

What's Next for CSC in Re-imagining Early Care and Education in Palm Beach County?

Decades of research support the importance of positive early childhood experiences and quality early care and education (ECE) in promoting children's health, school success and well-being. Today, Children's Services Council of Palm Beach County (CSC) is re-imagining how we support quality child care in Palm Beach County so all of our children have the opportunity to grow up healthy, safe and strong.

Background

Children's Services Council of Palm Beach County (CSC) invests in early care and education so families in our community can access quality child care and children are ready for kindergarten. CSC currently does this in two ways:

1. by offering scholarships and match funding to families who are financially eligible¹ (\$35 million in 2023); and
2. by providing support, training and other resources directly to child care programs through our Quality Rating and Improvement System, also called Strong Minds (\$11 million in 2023).

In 2018, funding changes at the state level gave CSC an opportunity to repurpose about \$7 million we invest directly in child care programs. (*The funds for scholarships will not be impacted.*) To ensure we included the community's voice in decision-making, CSC held a series of engagement opportunities from May through September of 2023. This series included both in-person and virtual small-group discussions and individual interviews, as well as an online platform created to connect with parents and caregivers, child care teachers, directors, staff, owner/operators, community providers, and system partners. In all, 577 residents (291 child care professionals and 286 parents/caregivers) participated in at least one platform.

Participants responded to questions about both parents' and child care staff's hopes and dreams for the children in their care, their recent experiences and the resources that may be needed to create an "ideal" setting. Participants also shared their views on what success looks like for their children, and the overall child care community in Palm Beach County.

Findings

After analyzing the information gathered from the engagements, CSC staff identified four primary themes:

1. Child Care Accessibility

Why it's important: Child care accessibility, availability, and affordability play a vital role in shaping the well-being of individuals, families, and communities because it allows parents and caregivers to participate in the workforce, supporting job stability and economic security.

What community said: Parents want affordable, available, quality child care that supports their ability to work while their children learn and grow. They say the process to apply for financial assistance is overly complicated. Child care owners/directors struggle to stay afloat financially and want parents to understand the value – and subsequent cost – of providing quality care.

¹ The Early Learning Coalition of Palm Beach County (ELC), as part of its leadership role in early learning, locally administers Florida's School Readiness and Voluntary Pre-K program which provides financial assistance to eligible parents to assist with the cost of child care.

2. Child Development and Wellness

Why it's important: Child care plays a key in supporting the learning, development and well-being of children from infancy to the time they enter kindergarten. However, many factors outside the classroom impact child wellbeing and learning including the impact of trauma, socio-economic conditions.

What community said: Parents want to ensure their child's center is clean and safe, and that teachers are nurturing, knowledgeable and experienced in child development; Teachers feel the child-teacher ratios are too high and do not take into account children needing additional care or support. Teachers have noticed a sharp post-COVID rise in children with behavioral and developmental issues. They seek resources and support to face these emerging challenges and the existing processes and resources for screening, assessment and referral and support services are not keeping up with demand.

3. Parent-Teacher Relationship and Mutual Support

Why it's important: Children benefit when parents and family members work together with early childhood professionals to support the child's learning and development.

What community said: Both parents and teachers believe a strong relationship between home and school is best for children. But parents sometimes feel unwelcome at their child's school and unappreciated by their child's teacher; While they understand the strain many families are under; teachers are often frustrated by what they see as parents' lack of follow-through and a general sense of disrespect. Both groups seek ways to communicate better so each feels respected and appreciated by the other.

4. Recruitment and Retention of Staff

Why it's important: The recruitment and retention of a qualified child care workforce plays a critical role in the quality of child care and development of children within the center.

What community said: Teachers want basic benefits and a living wage, as well as support and respect for the challenges they face every day in the classroom; Owners/directors grapple with high turnover, financial strains, ever-changing regulations and inexperienced staff.

Resident Advisory Committee

In the fall of 2023, CSC established a 16-member **Early Care and Education Resident Advisory Committee (RAC)**, made up of parents, teachers and child care owners/directors representing PBC's geographic, racial/ethnic, and cultural diversity and who engaged with CSC over the summer to work alongside CSC in developing recommendations for new services.

The RAC process included time spent on team building through sharing experiences and personal knowledge, learning about the current PBC early care and education landscape, and reviewing engagement findings before beginning discussion and prioritization. The RAC identified two key areas of focus: teacher retention and child development and wellness. Following this, CSC staff and the RAC identified potential strategies for addressing the key areas. The prioritized strategies include:

1. Incentives to improve child care teacher pay and benefits
2. Classroom supports for behavioral and developmental concerns

The identified strategies were confirmed by a majority of residents attending share-back sessions happening concurrently with RAC work. RAC members reviewed several models to address teacher retention and child development needs and, based on that work, are making the following recommendations.

Recommendations

Salary Supplement

The first recommendation is to implement a salary supplement program beginning in Spring 2025 to provide financial incentives to early childhood teachers who work with children ages birth through five in Palm Beach County to recognize their dedication and longevity in the early learning field. Supplements will:

- Be tied to training and education, longevity and CLASS assessment scores.
- Be distributed every six months directly to teachers/staff, with no minimum wait time to apply.
- Range from \$200 to \$6,000 yearly.

Child Development and Classroom Supports

The second recommendation is to provide on-site assistance in the classroom. This recommendation requires several strategies and needs additional time before rolling out. Strategies being explored include those that support all children's development; connect children with developmental and behavioral needs, and their families, to resources more quickly; build knowledge in behavior and classroom management; and strengthen parent-teacher relationships. This work is expected to begin in 24/25 and go through 26/27 as detailed below:

- Short-Term: (FY 24/25)
 - Develop and begin to offer training in social-emotional development, strengthening parent-teacher relationships, and classroom management for teachers and parents.
 - Create a resource guide/online navigation to assist teachers and parents in accessing developmental and behavioral health programs in Palm Beach County.
- Intermediate (FY 25/26)
 - Pilot child development and behavioral supports to classrooms.
- Long-term (FY 26/27)
 - If needed, recommend new services supporting behavioral health in early care and education.

Mini-Grants

The final recommendation is for one-time mini grants in FY24/25 to PBC child care programs serving children who receive public funds. These grants will assist child care programs in addressing the key issues identified from the ECE engagements while CSC prepares to implement salary supplements. This funding also responds to the loss of both the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) and the Strong Minds Tiered Reimbursement, which end in the fall of 2024.

Questions?

For specific questions or more information about CSC's Re-imagining ECE journey, and/or a full copy of the ECE Issue Brief please email reimaginingece@cscpb.org.

