality means for young children.

Families in Chattanooga-Hamilton County who participated in the needs assessment process largely defined quality in terms of safety, a sense of belonging, and learning experiences that build curiosity and critical thinking skills. Meanwhile, early childhood teachers and program leaders seem to focus primarily on children's acquisition of academic skills and QRIS scores as measures of quality—often to the detriment of other critical developmental tasks of early childhood, such as building social-emotional skills and developing a love of learning. Furthermore, the values that Chattanooga-Hamilton County's families hold are not unitary but are deeply embedded in culture and community. While QRIS can signal to families which programs have met state-defined quality standards, it is not designed to integrate the various ways in which families identify quality across communities and cultural groups. This reality presents a need for early childhood systems to expand definitions of quality to encompass what it means to promote the positive early childhood outcomes **that families value** most.



“Now, as far as me and what I do to get my children ready for kindergarten . . . I make sure that they have their letter recognition, they can count. Actually, when we wash our hands, we count to 20, so even the little guys, the one- and two-year-olds, they’re counting to 20 because we do that every time we wash our hands, and we wash our hands a lot. And writing their names, I think it’s really important that they know their name. They know their name, they know their letters, they can count . . . That’s the way I judge how well I’m doing. When these children go off to kindergarten and they’re doing good in school, then I know I’ve done my job.”

– Home-Based Provider

“First off, I think the most important thing should be safety at a child care center. That should be the number one priority. The boundaries, looking around what was safe for your kid, the environment that your kid is going to be in, the environment, the teachers. All that type of stuff is very important before you stick your kid in a child care center. I want to go on a tour, I want to phase my kids into the classroom before they automatically go to a school you know nothing about. So, the most important thing that I look for in child care is safety, curriculum, the environment.”

– Parent

Early childhood teachers and programs need additional support to offer early learning experiences that respond to the diverse needs and characteristics of children.

While the broad distribution of preschool curriculum to child care centers benefits programs and enables more children to experience evidence-based approaches, stakeholders have offered the perspective that in order for curriculum to be effective, it must be contextualized. The developing brain is shaped by early experiences, which are rooted in children’s culture and environment.

The implications of racial identity, language, and place lead to differing learning capacities and needs. Racial and cultural bias has been shown to pervade early childhood programs and undermine high-quality teaching and learning, particularly for children of color. And many children face poverty, lack of access to resources, and toxic stress, which influence how they “show up” to their early learning programs.³⁵ Families, early childhood teachers, and leaders alike recognize that children deserve to learn and grow where both the environment and their teachers are well prepared to meet their needs—and that the system has a long way to go in making this the reality.



“I’ve heard a child went into a child care and had a tee-shirt on that said Black Lives Matter and was told to leave. Based on what I’ve heard, what I’ve seen, again, I think if you took children into the pretty buildings on that end [of town], they would squash that. They would not allow children to wear those tee shirts or stand up for their race. So, it’s going to have to be just a huge ongoing conversation always. I do believe if child care providers could really get honest with themselves, it really is about a lack of knowledge, ignorance of just not understanding some of the difficulties these children face already in such an early life, and they don’t know how to care for them. They don’t know how to deal with adverse realities.”

– Parent

WHAT IS THE CALL TO ACTION FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD LEADERS?

Advancing program quality requires leaders to respond to family and community voice and mitigate the impact of policies and practices that marginalize communities and lead to disparate child outcomes. Early childhood services cannot be considered “high quality” without a clear emphasis on providing an experience that is free of bias and attuned to the nuances of race, language, and culture, as these factors create the context for all of children’s development and learning. Simply put, a commitment to advancing equity within the early childhood system is a necessary condition for quality.

Hamilton County’s early childhood leaders are committed to advancing quality and equity within the local early childhood system by prioritizing change where it is most needed. Opportunities exist to strengthen the structures built to ensure and improve quality so that each and every child can have early learning experiences that meet their needs and set them up for success in school and in life. As such, the county may consider the following recommendations:

Creating channels of bidirectional communication with families and communities—particularly those whom the early childhood system has historically failed to reach—to better understand their needs and values surrounding early care and education settings. As the county and city continue to expand the overall capacity of early care and education programs, continuous dialogue with families can enable local early childhood leaders to prioritize the types and characteristics of early childhood care and education settings that families want most for their young children.

Prioritizing flexible quality improvement resources to programs that meet the needs of children and families yet face financial barriers to achieving high QRIS ratings. In collaboration with the local resource and referral agencies, Signal Centers, Chambliss Center, and other key partners, the county can create a network of vital financial and nonfinancial support to underresourced programs—beginning with those operating in low-income communities.

Increasing professional learning opportunities for early childhood teachers that address issues of racial and cultural bias, cultural sensitivity, and meeting the needs of diverse learners. If we generally recognize program quality as the degree to which programs meet the needs of children and promote positive outcomes, then it follows that high-quality practices for early care and education are as nuanced as young learners are diverse. Therefore, early childhood teachers must be prepared and accountable for early learning practice that is culturally competent and free of bias.

WORKFORCE

Central to the effort of expanding equitable access to high-quality early care and education are the devoted adults who teach and care for young children.

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT THE EARLY CHILDHOOD WORKFORCE IN CHATTANOOGA-HAMILTON COUNTY?

92.2 PERCENT
OF THE WORKERS
ARE FEMALE

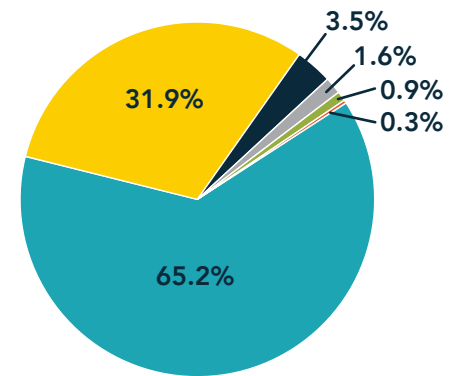
→ **964 WORKERS**



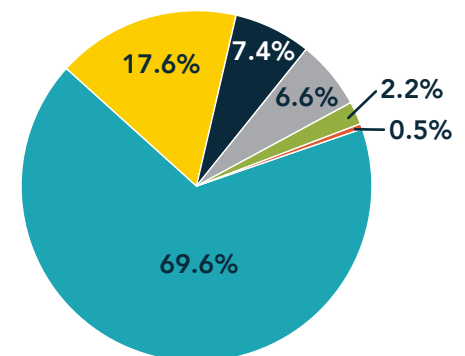
7.7 PERCENT
OF THE WORKERS
ARE MALE

→ **81 WORKERS**

Racial demographics of the workforce



As compared to total population, the racial demographics of Hamilton County are³⁶



WHAT DID WE HEAR FROM PROVIDERS AND FAMILIES?

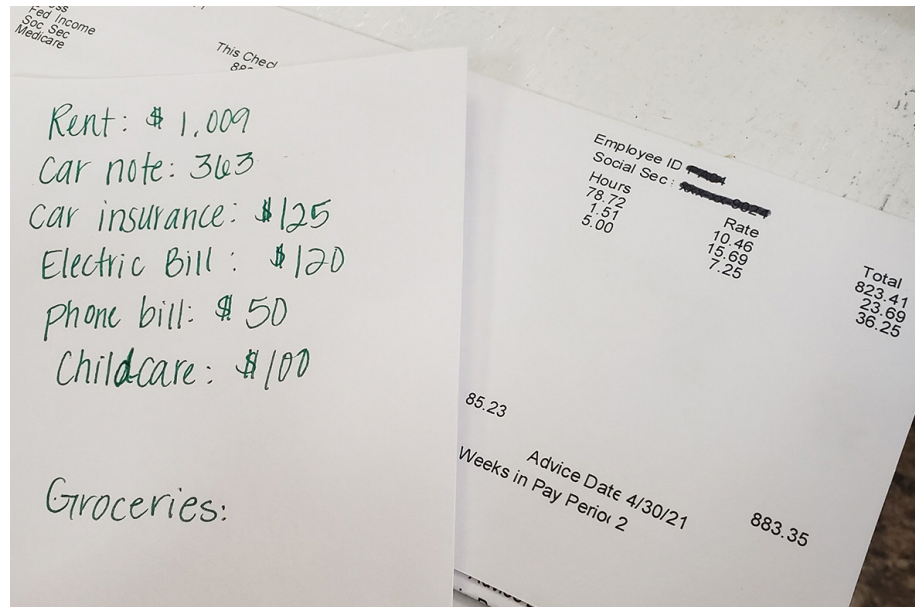
- Low wages and limited benefits hinder early childhood workforce engagement and retention.
- Early childhood teachers and providers across settings often lack adequate preparation to feel confident in the classroom. Those in unlicensed settings may lack ongoing professional supports.
- Solving the issue of high cost for providers and families is complex.



PHOTOVOICE SPOTLIGHT

Child care workers don't make enough to pay their bills

“Educators need to be valued, not just as babysitters but as professionals. There is a high need for more quality child care providers in Chattanooga. But you are seen as a babysitter that is not very well compensated. Child care workers are paid less than the fast-food sector. The labor board doesn't see it as a profession. You may decide to become a teacher because you care about



educating and the students you will be working with. You know you want to make a positive impact on someone else, but your work needs to be recognized [. . .] But early childhood workers are not seen as a professional job, and therefore are often paid less than a babysitter, not being able to afford a living. This leads to quality providers, looking for other jobs. [. . .] Early childhood workers are working with children during the time when 90% of their brains are developing. If people acknowledged the importance of early childhood experiences, they would place a higher monetary value on our workers, making the field more competitive and producing higher quality care. If we do not invest in early childhood educators now, what will we have to pay for it in the future?”

– Provider & Photovoice Project Participant

WHAT IS THE CALL TO ACTION FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD LEADERS?

- **Strengthening shared service approaches for early childhood programs** to access benefits like health insurance, early childhood mental health consultation, and administrative supports.
- **Creating peer networks that encourage collaboration** between all types of providers and the systems that serve them.
- **Collecting and elevating stories of early childhood teachers and providers** as part of state-level policy advocacy regarding compensation and other key issues affecting the workforce.

WORKFORCE

Chattanooga-Hamilton County's early childhood landscape is made up of a variety of early care and education options serving young children and families. Without well-prepared and supported early childhood teachers and providers, the early childhood system would not be able to provide and sustain high-quality early learning opportunities for the children of Chattanooga-Hamilton County or provide the care that families need to attend work and school. To be successful, early childhood teachers and providers must be supported and resourced to enter and remain in Chattanooga-Hamilton County's early childhood system.

WHAT IS HAPPENING IN CHATTANOOGA-HAMILTON COUNTY TO SUPPORT THE ECE WORKFORCE?

There is ongoing work to improve compensation and conditions for child care teachers. Beginning in April 2019, the WAGE\$ program was funded by the City of Chattanooga awarding \$75,000 in supplements to 73 early childhood educators. WAGE\$ increases teacher retention by providing early childhood educators with financial incentives for their education and continuity of employment. As a result of its success, the Tennessee Department of Human Services expanded the program statewide, and as of August 2021, WAGE\$ has provided over \$3 million dollars in salary supplements to 1,350 early childhood educators across Tennessee.

Early childhood teachers and providers have access to state-supported training and technical assistance. The Childcare Resource and Referral (CCR&R) and Tennessee Early Childhood Training Alliance (TECTA) provide an array of professional development supports. Providers who contributed to this needs assessment shared that online enrollment, free courses, and access to age-specific course content create meaningful and high-quality professional learning experiences. Providers shared that they are able to access early childhood information and receive ongoing individualized support through their Professional Evaluator (PE), who for many is their first point of contact for specific professional development needs.

“We’ve done a lot in our office to assist with providing the business owners of the child care centers. The city’s office of economic and community development has helped providers with grant and funding opportunities, assistance with completing [paperwork] for state and federal opportunities. We do things such as provider cafes to make sure that [providers] understand what they need to be doing as it relates to licensing. And we work alongside with the state of Tennessee child care licensing, and of course with our CCRNR, we work a lot to support the work that they’re helping with the child care owners as well. So just to make sure that from all angles, they know that they have support, and we try to fill in the gaps and bridge those gaps alongside with Early Matters.”

– Community Leader

WHAT IS NOT WORKING AS WELL AS IT SHOULD?

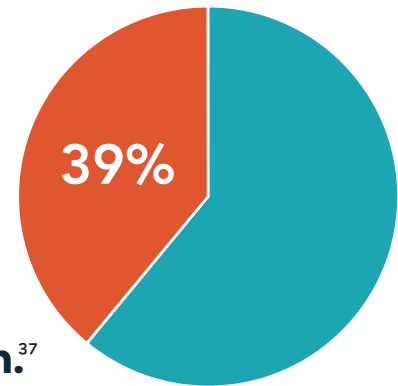
Despite initial efforts, early childhood teachers and providers suffer from chronically low compensation levels.

Low wages and lack of benefits (e.g., health insurance, paid time off, etc.) lead to educator turnover, which puts additional financial strain on programs and creates discontinuity for children and families. Low pay not only discourages talented individuals from entering the early childhood field but also keeps qualified professionals from staying and advancing inside the system. Providers and teachers are challenged to continuously provide high-quality early learning experiences when they face their own economic hardships.

Early childhood teachers and providers often feel undervalued.

Providers have shared that they rarely hear praise or encouragement from early childhood systems or community leaders. Research shows that early childhood teachers and providers feel stress at high rates; nationally, Head Start teachers report being depressed at twice the rate of the general public.³⁸ Early childhood teachers and providers know their value in the lives of young children and families but feel the disconnect because they are not recognized as a critical part of Chattanooga-Hamilton County's infrastructure and economy. While stakeholders seem to agree on the importance of early care and education and the need for high-quality providers and teachers, community leaders and teachers involved in the needs assessment process shared that they have begun to question if it's really worth it to be an early childhood teacher in Chattanooga-Hamilton County. Early childhood teachers and providers continue to balance the physical, emotional, and mental demands of their job while receiving low pay and little respect.

With the cost of care so high, **early childhood teachers and providers on average would need to spend 39 percent of their monthly income to send their children to the same programs in which they teach.**³⁷



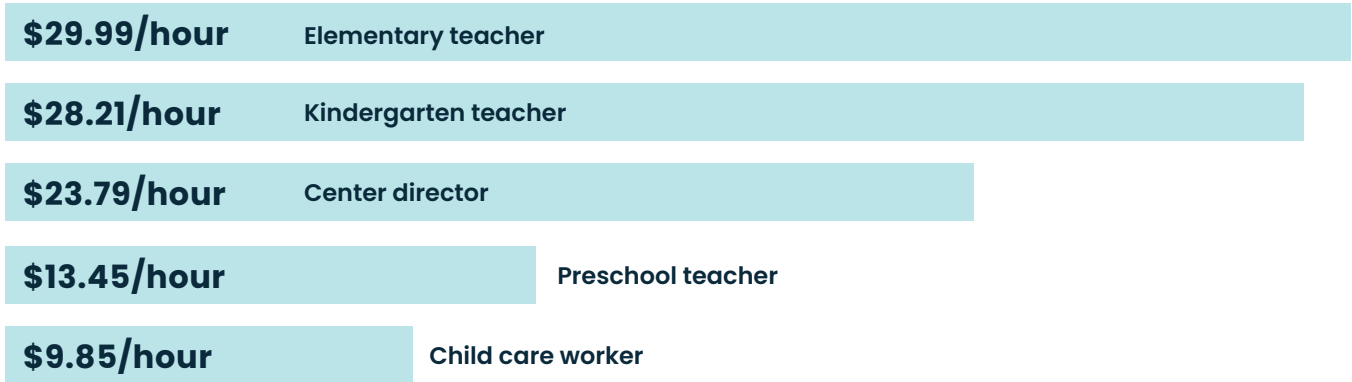
“In [child care], especially in Hamilton County, the turnover rate is very high. It’s high due to the teachers being underpaid and underappreciated for all they do. Teachers who stay pick up the slack from those who leave and the cycle continues of constant turnover. Daycare teachers are considered to be only babysitters and the change needs to start now, recognizing them as educators and so much more. When the teachers are constantly leaving and hinders the children’s development and causing them to lose their engagement while at school.”

– Provider

EARLY CHILDHOOD COMPENSATION

Early childhood teachers continue to suffer from chronically low wages.

MEDIAN HOURLY WAGES IN TENNESSEE:

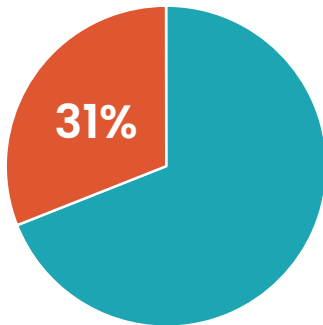


Average annual salary for an early childhood educator in Chattanooga-Hamilton County:

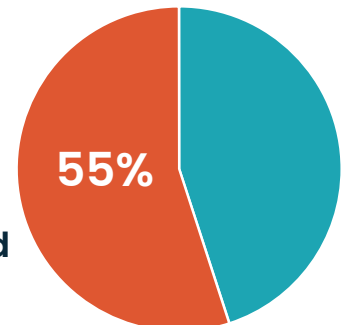
ABOUT \$21,000, WITHOUT BENEFITS



Representing **31% of a living wage** for a single parent, two-child home



Representing **55% of a living wage** for a two working adults, two-child home³⁹



The starting salary for the majority of public-school teachers in Tennessee, who play equally critical roles in developing young minds, however, is close to double that with benefits.

Poverty rate for early childhood educators in Tennessee: **22.9%**

↳ Much higher than for Tennessee workers in general (10.5%) and 10.2 times as high as for K-8 teachers (2.3%)⁴⁰

NATIONAL YEARLY AVERAGES FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS

\$26,027
WHITE EDUCATORS

\$21,571
BLACK EDUCATORS

\$5K/YEAR DIFFERENCE

The professional development supports available do not always meet the needs of early childhood teachers and providers.

Providers and teachers have shared their challenges with professional development, including content, timing, and implementation supports. As the early childhood sector continues to face high turnover rates, particularly during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, basic child development and entry-level trainings are consistently needed to ensure that teachers are ready to be in classrooms. This often leaves experienced teachers without the specialized professional development they desire to advance their practice. And there are currently no professional development supports available for family friend and neighbor (unlicensed informal) providers, despite the fact that they represent a significant portion of the workforce and play a critical role, considering the lack of accessible formal options. High turnover in conjunction with the lack of substitute teachers means that implementation supports like coaching, planning, and technical assistance are not happening regularly for those teachers who do remain. When teachers are not able to adequately plan or receive needed supports to improve their practice, not only are they less prepared to teach and care for young children, but the message is also reinforced that they are needed but not valued as educational professionals.

“It’s really difficult to get training that is really where you can take the information, put your boots to the ground, and really apply it to your everyday.”

– Provider

“The training courses we get are very similar. It seems like everything’s the same perspective, and it’s become quite a little bit boring after a while, and you know you need to get certain hours. Some topics sound so interesting, but when you get in Zoom and listen, it’s like, ‘Ah, I already know this, I already read that.’ [They don’t] make me grow. That’s not that interesting education.”

– Provider



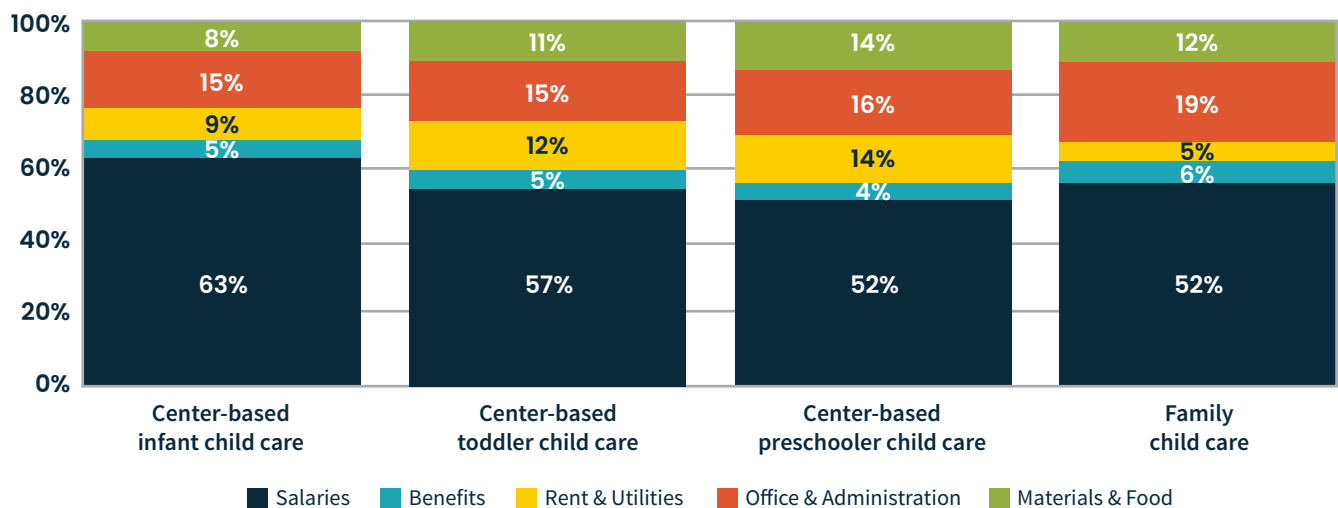
Chronic underfunding of the system and an unsustainable business model for child care leaves programs unable to pay a living wage.⁴¹ Providers, especially those who are small business owners, struggle to make ends meet for their programs. The current funding structure relies on demand and pricing, but the costs are driven by quality and administrative needs, meaning tuition rarely generates enough income to pay teachers a living wage and meet the needs of children (facilities, materials, equipment, etc.). The figure below uses national data to show the distribution of expenses in a typical child care program meeting the minimum licensing standards. Despite low pay, salaries represent the largest share of expense already. Additionally, changes in enrollment can quickly and dramatically impact their financial viability. Small center-based and home-based child care programs are highly valued by families for their ability to meet the needs of families and communities across Chattanooga-Hamilton County, but they often face real financial challenges. For programs that cannot create an economy of scale, the proportion of staff time spent on administrative activities to meet licensing and quality benchmarks means less time to devote to professional development, supervision, and coaching of early childhood teachers.

“Some of the [smaller care providers] are run by first-time business owners or local entrepreneurs, and so they don’t have the mainstream support that you might have with a franchise, or that a long-standing center may have. So there’s of course business economic hardships there, especially when you think about the populations that need the equitable high-quality learning the most. And now with COVID local entrepreneurs, being able to maintain their business in the midst of a pandemic when you’re not getting full enrollment, when you’re not having full participation from your students, there’s an economic hardship there for the business owner ”

– Provider

Salaries and benefits make up the largest share of child care program expenses

Program meeting minimum state licensing standards



SOURCE: “Where Does Your Child Care Dollar Go?” www.costofchildcare.org

WHAT IS THE CALL TO ACTION FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD LEADERS?

Considering the challenges with low pay, lack of benefits, and inconsistent professional development supports, programs are struggling to hire, support, and retain qualified early childhood teachers. The economic upheaval of COVID-19 has only deepened the impact of these issues on the early childhood community. Leaders and policymakers must work to better support existing early childhood professionals and provide intentional supports to emerging ones. Understanding this, the county may consider the following recommendations:



Strengthening shared service approaches for early childhood programs to access benefits like health insurance, early childhood mental health consultation, and administrative supports.

Economies of scale in payroll, benefits management, purchasing, and food services could result in lower costs and increased revenues to smaller programs, freeing up funds to be spent on improving quality—including compensation increases for child care teachers and providers.⁴²

Creating peer networks that encourage collaboration between all types of providers and the systems that serve them. Peer-to-peer learning opportunities have the power to reduce isolation and provide the opportunity to advance best practices. In addition to connection and collaboration, peer communities can have a strong collective voice in advocating for their needs as providers.

Collecting and elevating stories of early childhood teachers and providers as part of state-level policy advocacy regarding compensation. Storytelling provides the opportunity to humanize the complexity of the early childhood system’s challenges by bringing voice to the reality that our early childhood teachers and providers face. Compelling narratives are an effective way to move policy and provide the opportunity to center the experiences of those most impacted by the inequities in the early childhood system.

SYSTEMS COORDINATION

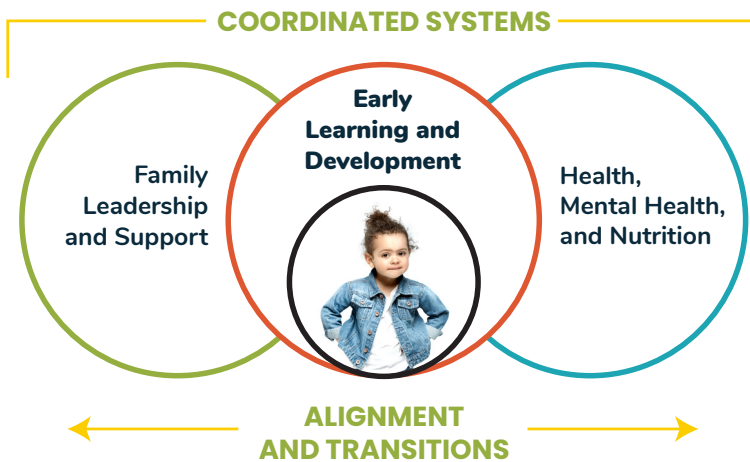
For all children and families to thrive, leaders across Hamilton County must work collaboratively to understand and address the needs of children and families.

HOW IS THE EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEM DEFINED?

During the early years, families may interact with many programs and services designed to provide early learning; health, mental health, and nutrition; and other family supports. While these services are governed through various governmental and community-based agencies and resourced by multiple federal, state, and local funding streams, it is the role of systems leadership to administer programs and services in a systematic way and ensure a streamlined user experience for children and families. Early childhood leaders need additional resources, data, and cross-sector partnership to create and sustain these conditions.



CHATTANOOGA-HAMILTON COUNTY'S EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEM



WHAT DID WE HEAR FROM PROVIDERS AND FAMILIES?

- The effectiveness and sustainability of early learning expansion efforts are limited by gaps in the collection, sharing, and usage of data.
- While cross-sector and cross-agency partnership among early childhood service providers is widely valued in theory, there is a need for leadership to support local entities in this complex work.
- Beyond collaboration within early learning and the early childhood system writ large, there is an imminent need and opportunity to engage “nontraditional” partners and allies of the early childhood system.



PHOTOVOICE SPOTLIGHT

Employers can also contribute to child care

“I think it’s great for the city to be a key player at the table, but where is the county? The county is the umbrella that touches everywhere. The city only touches a certain population or a smaller population rather. So, I think the county being a key leader in this space would be really great. The other thing is just more coordination.

And truly when we say there’s an Early Matters Coalition and I know so many who are a part of that, this is not a dig at them, but it feels very much so like they’re focusing on a certain pocket and there’s just this gap and we’re leaving so many kids behind, I think, as a part of that gap. And I know you’ve got to focus somewhere. And that being able to pull your attention towards more means you need more resources and I get that. But I think there’s got to be broader attention in this space.”

– **Community Leader**



“This dad is picking up his kid after work. His job gave him financial assistance for child care, and, thanks to that, he and his wife are able to pay for child care and continue working.”

– **Provider & Photovoice Project Participant**

WHAT IS THE CALL TO ACTION FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD LEADERS?

- **Improving the quality and accessibility of data** by working alongside various state, city, and county governing bodies; agencies; and programs.
- **Increasing the capacity of Chattanooga 2.0, Early Matters, and/or other local leadership structures** to support meaningful collaboration across agencies and programs.
- **Conducting a deep analysis of the cost of child care** by region, setting type, and other key factors.
- **Integrating supports for early childhood care and education** as a foundational component of post-COVID economic rebuilding efforts.

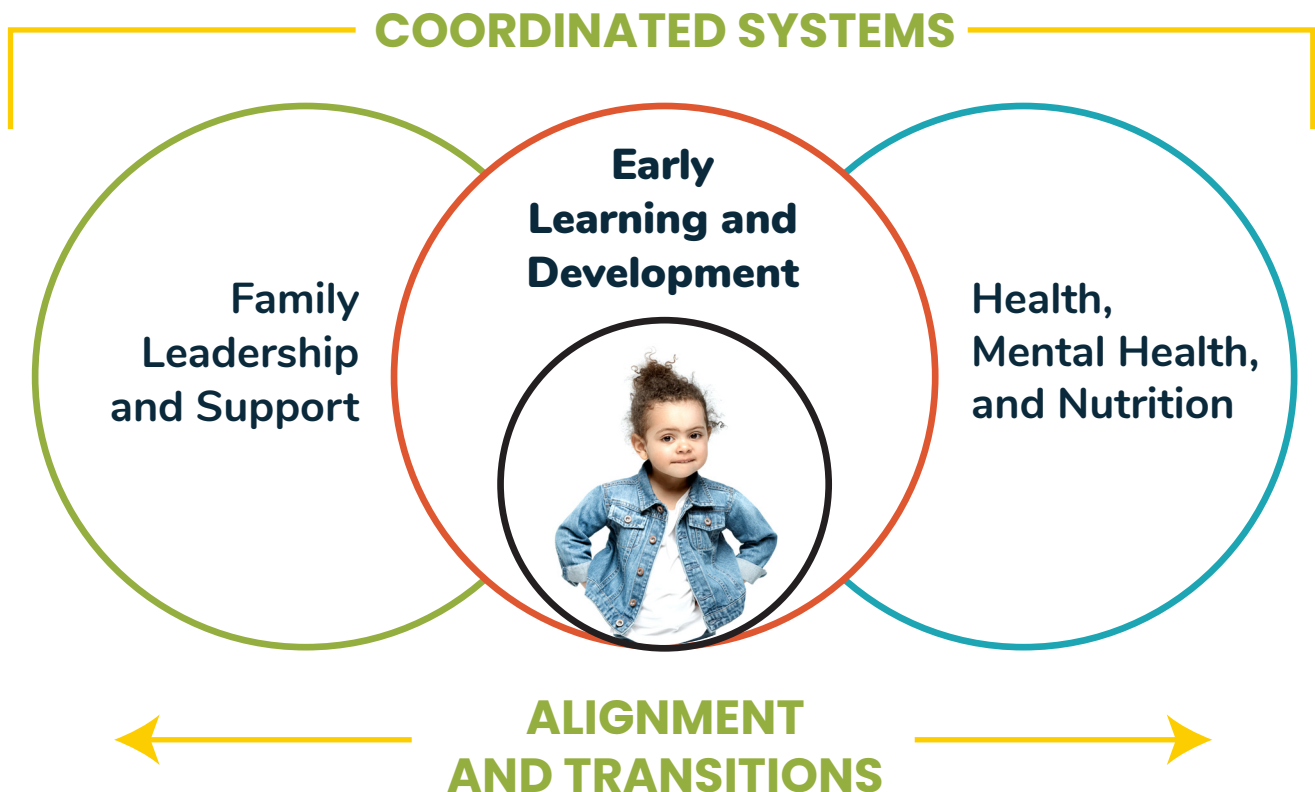
SYSTEMS COORDINATION

The success of the early care and education system relies on coordinated, well-supported, and data-driven initiatives that work to expand opportunity, reduce disparities, and improve outcomes for young children and their families. Collaborative efforts to strengthen early care and education are grounded in the belief that, for all children and families to thrive, leaders across Chattanooga-Hamilton County must work in tandem to understand and address the needs of children and families.



WHO IS WORKING TOGETHER TO SUPPORT YOUNG CHILDREN AND FAMILIES?

CHATTANOOGA-HAMILTON COUNTY'S EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEM



WHAT IS HAPPENING IN CHATTANOOGA-HAMILTON COUNTY TO SUPPORT SYSTEMS COORDINATION?

The will of Chattanooga-Hamilton County to be a strong early learning community has been evident in governmental and civic actions. In 2018, former mayor of Chattanooga Andy Berke was named co-chair of the Council on Youth, Education and Families of the National League of Cities (NLC). Mayor Berke elevated the importance of early learning for his fellow City Council members, stating, “Improving the lives of young people is the smartest and most strategic investment any city can make.” In 2017 the Office of Early Learning (OEL) was established within the City of Chattanooga Mayor’s Office to shift governance of key birth-to-five programming under singular leadership and work toward their common goals of kindergarten readiness and access to high-quality early learning experiences. The presence of OEL has provided the opportunity to further coordinate early learning and related programs and services that span the prenatal-through-age-five continuum and indicates a citywide commitment to streamlining and strengthening the early learning system. Furthering the city’s commitment to early childhood education, newly elected Chattanooga mayor Tim Kelly elevated the OEL, creating the Department of Early Learning to oversee Head Start and family child care navigators, as well as to manage partnerships with Hamilton County schools and early learning centers.⁴³

Elected officials and community leaders recognize the complexity of the family and community systems in which children learn and grow as well as the need to ensure that families are fully supported. In 2017 Hamilton County established the Children’s Cabinet, designed as a cross-sector decision-making body in support of children and families. Within the Children’s Cabinet, P-20 leaders apply a whole-child lens to positively influence child and family well-being from an educational, health, housing, public safety, and social services perspective. Led by Hamilton County mayor Jim Copping and former Superintendent of Schools Dr. Bryan Johnson, this entity enables collaboration across multiple sectors to improve access, alignment, and transitions across the spectrum of services and supports that children need to thrive. As community leaders specifically focused on outcomes for children, Chattanooga 2.0 and Early Matters look beyond early learning and seek to strengthen the full early childhood system by addressing multiple interlocking factors impacting families, early childhood programs, and the community. Their persistent efforts have led to increased awareness and support for early childhood among city and county officials and have challenged leaders to transcend programmatic “fixes” and focus on sustainable and equitable change for families, programs, and the community.

“We have one of the most giving communities in the country. As far as foundations, government, business, the resources and the dollars are here to do anything we want to do as a community, but will we create true partnerships? And will we go into the areas and partner, bring people to the table?”

– Community Leader

There is an emerging precedent for public-private partnership among early childhood stakeholders in Hamilton County. In recent years, city and county agencies have also developed partnerships with local community organizations, nonprofit organizations, and philanthropic foundations to provide early childhood services to children and families (e.g., Family Forward and Camp K). In partnership with Smart City Venture Fund, a collective body of local foundations dedicated to supporting cradle-to-career efforts, Chattanooga 2.0 (and by extension, Early Matters Chattanooga), has been able to increase services and supports to children and families through programs like the Quality Matters Fund. Public-private partnership has proven to be an important and effective strategy to enhance the sustainability of early childhood initiatives—blending multiple funding streams and creating linkages between a variety of educational, governmental, and civic interests.

WHAT IS NOT WORKING AS WELL AS IT SHOULD?

The effectiveness and sustainability of early learning expansion efforts are limited by gaps in the collection, sharing, and usage of data. To understand the needs and progress surrounding early learning and related issues more fully and make decisions that lead to positive change, **decision-makers need access to high-quality data.** For instance, there is broad agreement that more early learning program seats are needed, but it remains unclear what setting types are most appropriate and in what communities. A serious approach to the equitable expansion of early learning capacity in Hamilton County will require supply, demand, eligibility, and accessibility data that is disaggregated by socioeconomic factors (income, race, and place) and thoroughly examined in decision-making. Furthermore, the gathering and messaging of data to link child and

“If I’m a parent during COVID, I’ve been laid off, I’ve lost my mom to COVID. And I’m going back and forth with my kids, can you go to school? Can you not go to school? I mean, is it online? All of this, all while I’m trying to keep a job, get a new job or whatever. These parents are not going to click on your website and fill out the comment section. You have to go to them and ask them.”

– Community Leader

family outcomes to program participation—even on a small scale—is essential to generating the support of decision-makers and driving public will for early learning. As a key part of ongoing expansion efforts, there is an opportunity to build on this needs assessment by centralizing and leveraging data to communicate the nuances of access trends and gaps. Indeed, stakeholders know that this is possible—Hamilton County Public Schools has placed a significant emphasis on data collection to make informed decisions about the services it provides to students, and this approach can and should be expanded to early learning and related sectors as well. It is important to note that this is an area where top-down leadership that is responsive to the needs and realities of direct service providers will be essential. The burden

“[Supporting early learning access is] really expensive upfront and people here aren’t used to making that level of investment all at once. And it takes a lot of selling, like the long-term benefits that it could have. And some people don’t want to have to wait, they don’t want the delayed gratification of having a good start for our kids.”

– Community Leader

must not fall on providers whose resources are already stretched thin. Rather, it is the role of city and county leadership to create viable, user-friendly mechanisms for coordinated data collection and usage, and to forge effective partnerships with providers to ensure maximum benefit with minimum administrative burden.

While cross-sector and cross-agency partnership among early childhood service providers is widely valued in theory, there is a need for leadership to support local entities in this complex work.

One of the most challenging barriers to overcome in generating local collaboration and alignment is the reality that human and financial resources in local and community-based agencies are stretched thin. Where resources are scarce and highly regulated, programs are driven to a narrow focus on disparate, funder-specific benchmarks and lack the capacity and incentive to engage in effective partnerships. For instance, program and community leaders participating in the needs assessment were hard pressed to identify any meaningful and sustaining partnerships, or even to fully recognize how effective partnerships could benefit children and families holistically (not just their own programmatic goals). The resulting system fragmentation creates barriers for all families but has an outsized negative effect on

families who already face challenges in getting connected to the system—including those who are targeted by racial discrimination; experience poverty, homelessness, and other economic hardships; have limited English proficiency; are geographically isolated; or have children with special needs. Community partnership in support of children and families may begin with basic efforts like making referrals and sharing information across programs—but the potential for local collaborative action goes far beyond that. **The kinds of early childhood partnerships that can truly transform communities would require building trust, the sharing of resources,** data-based priorities and actions that cross-cut individual agency work plans, a commitment to expending limited staff and leadership capacity to build relationships and networks, and resources to overcome geographic barriers. For the local early childhood system to function as effectively as it could, additional dedicated effort on the part of systems leadership is needed to support and incentivize connections between early childhood service providers, create connections to vital resources and information, and build leadership capacity among local agencies.

“To me, if we’re working together, we could solve a lot of issues because if we want to really attack early childhood, we would go to the areas and stakeholders. Like I said, we work with a ton of churches, they have the facilities that are sitting there that can be used for early childhood education, but we don’t reach out to them.”

– Faith Leader

In addition to creating undue barriers for families, when the early childhood system fails to coordinate the various types of care it offers, it divides up resources in ways that can disenfranchise some stakeholders and parts of the system in favor of others. In particular, **early learning expansion efforts with a singular focus on expanding pre-K opportunities for four-year-olds can further limit the availability of much-needed infant and toddler care settings.** An emphasis on expanding or improving center-based programs risks ignoring the pressing needs of home-based child care—the setting type most often utilized by low-income families across the nation.⁴⁴ Recognizing this, there is a clear need for dedicated and well-resourced leadership to elevate equity as a priority in decision-making—applying a critical lens to identify the potential impact of policies and actions on diverse populations and supporting growth of the system in a balanced way.

Beyond collaboration within early learning and the early childhood system at large, there is an imminent need and opportunity to engage “nontraditional” partners. For decades, the early learning system has struggled to be recognized and resourced in ways that are commensurate with its potential impacts

on young children. In states and communities across the nation, early care and education is regarded as a private service instead of a public good—and the sexism and racism that pervade common perceptions of the field and its workforce have perpetuated a resistance to public support for early learning. As the tide of COVID-19 begins to ebb and local leaders turn their attention to rebuilding the local workforce economy, **the opportunity exists to clearly message the role of early care and education as part of the necessary infrastructure.**

By seeking opportunities to connect with the business, economic development, and other governmental and civic interests impacted by the presence and accessibility of early care and education, early childhood leaders can cultivate champions and allies for early learning in multiple sectors. Buy-in from cross-sector partners can lead to increased sustainability as well as innovation around some of the most persistent challenges facing early care and education.

“Some people are even afraid to have kids because they’re fearing that if I do have a child, I’m not going to be able to have a career because there are not enough seats, and they are not enough quality. So, I think employers are going to have to take on a role of solving this child care challenge in early learning and coming to the table and doing some more innovative things around that as well.”

– Community Leader



WHAT IS THE CALL TO ACTION FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD LEADERS?

The degree to which an early childhood system is coordinated has powerful, top-down implications for its accessibility, effectiveness, and sustainability. When meaningful, disaggregated data is available to decision-makers, they can plan and set goals for expansion that lead to more equitable access. When local agencies are governed with similar goals and priorities in mind, they are better able to see the benefits and opportunities for partnership. When programs function in collaborative partnership with one another, families are more likely to be connected to the system and transition smoothly between programs. And when families are continuously connected to the system, children have a better chance to thrive.



Leaders in Hamilton County and Chattanooga can strengthen coordination within and across their respective early childhood structures. Leveraging the connections and ongoing work of Chattanooga 2.0, Early Matters, Hamilton County Children’s Cabinet, and other convening entities that span the city and county, local leaders can consider the following recommendations:

Improving the quality and accessibility of data by working alongside various state, city, and county governing bodies; agencies; and programs. This includes more specific data on the reach and usage of each early care and education setting type across communities; among various racial, cultural, and income stratifications; and with quality in mind. By doing so, leaders can ensure that ongoing program improvement and expansion efforts result in families being connected to the services that best meet their needs.

Increasing the capacity of Chattanooga 2.0, Early Matters, and/or other local leadership structures to support meaningful collaboration across agencies and programs. Existing cross-agency and cross-sector leadership structures have convened and worked to build relationships with and among programs and agencies that serve young children and their families. With additional capacity and resources at their disposal, these leaders can expand their reach with community-based organizations, strengthen the “connective tissue” between partnering agencies, and build the leadership capacity needed for sustained collaboration.

Conducting a deep analysis of the cost of child care by region, setting type, and other key factors.

A “cost study” enables leaders to realize the full economic impact of participation in child care on families, identify trends and inequities in access, create connections to the locality’s broader economic development goals, and bring key findings to light in efforts to secure and allocate resources as they become available.

Integrating supports for early childhood care and education as a foundational component of post-COVID economic rebuilding efforts.

This could include strategies such as offering incentives for innovative partnerships between members of the business and child care communities to expand access and get the community back to work, leveraging the local chamber of commerce to raise support for the local child care industry, and messaging the well-researched return on investments in high-quality early learning to decision-makers and the general public.

WHAT’S NEXT?

The experiences children have during their first five years of life are critically important to their development and future success. In order to thrive, children and families need access to resources that support this time of exponential growth and learning. Early childhood leaders have a duty to strengthen and create a system that provides equitable access to early care and education opportunities for every child in Chattanooga-Hamilton County. This needs assessment provides an important starting point—outlining the early care and education needs of Chattanooga-Hamilton County’s young children and families. Moving forward, Early Matters will utilize this report in response to the needs of the early care and education sector and the young children and families it serves. It will serve as a unifying body of knowledge to advance access to early care and education and pursue the vision to be the best place in the nation for a child to be born and raised.

Early childhood leaders in Chattanooga-Hamilton County are entrusted with prioritizing the recommendations laid out in this plan. But they cannot do it without support. This report represents a commitment to action for children and families and calls on all communities, leaders, and decision makers to work together to advance these efforts. We all have a stake in this important work, and we all have a role in advancing the health and well-being of children, families, our communities, and the city-county as a whole. Children and families are the building blocks of a vibrant and dynamic Chattanooga-Hamilton County—so when it comes to ensuring that young children and their families are thriving, the time is now.

APPENDIX

The SRC study team collected qualitative data from individual or group interviews with local early childhood leaders, providers, teachers, and family members as well as from the photovoice project. The purpose of qualitative data was to better understand the needs and assets of the early learning community in Chattanooga-Hamilton County. The table below summarizes the data collection process.

DATA SOURCE	PARTICIPANTS	DATE
Document review	N/A	April–June 2021
Individual or group interviews	11 Local stakeholders and community leaders 10 Early childhood educators and providers 9 Family members	April–May 2021
Photovoice project sessions	12 Community Council members	April–July 2021

The SRC team analyzed the quantitative data through descriptive statistics and the qualitative data through inductive and deductive analysis. The use of multiple research methods and data sources allowed the team to triangulate the data and corroborate the themes identified during the analysis. *Please note that the quantitative data used is based on the county’s best understanding of the characteristics and well-being of children and families and may be evolving as COVID-19 continues to impact families and communities.*

ENDNOTES

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