

ARKANSAS EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION TASK FORCE RECOMMENDATIONS

Quality child care is essential to a thriving Arkansas economy.

Each year, our economy loses \$865 million due to child care issues, according to a U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation report. The lack of reliable and safe care options is forcing parents to significantly reduce their hours or leave the labor force entirely.

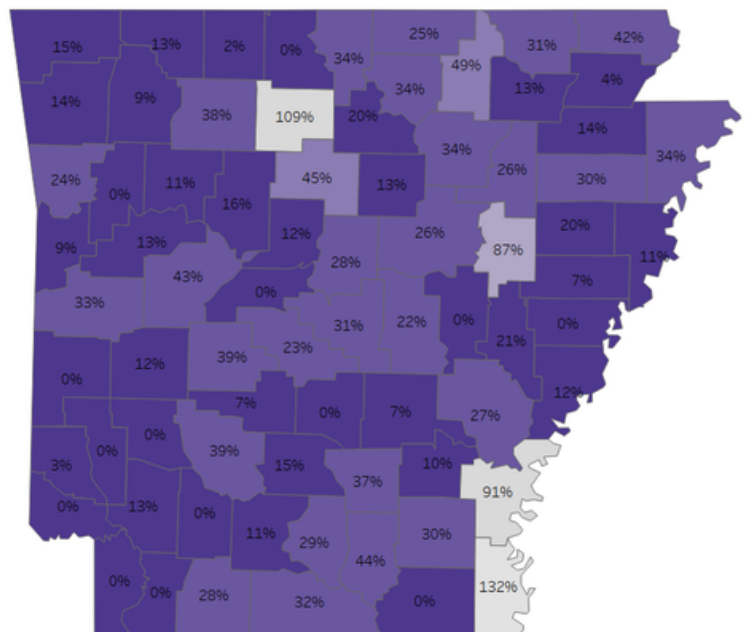
Working parents need safe, reliable, and affordable child care to build successful careers and support their families. Demand for infant and toddler care in Arkansas far exceeds supply. Right now, only 15% of parents can find high-quality care for their infants and toddlers.

Because the brain develops faster from birth to age three than any other period

in life, infants and toddlers also require stimulating learning environments with well-trained, adequately compensated professionals for their future learning, behavior, and health. In fact, in a recent statewide Excel by Eight poll, less than half of the respondents believe Arkansas children are adequately prepared for kindergarten.

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Percent of Demand for Infant/Toddler Care Met by Level 3 Programs



WHAT CAN WE DO?

In October 2020, a coalition of chambers of commerce, economic development organizations, and philanthropic groups convened the Arkansas Early Childhood Education Task Force to assess the state of early childhood education in Arkansas. The task force made the following recommendations:

01. **Support the establishment and expansion of quality child care.**

Increasing the supply of child care will drive economic growth by expanding the active labor force, supporting child care providers, and building the state's future workforce. Parents should be able to remain at their jobs and pursue employment opportunities at a time when our country is suffering from a significant labor shortage.

02. **Recognize adequate compensation is critical for early childhood educators.**

Studies show high-quality early education provides a 13 percent return on investment. These programs boost parents' employment prospects and equip our future workforce with the skills needed for real-world success. Yet, early childhood educators only earn a median wage of \$11 per hour, substantially less than other industries. Without competitive salaries and benefits, the child care industry will not be able to attract and retain the employees needed to support working families.

03. **Make child care affordable.**

Working families are the biggest consumers of child care, but high-quality programs cost more than most can afford. Therefore, many families are forced to consider the options of working and finding affordable, yet subpar, child care or leaving the workforce to provide safe and reliable child care at home. Arkansas must expand families' access to child care by reducing out-of-pocket costs. With unemployment near a historic low in Arkansas — 3.3% as of July 2022 — employers are struggling to fill positions. A mix of employer and government-funded solutions to affordable child care offerings is key to getting parents back in the workforce and ending the crisis.