Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare

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Early Care and Education Participation for Young Children in Foster Care:

Family and Staff Perspectives

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The Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare (CASCW) is located in the School of Social Work in the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Minnesota. CASCW works to improve the wellbeing of children and families involved in the child welfare system by educating and informing workers, policymakers, and the public.

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Report Overview

Study Background

The Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare and the Center for Early Education and Development at the University of Minnesota were commissioned by the Minnesota Department of Human Services to conduct a study to better understand barriers and facilitators to early care and education (ECE) participation for young children in foster care in Minnesota. This is the second of two reports presenting the findings of this mixed methods study. The first report, *Early Care and Education Participation for Young Children in Foster Care: Administrative and Contextual Insights*, presents this study's quantitative findings using the Early Childhood Longitudinal Data System (ECLDS) and qualitative perspectives from administrative-level stakeholders. It is attached to this document in Appendix C.

Findings

For this report, interviews with foster and biological families, child welfare staff, and ECE administrators were conducted to qualitatively understand barriers and facilitators to ECE participation for children in foster care. Sixty-nine participants were engaged in this study from March 2023 to April 2023.

Barriers to ECE Participation

- Barriers to ECE participation for families exist within different points of the ECE process: families reported experiencing barriers to learning about ECE programs, enrolling in ECE programs, attending ECE programs, and maintaining continuity of care in ECE programming.
- Lack of program availability was the barrier mentioned most frequently by study participants across all participant roles (foster families, biological families, child welfare staff, and ECE administrators).
- Issues with scheduling conflicts and transportation challenges were mentioned in conjunction with the lack of program availability.
- Lack of information and the lack of funding to cover ECE costs for families were additional key barriers mentioned by participants.
- Barriers were often interconnected and could have compounding impacts on one another.

Facilitators to ECE Participation

- Child welfare and ECE staff expertise and support was the biggest facilitator to ECE participation for the families in the study. Yet, participants noted that child welfare staff referring families to ECE was not systematic: families reported very different experiences based on their individual case worker.
- Existing policy prioritization mechanisms for children in foster care can facilitate ECE participation.
- Families often needed to find solutions to bridge the gaps in information and services by engaging in individual advocacy and leaning on support groups and personal networks.

Recommendations

- Build upon the information-sharing efforts of the Preschool Development Grant and other existing collaborations to increase family awareness of available ECE programs.
- Invest in robust training for child welfare and ECE staff and administrators.
- Establish statewide guidance to enhance consistent information-sharing at the local level.
- Invest in ECE programs themselves so programs can recruit, hire, and retain well-trained staff.
- Consider how transportation and scheduling impact families' ability to access ECE programs.
- Continue to make ECE access for young children in foster care a policy priority.

At the time of writing this report, several initiatives and pieces of legislation in this topic area were in discussion and/or in motion. Several changes to Minnesota policy, a number of which address some of the barriers identified in this report, were passed in 2023 and will go into effect in the following years. The findings of this report contribute essential family and staff voices to this ongoing discourse and action.

Contents

I. Executive Summary

A. Introduction

Participation in early care and education (ECE) programs has been found to increase the health and wellbeing of young children and families and could serve as an important tool to reduce educational disparities and long-term social inequities for disadvantaged children. Yet, many eligible children – like young children in foster care – are not enrolled in these programs and thus miss out on potential benefits. Despite research indicating that ECE participation can serve as a supportive pathway for achieving child welfare system goals (i.e., child safety and wellbeing), few studies have examined ECE participation rates for children in foster care, including barriers and facilitators to their participation.

To address gaps in knowledge of ECE participation rates for children in foster care, the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare (CASCW) and the Center for Early Education and Development (CEED) at the University of Minnesota were commissioned by the Minnesota Department of Human Services (DHS) to conduct a mixed methods study on ECE participation for young children (aged 0-5) in foster care in Minnesota. The purpose of the study was to better understand the barriers and facilitators of participation in ECE programs for young children in foster care in Minnesota and to present findings in an interim report and a final report to the Minnesota Legislature.

The first report from this study, *Early Care and Education Participation for Young Children in Foster Care: Administrative and Contextual Insights* (delivered in December 2022, hereafter referred to as the "Administrative and Contextual Insights report," and attached to this report in Appendix C), described the mixed methods study which used the Early Childhood Longitudinal Data System (ECLDS) and other publicly available data to present the counts and rates of ECE participation for young children in foster care, disaggregated by race/ethnicity, age, and geography. The quantitative findings of the *Administrative and Contextual Insights* report included the following information:

- A majority (56.3%) of young children in foster care were not enrolled in any ECE program in academic year (AY) 2019.[1] Participation rates for young children in foster care (43.7%) were comparable to participation rates of the general child population (44.1%) in Minnesota.
- African American/Black children in foster care had the highest rates of ECE participation (49.9%) and American Indian/Alaska Native children in foster care had the lowest rates of ECE participation (38.6%).
- Although children less than one year of age were the largest age group in foster care in Minnesota, they had the lowest rate of ECE participation (25.9%).

[1] AY 2019 was chosen as the year of focus to provide a pre-pandemic snapshot, given challenges with data reliability as well as ECE participation due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Most counties (72%) had ECE participation rates for children in foster care under 50%.
- State partners at DHS and the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) who conducted the quantitative analysis described challenges and limitations in using the ECLDS to clearly and accurately describe the counts and rates of ECE participation for young children in foster care.

The *Administrative and Contextual Insights* report also presented findings from 18 qualitative interviews with 19 key state-level stakeholders to identify the broad-level data systems, policy, and practice contexts to ECE participation for young children in foster care. Qualitative findings presented in the *Administrative and Contextual Insights* report informed the methodology for the qualitative data collection in this final report, and included the following:

- There is a need for increased and improved data collection and integration to help local and state authorities better reach, serve, and support families in accessing ECE;
- Barriers to ECE participation look different across locations because counties, districts, and programs often operate differently and have access to different resources; and
- Families may experience barriers to ECE participation across different points in the process, including barriers to learning about ECE, enrolling in ECE, engaging in ECE, and maintaining continuity of care in ECE programming.

The purpose of the current study, which is described in depth in this final report, was to increase qualitative understanding of barriers and facilitators to ECE participation for children in foster care by engaging families and local child welfare and ECE staff across Minnesota as participants in the research study. At the time of writing this report, several initiatives and pieces of legislation in this topic area were in discussion and/or in motion. The findings of this report contribute essential family and staff voices to this ongoing discourse and action.

B. ECE Program Descriptions

As defined by the legislation [*Laws of Minnesota 2021, 1st Spec. Sess., chapter 7, art. 14, section 20*], for purposes of this study "early care and education program" means: Early Head Start and Head Start under the federal Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007; special education programs under Minnesota Statutes, chapter 125A; Early Learning Scholarships under Minnesota Statutes, section 124D.165; school readiness under Minnesota Statutes, sections 124D.15 and 124D.16; school readiness plus under Laws 2017, First Special Session chapter 5, article 8, section 9; voluntary prekindergarten under Minnesota Statutes, section 124D.151; child care assistance under Minnesota Statutes, chapter 119B; and other programs as determined by the commissioner.

Brief descriptions of the publicly funded ECE programs included in this study are presented below. For detailed program descriptions, see *Appendix A: Description of ECE Programs.*

1. **Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE), Parts B and Part C:** Federally funded programs to provide support and services to infants, toddlers, and preschool children with disabilities and/or developmental delays and their families.

2. **Voluntary Pre-K (VPK)** and **School Readiness Plus (SRP):** Publicly-funded prekindergarten programs designed to prepare eligible 4-year-old children for success as they enter kindergarten the following year.
3. **School Readiness:** Preschool program designed to help prepare 3- and 4-year-olds to enter kindergarten.
4. **Early Childhood Screening:** Screening program to identify possible health or developmental concerns in infants and young children who may need a health assessment, mental health assessment, or educational evaluation.
5. **Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE):** Program for families and children designed to enhance the ability of all parents, caregivers, and other family members to provide the best possible environment for their child's learning and development.
6. **Early Learning Scholarships:** Scholarships designed to increase access to high-quality ECE programs. The following groups are prioritized: children of a teen parent pursuing a high school diploma or GED, children in foster care, children in need of child protection, or a child in a family who has been experiencing homelessness in the past 24 months.
7. **Head Start (HS)** and **Early Head Start (EHS)**: Federally-funded programs to help to prepare low-income families and young children for success and their transition to public school kindergarten.
8. **Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP):** Provides financial assistance to help families with low incomes pay for child care so that parents may pursue employment or education leading to employment, and so that children are well cared for and can thrive as learners. Children in foster care are <u>not</u> currently eligible for CCAP benefits.

C. Study Methods

From March 2023 to April 2023, the University of Minnesota research team conducted a total of 37 focus groups and interviews with 69 family and staff participants across the state of Minnesota. The University of Minnesota research team, in consultation with the Minnesota Departments of Human Services and Education, identified county human service agencies across the state of Minnesota to partner in recruitment for the study. Ultimately, eight county agencies agreed to partner in recruitment for the study, and participants from 13 counties took part in the study through additional statewide outreach in March 2023. This study was approved by and is subject to the oversight of the University of Minnesota IRB (STUDY00017517). The qualitative methods of this study are described in more detail in *Section V. Qualitative Methods*, and in depth in *Appendix B: Qualitative Methodology (Extended).*

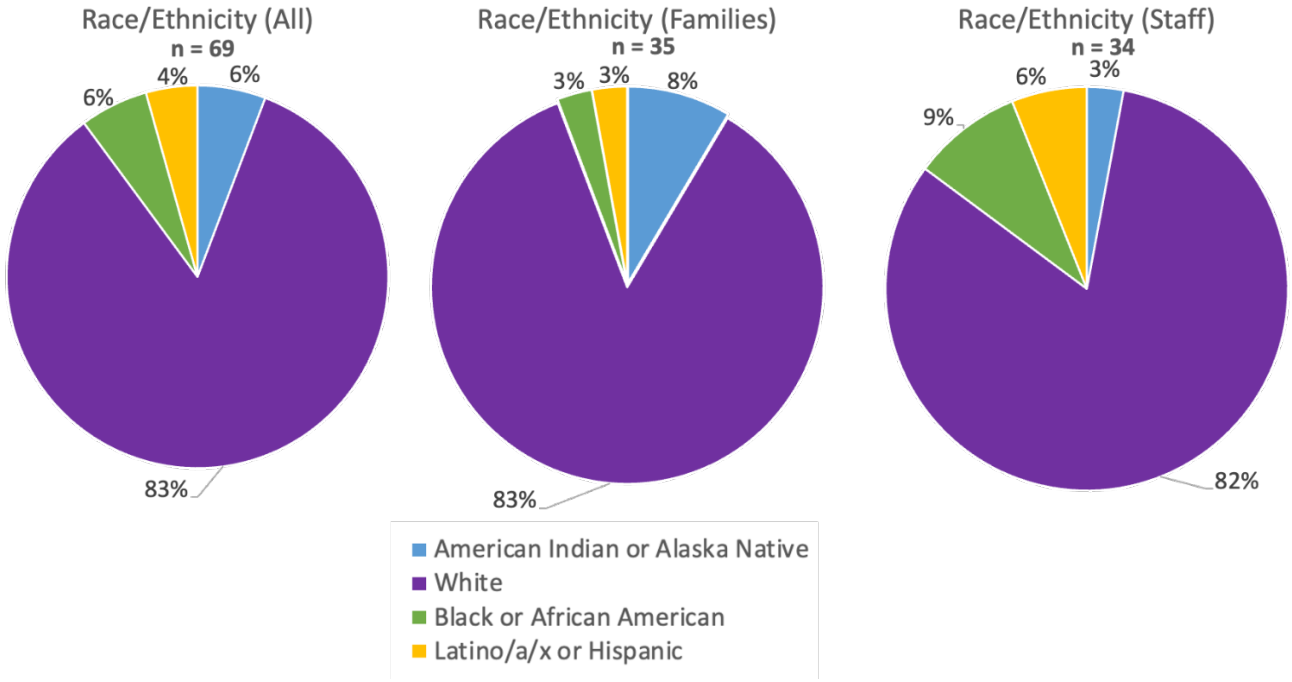
D. Data Considerations

The sampling methodology allowed the researchers to reach Minnesotans across multiple roles, counties, and regions of the state, including foster families (n=33), biological families (n=2), child welfare staff (n=19), and ECE administrators[2] (n=15); participants resided and/or worked

[2] This report uses the term "ECE administrators" as most of the ECE participants in this study were director-level individuals and would thus likely have direct awareness/knowledge of the barriers/facilitators foster families'

in 13 counties and six Minnesota Association of County Social Service Administrators (MACSSA) regions. Yet, the study faced recruitment challenges which ultimately limited the racial/ethnic diversity of the sample.

Race/Ethnicity by Total Sample, Family Participants, and Staff Participants



Note. One participant preferred not to respond. No participants identified as "Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander," "Asian," "Middle Eastern or Arab American," or "another race/ethnicity." Figure also displayed as Figure 3 in *Section VI: Participant Characteristics*.

The research team prioritized the recruitment of families and workers from counties specifically with higher Native American/American Indian and African American/Black populations, given the disproportionate involvement of these communities in the child welfare system. However, some of the county agencies that served more racially/ethnically diverse communities reported that they did not have the capacity to partner with the research team in recruitment. Study timelines further limited the ability of the research team to work more closely with additional counties and community-based organizations to expand recruitment of participants from these communities across the state. For more information on the study sample, see *Section VI: Participant Characteristics.*

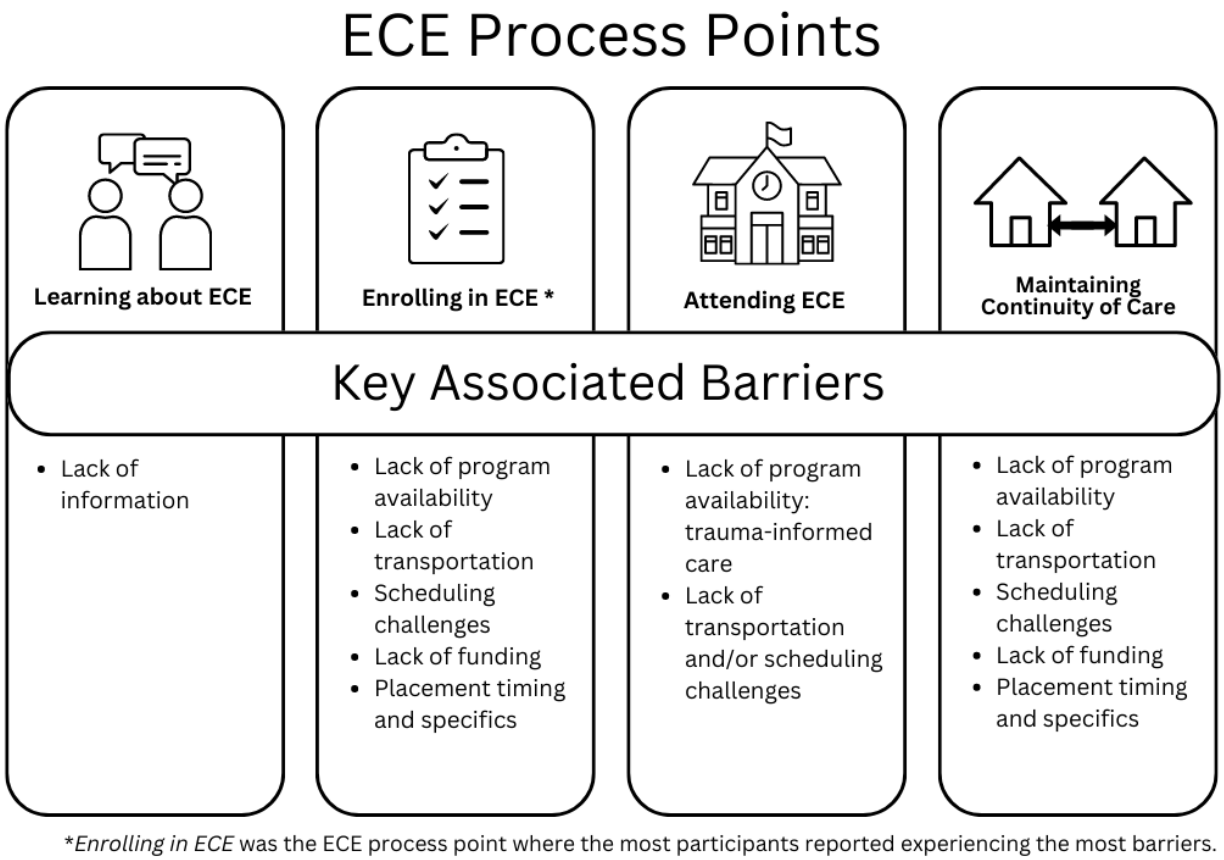
experience enrolling in and accessing the ECE programs they administer. Some ECE participants were staff-level who were involved in Early Childhood Screening and/or broader family outreach efforts. During the recruitment process, participants were asked to self-select into the study if they met the following criteria, regardless of their job title: ECE professionals with experience administering/supervising a program that, at least several times each year, serves young children in foster care; ECE professionals with some direct awareness/knowledge of the barriers/facilitators to young children (0-5) in foster care participating in early childhood education programs.

It is additionally important to note that this study focuses on county-based foster care placements, which include children from indigenous communities and may include children who were originally placed with counties that are now within a tribal system or whose case has been transferred for tribal oversight. It is necessary to conduct culturally-sensitive research with tribal communities as partners and central stakeholders; this report includes recommendations for the state to: 1) consult with tribes to determine if a study in this area is wanted by their communities, and if so, 2) fund and conduct additional community-engaged studies, in partnership with indigenous researchers, to better understand the intersection of foster care placement and participation in Tribal Early Childhood programs, such as the Tribal Early Learning Initiative and Tribal Home Visiting, and to explore strategies to reduce barriers and improve access to early care and education programs for young American Indian children in foster care. *Section XI: Considerations for Future Research* provides detailed recommendations for future research.

E. Findings: Barriers to ECE Participation

This section provides a high-level overview of the qualitative findings relating to barriers to ECE participation for young children in foster care. Interviews with stakeholders in the *Administrative and Contextual Insights* report (Appendix C) revealed that families experience barriers at different points in the ECE process, from learning about and enrolling in ECE to attending ECE and maintaining continuity of care. Thus, during data analysis for this report, the research team organized qualitative themes using a similar framework to consider how specific barriers discussed by families and staff may cluster under different points in the ECE process.

Barriers to ECE Participation Experienced within the ECE Process



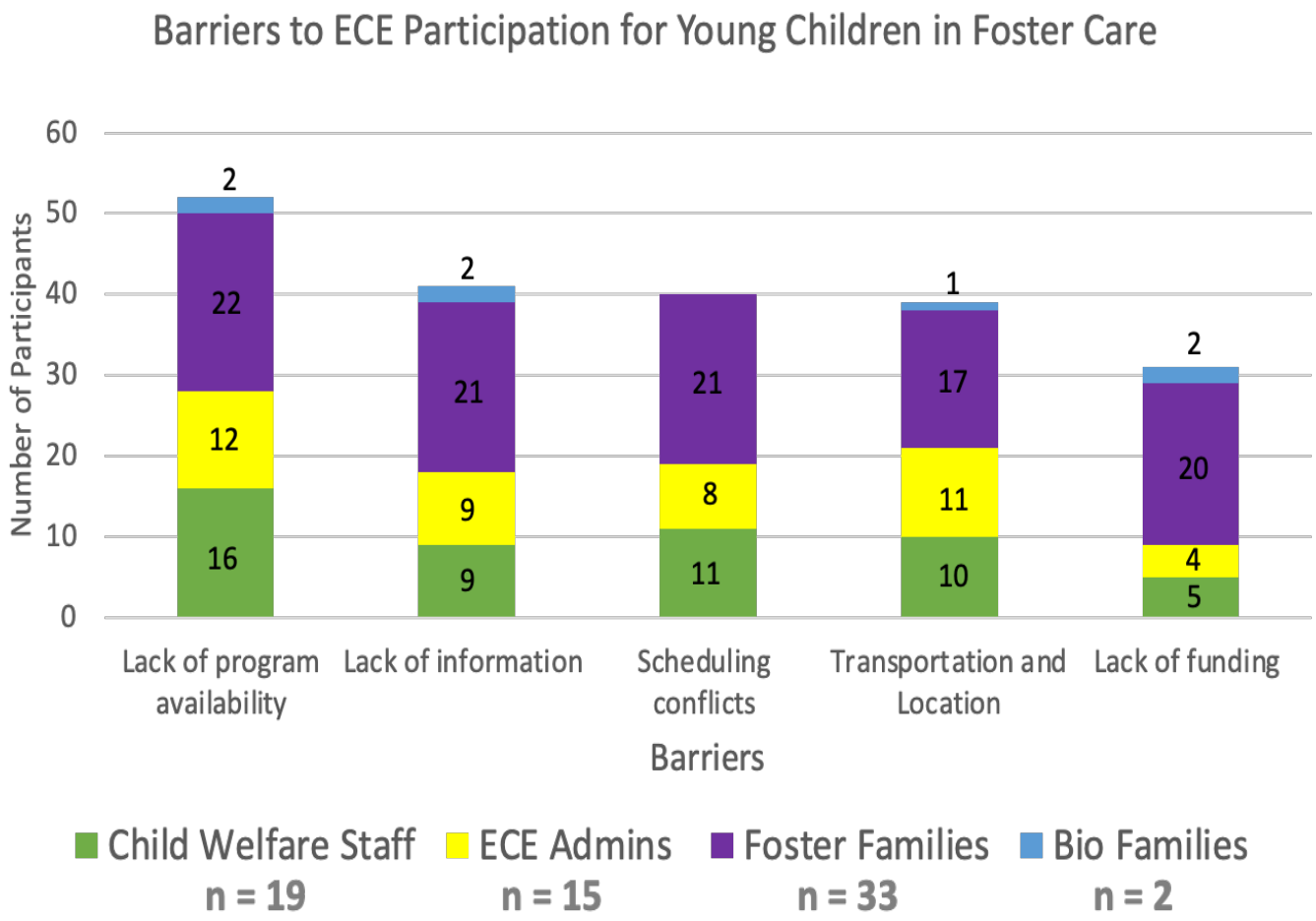
Note. Also displayed as Figure 7 in *Section VII: Findings: Barriers to ECE Participation*.

- **Barriers to ECE participation for families exist within different points of the ECE process.** Learning about ECE, enrolling in ECE, attending ECE, and maintaining continuity of care were the four process points the research team used to organize barriers and facilitators in this study. Most barriers reported by participants in this study occurred during the enrollment process, when families often had some information to enroll in ECE, but experienced additional challenges accessing funding and program seats. Participants also underscored that families enrolled in ECE may experience challenges to attending ECE, which can contribute to family stress.
- **Lack of program availability was the barrier mentioned most frequently by study participants across all participant roles.** Lack of program availability was most often cited as a barrier to enrolling in ECE. Participants highlighted the lack of ECE program spots overall (which resulted in extensive waitlists that could last for months or even years), as well as the limited number of trauma-informed and high-quality programs that accept Early Learning Scholarships. Lack of program availability can impact families' ability and/or decision to enroll in ECE.
- **Issues with scheduling conflicts and transportation challenges were also mentioned in conjunction with the lack of program availability.** These barriers were interrelated and also tied to limited services (e.g., transportation offered by programs, limited in-home

service offerings) and program schedules (e.g., half-day programs).

- **Lack of information and the lack of funding to cover ECE costs for families were additional key barriers mentioned by participants.** Family participants mentioned not receiving information from the systems they interacted with (like the child welfare system) and having to use personal networks and/or individual advocacy to gather the information they needed about ECE programs and resources (such as the Early Learning Scholarship). Some families reported not knowing about the Early Learning Scholarship, ultimately paying for child care out-of-pocket. Others noted waitlists for the Early Learning Scholarship, which further added financial burden to families and limited access to ECE programming.
- **Barriers discussed by participants are often interrelated and can have compounding impacts on one another.** For example, lack of program availability is also exacerbated for families who: have more scheduling conflicts, are looking for care during non-traditional work hours, and/or require transportation to and from programming in rural areas. The effect of interconnected, compounding barriers may create greater disparities for families trying to access ECE programming.

Barriers to ECE Participation for Young Children in Foster Care by Participant Role



Note. Also displayed as Figure 8 in *Section VII. Findings: Barriers to ECE Participation.*

The key barriers to ECE participation that were mentioned by participants in this study are consistent with the findings from similar studies in this topic area (laid out in *Section IV. Issue Overview*) and the findings from the *Administrative and Contextual Insights* report. The figure above (also displayed as Figure 8 in *Section VII. Findings: Barriers to ECE Participation*) illustrates these overarching themes by the number of participants that mentioned the barrier, and by role (e.g., foster family, n=33; biological family, n=2; child welfare staff, n=19; and ECE administrators, n=15). As indicated above, **lack of program availability was the barrier mentioned most often and was a top issue for participants in each of the four roles.** While it is interesting to consider how some key barriers were emphasized more by some roles than others, the differences across roles were not stark enough to draw concrete conclusions. Furthermore, **qualitative data are not intended to be generalizable to whole populations,** including to whole disciplines or roles. Instead, it is intended to provide greater detail about a specific situation over an identified period of time. Thus, while these subtle differences across roles may point to additional inquiries for future research, the variances seen in these qualitative data are more likely due to individual experiences and levels of expertise in this topic than broader structural or value differences across roles.

F. Findings: Facilitators to ECE Participation

This section provides a high-level overview of the qualitative findings relating to facilitators to ECE participation for young children in foster care.

- **Child welfare and ECE staff expertise and support was the biggest facilitator to ECE participation for the families in the study.** Almost half of the participants in the study highlighted the efforts and knowledge of child welfare staff and ECE administrators as important facilitators to ECE participation.
- **Participants noted that referring families to ECE was not always systematic; families reported very different experiences based on their individual case worker.** Some staff participants mentioned that they did not have the information needed to refer families to ECE systematically and/or that talking to families about ECE resources was not always required or encouraged in local agency or unit policies and culture. As a result, referrals were inconsistent as not every case worker recommended ECE to all families.
- **Existing policies and prioritization mechanisms can facilitate ECE participation.** Such policies include: federal policies that provide free enrollment and automatic eligibility in Early Head Start and Head Start for children in foster care; state policy on Early Learning Scholarships, notably the policy's specification that the scholarship follows the child when there is a change in caregivers or ECE programs which ensures that funding is available for the child's ECE participation even if a new caregiver lives in a different county or school district; and policies that prioritize children in foster care for ECE program seats (and on waitlists, if seats are not available).
- **Characteristics of local service delivery can also facilitate ECE participation.** Transportation provided by ECE programs, flexible program schedules and offering screening and programming during non-traditional hours, smooth and accessible

application and enrollment processes, and coordinated services and in-home service delivery were all mentioned by families as facilitators to ECE participation.

- **Families often needed to find solutions to bridge the gaps in information and services by engaging in individual advocacy and leaning on support groups and personal networks.** Some families reported that foster family support groups and personal networks were their only sources of information, noting that they did not receive the needed information and support to learn about and enroll in ECE programming from their interactions with child welfare and early childhood systems. Additionally, foster families discussed needing to advocate for the children in their care to receive ECE services or get into ECE programming when systems staff (child welfare or ECE) did not initiate an ECE referral or families encountered other barriers in the enrollment process.

Throughout the study, the participants — ECE educators, child welfare staff, and foster and biological parents — **demonstrated deep care** for children in foster care, and **recognized how important ECE** is for helping children in foster care and their families thrive. However, participants also acknowledged that there **must be changes** to facilitate ECE participation for young children in foster care. While there are facilitators within the existing systems that help children in foster care enroll and engage in ECE, it is important to think about **which families have the resources to overcome barriers and leverage facilitators**, and how to make ECE programs and resources accessible for all families.

G. Recommendations

This section provides an overview of the **study recommendations,** which build upon participant recommendation themes and take into consideration the research team's findings from the full extent of this study as well as current efforts in Minnesota. The participants offered several recommendations to better facilitate participation in ECE programming for young children in foster care. These recommendations can be broadly categorized into efforts to **enhance information-sharing** and **increase program and service availability**. An in-depth explanation of participant and study recommendations can be found in *Section X. Recommendations*.

Enhance Information-Sharing

- **Build upon the information-sharing efforts of the Preschool Development Grant (PDG) and other collaborations**[3] to increase family awareness of available ECE programs and resources, including the Help Me Connect[4] online navigation tool and the current community resource hubs[5] across the state.
    - In addition to these efforts, **expanding community information entry points,**

[3] CEED and CASCW have partnered to create an interdisciplinary website (https://cd4cw.umn.edu/) that shares accessible, evidence-based early childhood resources with child welfare professionals and trainers.
[4] Visit the Help Me Connect website at https://helpmeconnect.web.health.state.mn.us/
[5] Learn more about the PDG's community resource hubs by visiting https://education.mn.gov/MDE/dse/early/preschgr/local/index.htm

through healthcare settings and local departments of health, for example, could provide additional opportunities for families to learn about available ECE programs, and to see ECE programs as an important resource for child development and wellbeing.

- **Invest in robust training for child welfare and ECE staff and administrators.** Training needs were brought up by family and staff participants throughout the study, and there are different needs between disciplines:
    - **Child Welfare Staff and Administrators:** Child welfare staff are often a first touchpoint to ECE programs and resources available for families caring for children in foster care. However, family participants reported different experiences based on the specific child welfare worker assigned to their case. State guidance and support is needed to ensure that all child welfare staff and administrators in Minnesota have up-to-date knowledge of the ECE programs and resources available for children in foster care in Minnesota, as well as a foundational understanding of the importance of ECE for child development and child and family wellbeing. State guidance[6] to increase the consistency of child welfare staff and administrators' knowledge across the state may greatly impact ECE participation for young children in foster care.
    - **ECE Staff and Administrators:** Family participants similarly noted discrepancies in accessing ECE based on how trauma-informed the ECE administrators and staff were in their interactions with the children in their care and with themselves as foster parents. Trainings should build upon existing efforts in Minnesota and the work of the Preschool Development Grant (e.g., the Knowledge and Competency Framework; the Toolkit for Healing Centered Practice) and could further support efforts to ensure that ECE programs are responsive to cultural and racial equity concerns and specific needs of families caring for children in foster care.
- **Establish statewide guidance and local support to enhance consistent information-sharing at the local level.** There are a few areas where this study revealed discrepancies in information-sharing across human service agency locations and/or ECE programs:
    - **Clarify Information around Early Learning Scholarships:** Family as well as staff participants in different counties did not understand that the local (sometimes colloquial) names for the Early Learning Scholarship was indeed the Early Learning Scholarship (e.g., participants mentioned "the Northland Foundation Grant" and "the Milestone Grant" but not the Early Learning Scholarship). Ensuring that all staff and families easily understand that this resource is available across the state of Minnesota is essential, despite how (or through whom) the Early Learning Scholarship is distributed locally. To increase transparency and access to resources, such as the Early Learning Scholarships, the name of statewide initiatives should be maintained at the local level. This is

[6] In 2020, the Minnesota Department of Human Services published a report, "Quality child care and early education for children involved with child welfare services" (eDoc 7353), available at https://edocs.dhs.state.mn.us/lfserver/DHS-7353A-ENG

particularly important when considering continuity of care, should a child be reunified with their parent(s), move to another foster placement, or move into an adoptive home in another county; workers and families caring for children in foster should have an understanding that Early Learning Scholarships are a statewide offering, and not just something local to their area.

- **Establish and Support Child Welfare Agency Information-Sharing and Referral Procedures:** Not all child welfare staff participants reported engaging in systematic referrals to direct families caring for young children in foster care to ECE programs and resources. Creating statewide guidance, in addition to local supports to ensure that every staff member is providing information on ECE programs and resources to all eligible families, could increase ECE participation for families caring for children in foster care. It is critical to make this as easy as possible for child welfare staff, and to be cautious against creating another mandate without appropriate resources that could become another "checkbox" for child welfare staff. For example, the state could commit to going to local agencies to conduct any necessary trainings. The state should additionally consider how high caseloads and low staffing levels impact the ability of child welfare staff to engage in the ECE referral process, on top of other current requirements.
- **Invest in and Support Child Welfare and ECE Staff to Systematically Implement Follow-up Procedures after Referrals to ECE Programs:** Throughout the study, the researchers heard examples from ECE staff in particular that exemplified how systematic follow-up with families after a referral to ECE can be an impactful facilitator to increasing participation in ECE programs. Establishing follow-up mechanisms requires financial investment to support the staff time needed to intentionally and meaningfully engage in follow-up procedures with families after they have received a referral to ECE (i.e., having a systematic procedure for reaching out to families after a referral has been made to see how staff can support families in accessing the resources they are interested in). This investment should not be dependent upon an individual county or district's resources, and instead should be supported at the state level financially and in terms of guidance to ensure follow-up procedures are consistently efficacious across the state.

Increase Program and Service Availability

- In line with recommendations from the Great Start for All Minnesota Children Task Force[7] in their final report[8], the researchers recommend the state **invest in ECE programs themselves so programs can recruit, hire, and retain well-trained staff.** Investing in programs so they can better compensate staff could increase program

[7] Learn more about the Great Start for All Minnesota Children Task Force by visiting https://mn.gov/mmb/childrens-cabinet/great-start-childrens-task-force/

[8] The Great Start Task Force's final report is downloadable from the Task Force homepage (see 7).

capacity by 1) expanding the number of highly-qualified staff and, 2) reducing staff turnover.
    - Additionally, expanding upon Preschool Development Grant efforts to **invest in prospective ECE staff through Child Development Associate Degrees** could help increase the pipeline of qualified ECE staff in Minnesota.
- **Consider how transportation and scheduling conflicts impact families' ability to access ECE programs.** Strategies for addressing these barriers may include:
    - **Investing in safe and trauma-informed, age-appropriate, reliable transportation for young children.** Transportation should be physically and emotionally safe, age-appropriate and trauma-informed, and reliable for families and children to feel secure in the transportation service. Transportation should have all the appropriate safety equipment to keep young children physically safe and should be supervised by a professional trained in trauma-informed care for young children.
    - **Increasing the availability of in-home services.** Providing quality in-home services[9] can help families engage in ECE despite transportation limitations and/or scheduling conflicts. In-home services also support increasing families' knowledge of child development and how best to support the children in their care during typical family routines.
    - **Investing in local ECE programs to allow for non-traditional class and screening times.** Family and staff participants noted that creating alternative class times (e.g., evenings, weekends) and available times for early childhood screenings (which qualitative data from the *Administrative and Contextual Insights* report identified as one entry point to learning about ECE programs and resources) can help families engage in ECE, particularly those with challenging and/or non-traditional schedules.

Continue to Prioritize ECE Access for Young Children in Foster Care

- As emphasized in the *Administrative and Contextual Insights* report (Appendix C), for ECE participation rates to improve and be sustained over time, **it is important that ECE access for young children in foster care remain a policy priority in Minnesota**. This includes creating funding structures and system infrastructure that can be sustained long-term to support family and child wellbeing through ECE participation.
    - **Prioritization of this issue is particularly important when considering how access to resources changes for children in foster care after reunification or adoption.** While this study focused on recruiting families who currently or recently (within the last 12 months) have cared for a young child in foster care to better understand specific barriers and facilitators to ECE participation for this

[9] Relatedly, the Parents as Teachers (PAT) program was implemented in 2018 as part of Minnesota's Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) 5-year implementation plan. PAT is a home visiting program serving children from prenatal to entering kindergarten with the goals to increase parent knowledge of early childhood development, provide early detection of developmental delays and health issues, prevent child abuse and neglect, and increase children's school readiness and success. The final FFPSA implementation plan is available on the MN DHS website.

group of children, a few participants were in the reunification process or had adopted a child they had been caring for within the last year. The researchers did hear from the few participants who had gone through or were currently going through the reunification or adoption process how they lost support (e.g., from their case worker) and/or resources (e.g., financial support from agencies; prioritization status as a child in foster care) that made it difficult to maintain continuity of care in ECE programs post-reunification or post-adoption. Therefore, **it is recommended that a future study be conducted that focuses on the voices of families who have young children who *were* in foster care but have been reunified or adopted** to better understand barriers to ECE participation after the child has left foster care. Additional considerations for future research are outlined in the following section and in more detail in *Section XI. Considerations for Future Research.*

H. Considerations for Future Research

This section introduces considerations related to potential future research in this topic area to guide and refine policy. In this section, components of the legislation that were not included in this study, and recommendations for future studies that can address those areas of inquiry needed for on-going policy development and refinement are also addressed. More detailed recommendations can be found in *Section XI. Considerations for Future Research.*

Engaging Additional Stakeholders and Communities. Research studies and other data collection activities (e.g., continuous quality improvement efforts, community needs assessments) can face challenges when working to engage diverse voices across a variety of identities and lived experiences, even when researchers like those in this study use intentional recruitment strategies to engage communities. Furthermore, it is important to recognize how research studies have, at times, caused great harm to individuals, families, and communities, and the memory of this historical harm and subsequent lack of trust in institutions conducting research (government as well as academic) can impact whether or not a person chooses to participate in a study. Crucially, it can take a notable amount of participant resources, time, and effort to engage in a research study, which may hinder some persons from participating.

In this context, the research team offers the following considerations for engaging additional stakeholders and communities:

- Make sure research studies are allocated sufficient time to develop the relationships required to effectively and meaningfully engage with a variety of communities.
- Continue to consider who is most able and likely to participate in research, and how to best engage participants who are perhaps not as likely and/or able to participate.
- Make concerted efforts to coordinate studies to help ensure that families and communities are not over-tapped for similar studies over a short period of time. If it is desired to solicit feedback from families on an annual basis, this should be done in a way that is the least burdensome to families and also inclusive of families who may not have the same resources to participate in research studies.

- Transparency is crucial to building relationships and maintaining trust. Families should be informed of the information collected during every research project and how their feedback is being used to impact policy and practice throughout the state.

Culturally-focused Studies with American Indian Tribal Partners and Systems. This study focuses on county-based foster care placements, which include indigenous children and may include children who were originally placed with counties that are now within a tribal system or whose case has been transferred for tribal oversight; the legislation guiding this report does not require engagement and stakeholder feedback with American Indian Tribal partners and systems. It is recommended that the state **consult with tribes to determine if more information around the barriers and facilitators to ECE access for children in foster care has been identified as a need** within their various communities. If so, it is then recommended that the state fund a study led by tribes and indigenous researchers[10] to better understand the barriers and facilitators to ECE participation for young American Indian children in foster care, and to put forth recommendations to improve access for these children.

Any future research with tribes should build upon, and not duplicate, the tribal engagement that was a part of the Preschool Development Grant.[11] As part of this work, an Indigenous Evaluation 101 Guidebook[12] was developed by Bowman Performance Consulting (Shawano, WI) and Wilder Research (Saint Paul, MN). For more information and updates on the work under the Preschool Development Grant, visit the grant's homepage[13] on the MDE website.

Annual Reporting on Measures for Children in Foster Care. The *Administrative and Contextual Insights* report included quantitative data on counts and rates of participation in ECE programs by young children (aged 0-5) in Minnesota who have experienced foster care, as well as counts and rates of participation that were disaggregated by children's race, ethnicity, age, and county of residence. To provide this report on an annual basis, consistent funding is required to cover the staff time needed to clean and analyze the data and prepare a written report. In addition, funding and staff time must be allocated to address the limitations of the current data system that were revealed through these analyses. A complete description of these limitations is included in the *Administrative and Contextual Insights* report (Appendix C). Additional considerations are outlined in *Section XI. Considerations for Future Research*.

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[10] Research with tribes should always be led by tribes: Research should only be conducted if the tribes need and/or desire the research to be conducted and research should be led by indigenous researchers. Sufficient funding, time, and project flexibility must be allocated to build trust and relationships as a central component of any study with tribal nations. If the research is in partnership with the University of Minnesota, researchers should consult the guidebook being developed through the UMN Office of Native Affairs. More guidance for engaging in indigenous research is available via this online resource from the Center for Native Child and Family Resilience (https://cncfr.jbsinternational.com/IWOK).

[11] For more on the efforts of the Preschool Development Grant, visit the MDE website at https://education.mn.gov/MDE/dse/early/preschgr/

[12] Access the Indigenous Evaluation 101 Guidebook from the Wilder Research website at https://www.wilder.org/wilder-research/research-library/indigenous-evaluation-101-guidebook

[13] See 11.

Defining and Measuring Child Wellbeing. Given the timeline of this study and the study's focus on barriers and facilitators to ECE participation for young children in foster care, data from this research study do not address definitions and measures of early childhood wellbeing. Nor does this report include an inventory of current administrative data that may already include reliable and valid measures of wellbeing. Most, but not all, ECE programs collect authentic assessment data on young children in their care to determine the most appropriate instructional strategies to use in programming and to determine if developmental delays exist with children. These data provide some insight on the wellbeing of children in Minnesota, but the lack of consistent measures across various ECE programs makes it difficult to present an aggregate report on child wellbeing in Minnesota at this time. Future research is needed to determine how different ECE programs and communities in Minnesota define wellbeing; how administrators perceive current measures of wellbeing; and, what is needed to integrate existing and new measures into a data system that state and local organizations can easily access to guide program improvements.

II. Study Background

To address gaps in early care and education (ECE) participation rates for young children in foster care, the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare (CASCW) and the Center for Early Education and Development (CEED) were commissioned by the Minnesota Department of Human Services (DHS) to conduct a mixed-methods study on ECE participation for children under age six in foster care in Minnesota. The purpose of the study was to better understand the barriers and facilitators of participation in ECE programs for young children in foster care in Minnesota and to present findings in an interim and final report to the Minnesota Legislature. For the interim report (delivered in December 2022, attached to this report in Appendix C), the aim of the study was twofold: to quantitatively describe recent ECE participation rates for young children in foster care by race, ethnicity, age, and county of residence; and to qualitatively explore the broad-level data systems, policy, and practice context through interviews with key state-level administrative stakeholders. For this final report, the aim of the study was to engage family and local staff participants across the state to qualitatively understand specific barriers and facilitators to ECE participation, as well as recommendations to increase ECE access for young children in foster care across the state.

Study findings shared in this final report focus on specific barriers and facilitators to ECE participation for young children in foster care and participant recommendations for increasing access to quality ECE programming for families caring for children in foster care throughout the state of Minnesota. These findings, from qualitative interviews with families and staff throughout the state, are intended to inform considerations for state-level policies aimed at improving ECE access for young children in foster care through key recommendations from participants. This report also provides recommendations to inform potential future research in this topic area and more broadly in the inquiry area of child wellbeing.

III. Legislation

The following legislation describes the reporting requirement and content relevant to this report based on Laws of Minnesota 2021, 1st Spec Sess., Chapter 7, Article 14, Section 20.

Subd. 1. Reporting requirement

- The commissioner of human services shall report on the participation in early care and education programs by children under six years of age who have experienced foster care, as defined in Minnesota Statutes, section 260C.007, subdivision 18, at any time during the reporting period.
- For purposes of this study, "early care and education program" means Early Head Start and Head Start under the federal Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007; special education programs under Minnesota Statutes, chapter 125A; Early Learning Scholarships under Minnesota Statutes, section 124D.165; school readiness under Minnesota Statutes, sections 124D.15 and 124D.16; school readiness plus under Laws 2017, First Special Session chapter 5, article 8, section 9; voluntary prekindergarten under Minnesota Statutes, section 124D.151; child care assistance under Minnesota Statutes, chapter 119B; and other programs as determined by the commissioner.

Subd. 2. Report content

- The report shall provide counts and rates of participation in early care and education programs disaggregated, to the extent practicable, by children's race, ethnicity, age, and county of residence. *Completed as part of the* Administrative and Contextual Insights *report (Appendix C).*

Subd. 3. Data and collaboration

- The report shall use the most current administrative data and systems, including the Early Childhood Longitudinal Data System, and publicly available data. The report shall identify barriers to other potential data sources and make recommendations about accessing and incorporating the data in future reports. *Completed as part of the* Administrative and Contextual Insights *report (Appendix C).*
- To the extent practicable, the commissioner shall:
    - Incorporate the experiences of and feedback from children's foster families and families of origin into the content of the report; and
    - Collaborate and consult with the commissioners of health and education, county agencies, early care and education providers, the judiciary, and school districts in developing the content of the report.

IV. Issue Overview

This section provides an overview of what is currently known about ECE participation for young children in foster care.

A. ECE Participation for Young Children in Foster Care

Participation in ECE programs has been found to **positively impact school readiness** (Ansari et al., 2019; Lipscomb et al., 2013; Lipsey et al., 2018; Puma et al., 2012), child **cognitive development and health** (Lee, 2022; Camilli et al., 2010; Puma et al., 2010), **socio-emotional development** (Lee, 2022), and **early gains in school achievement** (Hill et al., 2015; Reynolds et al., 2010), as well as **increased education attainment** into adulthood (Campbell et al., 2012) and **reduced likelihood of engaging in criminal activity** in adulthood (Garcia et al., 2019). Studies have also shown that **participation in ECE programs can improve parenting practices** (Ansari et al., 2016; Vogel et al., 2013) and **parent involvement in their child's education** (Puma et al., 2010). Critically, participation in quality ECE programs has been found to be particularly **impactful for young children at a disadvantage** as measured by mothers' education level (Garcia et al., 2019), low-income status (Burger, 2010; Dinehart et al., 2012), child welfare system involvement (Dinehart et al., 2012; Hajal et al., 2019; Klein et al., 2018; Kovan et al., 2014), and/or living in foster care (Lipscomb et al., 2013; Pears et al., 2016, 2022).

Yet, MDE estimates there were **almost 41,000 children** who were eligible for but not yet receiving Early Head Start or Head Start services in Minnesota in 2021 (Minnesota Head Start Association, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic (school year 2020-2021) exacerbated under-enrollment trends, as **enrollment rates declined for Minnesota children** across Early Childhood Special Education programs, Voluntary Pre-K and School Readiness Plus programs, and statewide enrollment in kindergarten generally (Minnesota Department of Education, 2021). ECE participation for children supervised by the child welfare system is **consistently and concerningly low**, even as federal guidelines have prioritized ECE program enrollment for child welfare services-supervised children (Klein et al., 2016).

Despite the categorical eligibility and low participation rates of young children in foster care, a large portion of research exploring barriers to ECE participation has focused on low-income families, and **few studies have examined the low participation rates for children with child welfare system involvement and/or living in foster care.** For example, research from a broad Wilder Research study examining the health and wellbeing of Minnesota children found that just 28% of eligible children living in poverty were enrolled in Early Head Start or Head Start programs in Minnesota in the 2015-2016 school year (Chase et al., 2018), but the data were not disaggregated to examine participation rates among children in foster care. It is essential that this gap in knowledge be addressed and that participation rates among young children in foster care be examined: Minnesota-based studies have found that when compared to children who are low-income but not involved in the child protection system, **children with child protection system-involvement have fared worse in terms of academic achievement** (Kovan et al., 2014;

Susman-Stillman et al., 2022 *unpublished manuscript*). Concerningly, young children in the child protection system often do not receive the early interventions they need to thrive in a school environment and beyond (Lipscomb et al., 2012; Ward et al., 2009), and studies have found that **children in foster care are particularly at-risk for lower school achievement** compared to their peers in parental care (Pears et al., 2005; Piescher et al., 2014; Trout et al., 2008).

Even as research findings have indicated that ECE participation can serve as a supportive pathway for achieving child welfare system goals, such as child safety and wellbeing (Klein, 2016), several **policy and structural challenges** to the integration of early learning systems and child welfare systems still exist at federal and local levels, creating system-level barriers to ECE participation (Brodowski et al., 2016; James Bell Associates, 2015; Lee et al., 2015; Meloy et al., 2012, 2015). Studies have identified that, for children in the general population, additional **barriers to ECE participation occur on the family level**, including cost, transportation limitations, and perceptions of discrimination (Ansari et al., 2020; Beatson et al., 2022; Mitchell et al., 2017). While these barriers may have some cross-over to those experienced by families providing foster care, ultimately **little is known specifically about barriers and facilitators to ECE participation for young children (aged 0-5) in foster care**, particularly in the United States (two recent international studies explored foster caregivers' decisions to participate or not participate in ECE programs: see Cameron et al., 2020 and Metoo et al., 2020).

B. Barriers and Facilitators to ECE Participation

To date, **existing research on ECE participation has rarely focused on young children in foster care and their families.** Much of what is known about participation in ECE programs for this population has come from randomized control trials and program evaluations, which often focus on one intervention or program (like Head Start). Additionally, these quantitative studies have often limited their samples to children aged 3 or 4 (e.g., Lipscomb et al., 2013; Magnuson & Waldfogel, 2016), because they would be eligible to specifically enroll in a pre-K program. This has resulted in **limited knowledge around ECE participation for children aged 0-2**. Yet, children less than one year old are the largest age group entering the foster care system in Minnesota, making up **15.9% of annual entries** (US Children's Bureau, 2020). These quantitative studies also often lack nuanced data collection and in-depth exploration of data, which qualitative or mixed methods studies can more readily provide. The few studies that have used qualitative interviews to explore barriers and facilitators to ECE participation have restricted their examination to low-income families, families of a specific demographic or background (e.g., Latino/a immigrant families in Ansari et al., 2020), and/or have been conducted outside of the unique policy context of the United States (e.g., Beatson et al., 2022 in Australia; Meetoo et al., 2020 in England; and Mitchell et al., 2017 in New Zealand).

The few studies that have explored the barriers to ECE participation for young children in foster care have identified several **structural and systems elements** as themes in barriers to ECE participation, including: a **lack of vacancies in high-quality ECE programs** (James Bell Associates, 2015; Mitchell & Meagher-Lundberg, 2017); a **lack of understanding of the benefits of high-quality ECE programs** among child welfare and court system workers, resulting in low

referrals to ECE programs (James Bell Associates, 2015; Lee et al., 2015); challenges due to **limited collaboration** between ECE agencies and child welfare agencies, including a lack of historical collaboration and personnel turnover (James Bell Associates, 2015; Lee et al., 2015); and **issues with integrating data systems** to better understand gaps and needs around ECE participation for young children in foster care (James Bell Associates, 2015).

Policies have also been found to serve as barriers to ECE participation, such as the **variation in receipt of and accommodations granted for child care subsidies** (specifically, the federal Child Care and Development Fund program) by state and family type (e.g., families providing foster care are less likely to receive child care subsidies; Lipscomb et al., 2012; Meloy et al., 2015); and **policies that restrict ECE program eligibility and availability based on family type** (e.g., family of origin or foster family; Lee et al., 2015). A lack of stability in child care subsidies (Lipscomb et al., 2012) and foster placement changes and/or case closures (Lee et al., 2015) have also been found to create disruptions in ECE participation for children in foster care.

On the family level, two international studies found that **foster families' hectic schedules** served as barriers to ECE participation for families providing foster care (Cameron et al., 2020; Meetoo et al., 2020). Additional studies outside of the United States context and not relating specifically to children in foster care identified barriers to ECE participation including: **direct and indirect costs**, such as **fees and transportation** (Beatson et al., 2022; Mitchell & Meagher-Lundberg, 2017); a **lack of cultural relevance in ECE programming** (Mitchell & Meagher-Lundberg, 2017); and **fear and mistrust of programs** that were perceived by families to be rooted in discrimination and/or educational inequality based on race/ethnicity (Ansari et al., 2020). Finally, Mitchell & Meagher-Lundberg (2017) also illustrated that a range of personal reasons and circumstances outside of aggregate study themes additionally played a role in facilitating or hindering participation in ECE programs for individual families.

Even less has been expressly identified in the literature in terms of facilitators to ECE participation for children in foster care. Studies in Australia and New Zealand highlight that the **effective promotion of the benefits of high-quality ECE programs** can positively influence participation (Beatson et al., 2022; Mitchell & Meagher-Lundberg, 2017). Similarly, Tilhou et al. (2021) identified that **collaboration across sectors** in local communities could increase access to educational and health and wellness programs for families with children in foster care**.**

Given the limitations of what is currently understood around the barriers and facilitators to ECE participation for children in foster care, this study explores these barriers and facilitators within the local policy context of Minnesota. Using **quantitative data analysis** to provide a better understanding of the current context, and **qualitative interviews** with families, local staff, and state-level administrators, the full span of this study provides crucial insight into the barriers and facilitators to ECE participation for young children in foster care. By better understanding the **broad policy, practice, and data systems context** (shared in the *Administrative and Contextual Insights* report), in addition to the **experiences of families and local staff** in this area (shared in this final report), Minnesota policymakers and administrators will be better equipped to improve access to the benefits of ECE programming for young children in foster care.

V. Qualitative Methods

From March 2023 to April 2023, the University of Minnesota research team conducted a total of 37 focus groups and interviews with 69 family and staff participants across the state of Minnesota. The University of Minnesota research team, in consultation with the Minnesota Departments of Human Services and Education, identified county human service agencies across the state of Minnesota to partner in recruitment of participants for the study. Ultimately, eight county agencies agreed to partner in recruitment for the study and participants from 13 counties participated in the study through additional statewide outreach in March 2023. This study was approved by and is subject to the oversight of the University of Minnesota IRB (STUDY00017517).

Note. *This study focuses on county-based foster care placements, which include indigenous children and may include children who were originally placed with counties that are now within a tribal system or whose case has been transferred for tribal oversight. This report includes specific considerations for indigenous research in* Section XI. Considerations for Future Research.

A. Sampling Methodology

The quantitative data presented in the *Administrative and Contextual Insights* report did not reveal any clear patterns or trends in terms of differences in ECE participation for young children in foster care across counties or regions: a majority (72%) of counties had ECE participation rates for young children in foster care below 50%. Therefore, in January 2023, the research team developed a sampling methodology using federal **Rural Urban Commuting Area (RUCA) codes**[14] to identify public county human service agencies across Minnesota for outreach. The codes were developed by the US Department of Agriculture Economic Research Services division, and characterize U.S. census tracts using population density, urbanization, and daily commuting trends. The RUCA codes range from 1-10, with 1 being the most urban and 10 being the most rural. The codes are categorized as follows: 1-3=metro (1=metro core), 4-6=micropolitan (4=micro core), 7-9=small town (7=small town core), 10=rural. Using the classification presented by the RUCA codes allowed the research team to look at the nuance of rurality across counties in Minnesota to better understand potential access to resources by common commuting patterns, including access to ECE programs. For example, where other classifications may signify Clay County as a more rural county, the RUCA codes take into consideration commuting patterns into the Fargo/Moorhead area, which then gives Clay County a designation of "1" (metro core) in the RUCA characterizations.

County RUCA codes were examined in conjunction with the ECE participation rates laid out in the *Administrative and Contextual Insights* report (Appendix C). Counties were ultimately identified and selected for outreach in consultation with the Minnesota Departments of Human Services and Education to ensure inclusion of varied rurality (RUCA code), region of Minnesota, and rates of ECE participation for young children in foster care in the county. Efforts were also

[14] For more information on the Rural Urban Commuting Area Codes, visit www.ers.usda.gov.

made to prioritize outreach to local human service agencies in counties with high Native American/American Indian populations and African American/Black populations, given the disproportionality of involvement in the foster care system for these communities.

Initially, seven local human service agencies were identified and contacted by the research team to partner in recruitment efforts for the study. County agency administrators were sent an email detailing the purpose and processes of the study and were asked to partner in recruitment of foster families and biological families of young children in foster care being served by their agency, as well as child welfare workers at the agency who worked directly with families of young children (aged 0-5) in foster care. The research team also conducted follow-up phone calls to reach agency administrators. Administrators were asked if they would be willing to send emails to potentially eligible families and workers and/or to reach out to families via phone using email and phone scripts prepared by the research team and approved by the University of Minnesota IRB.

When agency administrators responded that they were not able to participate, the research team included additional agencies in the recruitment plan based on the criteria presented above. Through this process, 22 local human service agencies were ultimately contacted by the research team. Eight human service agencies agreed to partner in recruitment. Eight human service agencies were not able to be reached after multiple attempts to contact agency administrators. Six human service agencies declined to participate, often citing the limited capacity of staff and/or the over-saturation of research studies that had been conducted with families served by the agencies over the last few years. County agencies were offered a $1,000 honorarium to cover the cost of additional recruitment efforts. Of the eight human service agencies that partnered in recruitment, one accepted the honorarium.

To amplify the study's reach to eligible families across the state, a statewide recruitment methodology was approved by the IRB and implemented in March 2023. The research team partnered with multiple University of Minnesota schools, departments, and research centers, the Minnesota Association of County Social Services Administrators (MACSSA) regional chairs, and several local and statewide community-based organizations that serve families with children in foster care or child welfare system involvement to get the word out to families via listservs, newsletters, and social media posts. When recruitment and data collection ended in April 2023, participants from 13 counties had engaged in the study through focus groups or interviews (Table 1).

Table 1. Participating Counties by RUCA Code and ECE Participation Rate during AY 2019

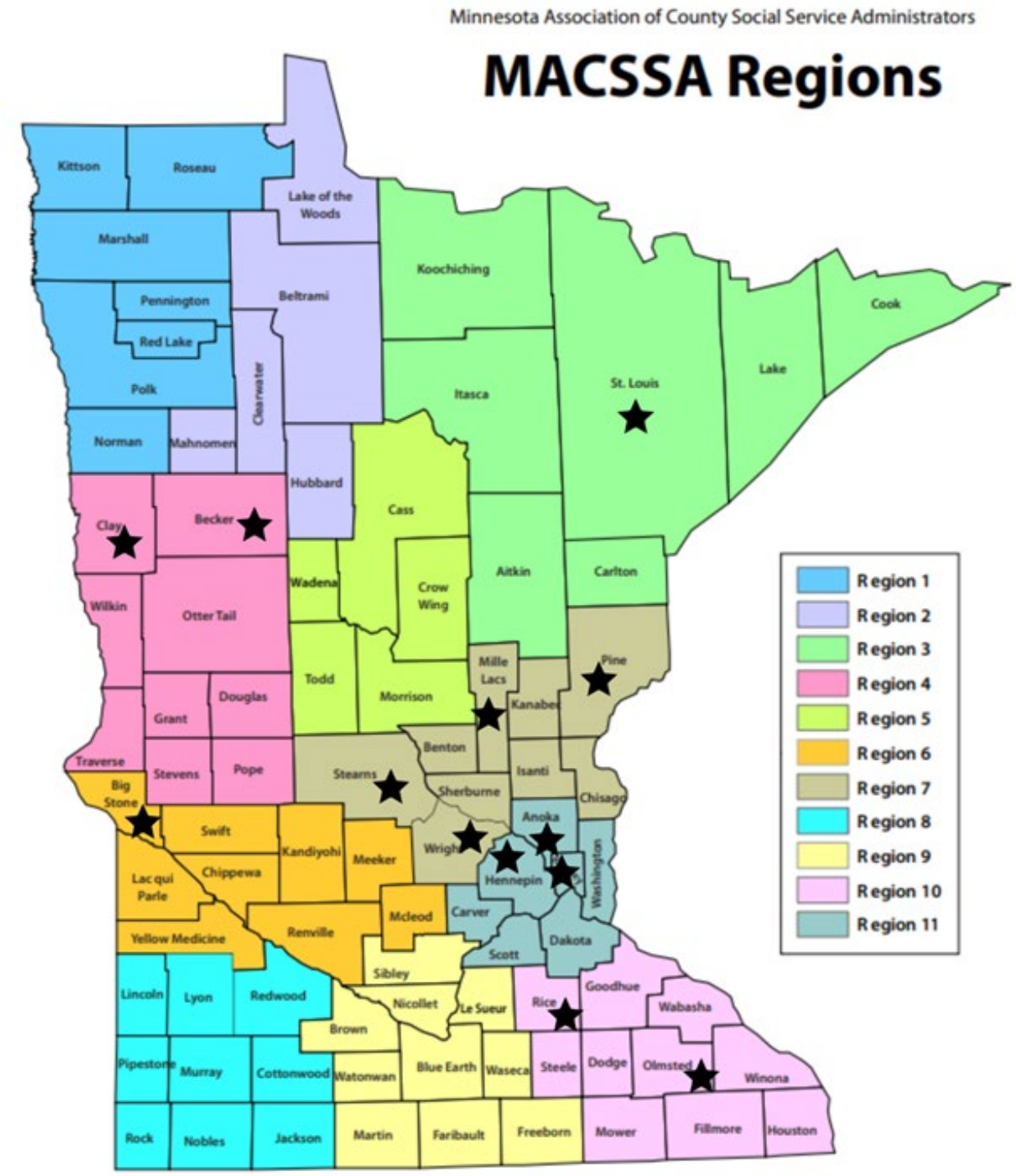
County	**RUCA code**	**High/low** ECE participation**	**ECE participation rate (number of children in foster care)**
Anoka	1 (metro core)	Low	39.2% (176)
Clay*	1 (metro core)	High	57.4% (54)
Hennepin	1 (metro core)	Medium	48.3% (1,083)
Olmsted*	1 (metro core)	Low	36.5% (63)
Ramsey	1 (metro core)	Medium	47.0% (529)

Stearns*	2 (metro)	High	51.2% (129)
Wright*	2 (metro)	Low	35.9% (78)
Rice	3 (metro)	Low	38.7% (75)
St. Louis*	3 (metro)	Medium	40.0% (415)
Mille Lacs	7 (small town core)	Low	39.8% (98)
Becker*	8 (small town)	Medium	47.1% (70)
Pine	8 (small town)	Medium	41.9% (43)
Big Stone	10 (rural)	High	50.0% (2)

**Partnered in recruitment and enough participants were simultaneously recruited for focus groups to be conducted.*
***Low ECE participation was categorized as <40%; Medium was categorized as 40<49.9%; High was categorized as >50%. The highest percentage of ECE participation for a public human service agency in Minnesota with over 50 children in foster care in academic year (AY) 2019 was 57.4% (Clay County). The lowest percentage of ECE participation for a public human service agency in Minnesota with over 50 children in foster care in AY 2019 was 31.2% (Beltrami County). Data tables detailing the counts and rates of ECE participation for children in foster care in AYs 2019-2021 are available in Appendix E of the* Administrative and Contextual Insights *report, attached to this report in Appendix C.*

Table 1 is organized by RUCA code, with "1" signifying the most metropolitan and "10" signifying the most rural. Clay, Olmsted, Stearns, Wright, St. Louis, and Becker counties all agreed to partner in recruitment and recruited enough simultaneous participants to conduct at least one county- and role-specific focus group. Hennepin and Mille Lacs counties also agreed to partner in recruitment but had challenges with recruitment, resulting in no county-specific focus groups being conducted in those counties. The remaining counties were reached through the statewide recruitment efforts, with one or more statewide family participants living in each of these counties. Participants in the study came from six MACSSA regions (Figure 1): St. Louis County (Region 3); Clay and Becker counties (Region 4); Big Stone County (Region 6); Stearns, Wright, Mille Lacs, and Pine counties (Region 7); Olmsted and Rice counties (Region 10); and Hennepin, Ramsey, and Anoka counties (Region 11). The researchers are grateful to every county agency, University-affiliated partner, the MACSSA regional chairs, and community-based organizations that partnered with the team in recruitment for this study.

Figure 1. Participant Counties by MACSSA Region



Note. The original map is from the MACSSA website[15] and has been edited to denote counties in which participants resided.

[15] Minnesota Association of County Social Service Administrators, www.macssa.org.

B. Participant Recruitment

Families and Child Welfare Staff

Once a county agency administrator agreed to partner in recruitment for the study, the research team provided them with email and phone scripts to support recruitment of eligible families and email scripts to support recruitment of eligible staff. Interested persons were asked to contact the research team via phone or email and the research team then asked them a series of questions to determine their eligibility. The eligibility criteria for the study were as follows (all participants had to currently live and/or work in Minnesota):

- Participant was a biological parent or guardian of one or more children aged 0-5 who were in foster care at the time of the study or were recently (within the last 12 months) in foster care.
- Participant was a current or recent (within 12 months) relative or non-relative foster parent or guardian of one or more children aged 0-5.
- Participant was a child welfare professional working directly with families in the child welfare system and/or in out-of-home care.
- Participant was an early childhood education administrator.

ECE Administrators

Once a local human services agency agreed to partner in recruitment for the study, members of the research team worked to identify and recruit ECE administrators in that county. ECE administrators were identified by selecting a school district that geographically overlapped with a Head Start service area in the county, where possible. School districts were further prioritized based on the number of Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten and School Readiness Plus seats relative to student population, for which children in foster care are a priority group. ECE administrators for school-based programs in the district were recruited alongside Head Start administrators in the identified service area. ECE administrators were also recruited through the snowballing method, where an ECE administrator would recommend another ECE administrator for recruitment. Ultimately, ECE administrators from five counties (Becker, Clay, Hennepin, Olmsted, Wright) agreed to participate in the study. ECE administrator participants worked in and/or had direct local oversight over the following programs: Head Start and Early Head Start, Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE), Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE), School Readiness, Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten, and Early Childhood Screening.

C. Data Collection and Management

Participants engaged in a role- and county-specific focus group or interview (e.g., foster families in Clay County) or in a statewide foster family focus group or interview, based on participant availability. Researchers used the video call software Zoom (password-protected) to conduct and record the interviews. All interested participants confirmed they were able to participate in a focus group or interview in English, and all participants agreed to recording as part of the consent process (for more information on the consent process, see *Appendix B: Qualitative*

Methods [Extended]). Two research team members were present for each focus group/interview; one researcher conducted the focus group/interview, based on the focus group/interview protocol designed by the research team specifically for this study, and the second team member took running notes of the focus group/interview. Participants were asked about barriers and facilitators to ECE program participation, and recommendations for increasing ECE participation for young children in foster care. Focus group/interview Zoom recordings were sent out for professional transcription. One research team member reviewed each transcript for accuracy and de-identified the transcript. Zoom video recordings were saved on a password-protected digital drive accessible only by the research team. After transcripts were validated and de-identified, all focus group/interview recordings were destroyed.

At the end of each focus group or interview, participants were asked to complete a 10-question demographics survey through the survey software Qualtrics. No identifying information (e.g., name, email address) was collected as part of this survey. Participants were able to skip or not respond to any or all questions, as desired. Sixty-eight out of the 69 participants completed the survey (99% completion rate). After the focus group or interview, each participating family was emailed a $100 digital gift card to their email address as an honorarium for their time and insight as well as to help cover any potential costs incurred to participate (e.g., child care costs). Staff participants were not offered compensation for participating in the study. Data collection concluded in April 2023.

D. Data Analysis

The research team used the qualitative data analysis software NVivo (NVivo Mac, Release 1.7.1) to complete analysis of the focus group/interview transcripts. The data analysis process was iterative. Initially, two research team members (one from CASCW and one from CEED) drafted an *a priori* codebook based on relevant literature and the findings from the *Administrative and Contextual Insights* report. Then, the *a priori* codebook was reviewed, revised, and consensed by the full research team to create a revised codebook. Revisions may have included the addition or deletion of a code, or clarification of a code's definition. Then, each transcript was analyzed by two research team members, who used the revised codebook to analyze each subsequent transcript. Finally, a subgroup of the full research team, a four-member interdisciplinary analysis team (consisting of two research team members from CASCW and two research team members from CEED), met regularly throughout the analysis process to clarify definitions of the codes and document areas that needed further exploration or discussion, and to identify and discuss emerging themes.

The research team developed an outline for presenting the qualitative findings from the analysis of all 37 transcripts. After reviewing the focus group/interview excerpts coded to each theme for accuracy, researchers calculated the number and percentage of individual participants who mentioned each key theme at least one time. If a theme occurred more than once by a single participant, it was given the same weight in the calculations as a participant who mentioned the theme only once. The research team met regularly during the analysis process to come to consensus around themes and to organize and characterize the findings from the qualitative data presented in this report.

VI. Participant Characteristics

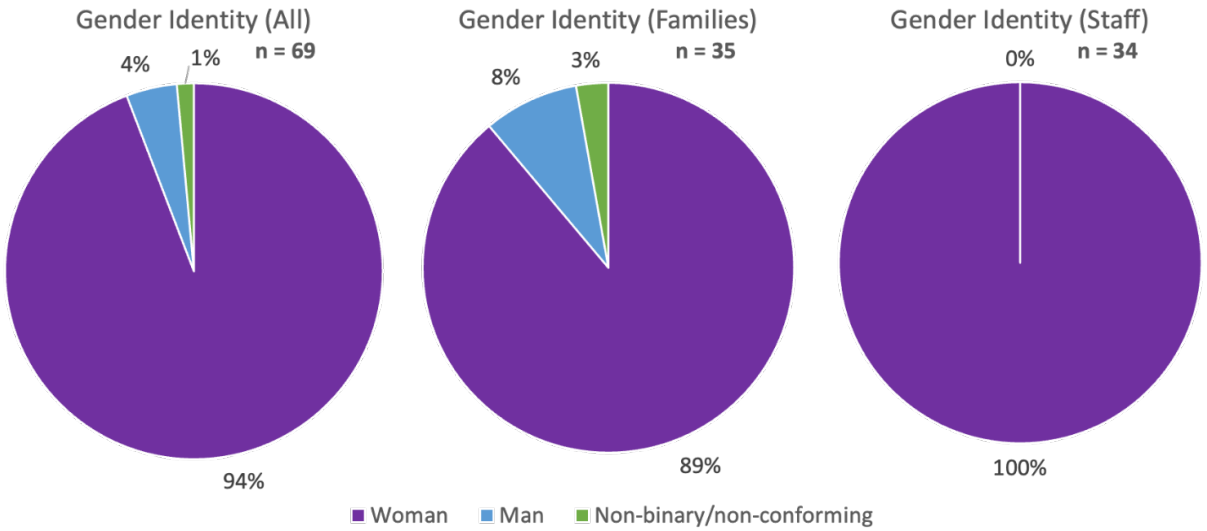
This section describes the sample of participants using select data from the voluntary 10-question demographic survey completed by participants at the end of each focus group/interview. Sixty-eight of the 69 participants completed the survey (99% response rate). To protect participant confidentiality, the responses of the two biological family participants are reported in aggregate with the foster family responses in this section.

The survey was intended to be brief and to collect only high-level information of the participants of the study; the survey was not intended to provide in-depth data on participants and the survey did not ask for data that could identify the participant and/or put the participant at risk. As such, participants also had the ability to skip or not respond to any question on the survey. The survey was not designed to serve as a central data collection and analysis mechanism of this study; therefore, data in this section should be considered supplemental. *For more information on the survey and survey results, contact Amy Dorman at dorm0039@umn.edu.*

A. Personal Characteristics

Of the total sample of participants, 94% (65/69) identified as women, 4% (3/69) identified as men, and 1% (1/69) identified as non-binary/non-conforming (and as a woman). Participants could select multiple gender identities. Family participants were 89% (32/35) women, 8% (3/35) men, and 3% (1/35) non-binary (woman and non-binary). All (34/34) staff participants identified as women. Sexual orientation or sexuality was not asked on the survey as part of this study but could be relevant for future research.

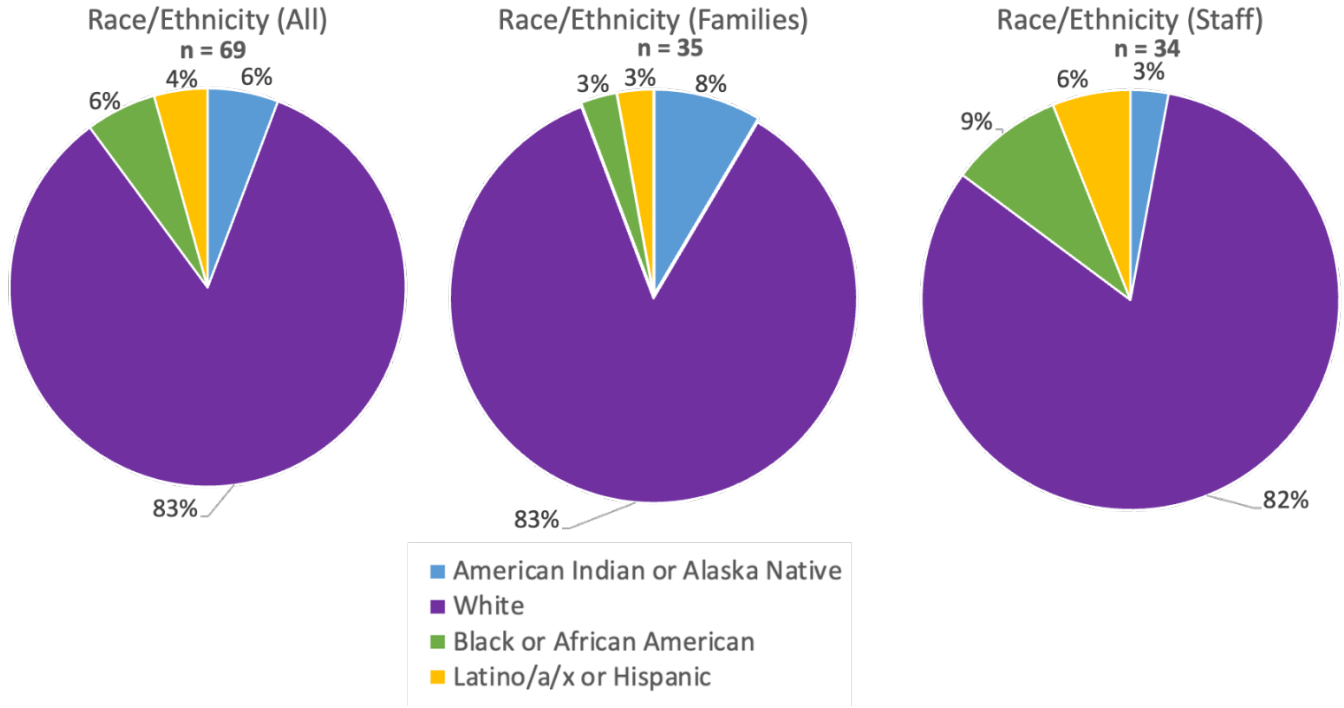
Figure 2. Participant Gender Identity by Total Sample, Family Participants, and Staff Participants



Note. One family participant identified as both a woman and non-binary/non-conforming. No participants identified as "transgender" or "another gender or gender identity".

Participants identifying as White were 83% (58/69) of the participant pool, while 6% (4/69) identified as American Indian or Alaska Native, 6% (4/69) identified as Black or African American, 4% (3/69) identified as Latino/a/x or Hispanic, and 1% (1/69) preferred not to respond to the question. Participants were able to select multiple races, and two people in the total sample selected multiple races. Most (83%; 30/35) family participants identified as White, and 8% (3/35) identified as American Indian or Alaska Native, 3% (1/35) identified as Black or African American, 3% (1/35) identified as Latino/a/x or Hispanic, 3% (1/35) identified as American Indian or Alaska Native and White, and 3% (1/35) preferred not to respond. Most (82%; 28/34) staff participants identified as White, and 9% (3/34) identified as Black or African American, 6% (2/34) identified as Latino/a/x or Hispanic, and 3% (1/34) identified as American Indian and Latino/a/x or Hispanic. Immigrant status was not asked on the survey as part of this study but could be relevant for future research.

Figure 3. Race/Ethnicity by Total Sample, Family Participants, and Staff Participants



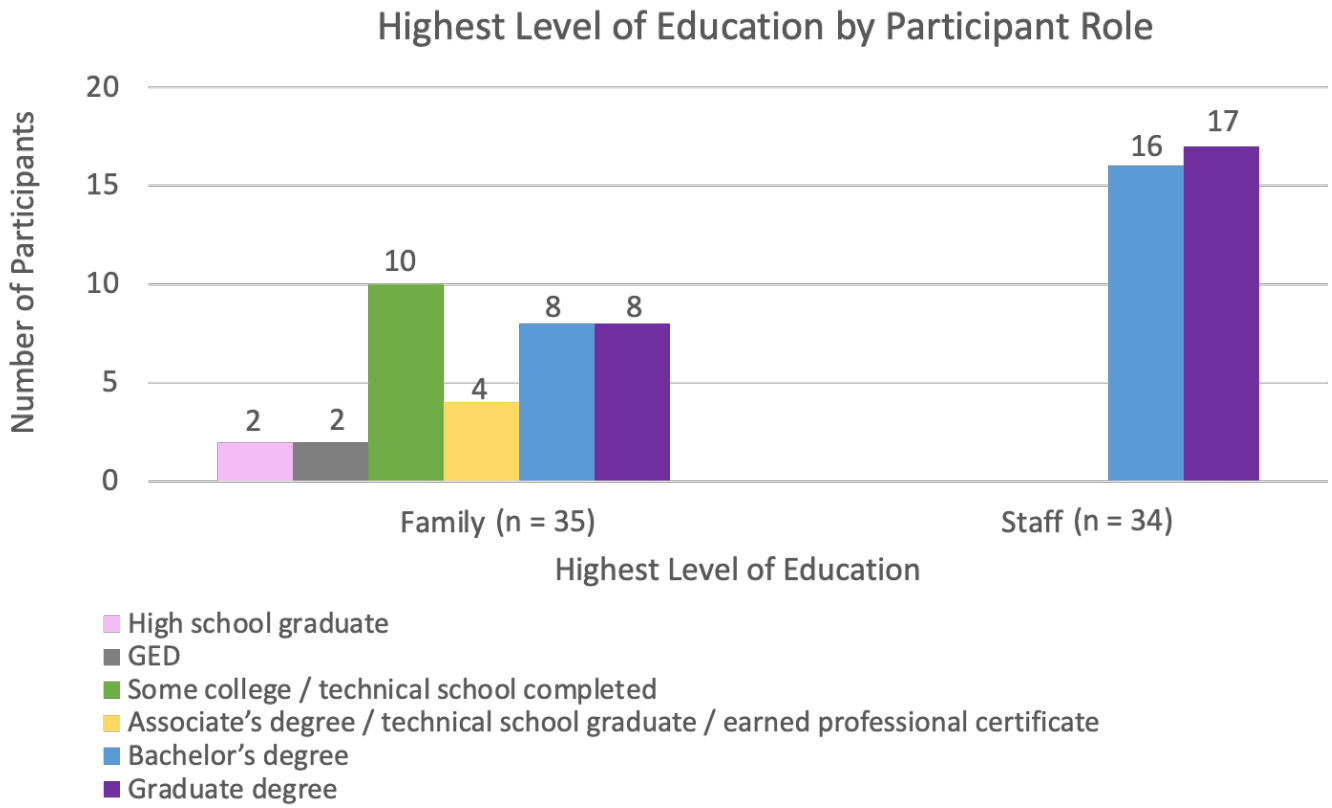
Note. One participant preferred not to respond. No participants identified as "Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander," "Asian," "Middle Eastern or Arab American," or "another race/ethnicity."

The mean age of the sample was 44 years old (min=23, max=68). Participants reported being comfortable speaking six languages other than English: German (4%; 3/69), Indigenous languages (1%; 1/69), Somali (1%; 1/69), Spanish (4%; 3/69), and Afaan Oromo (1%; 1/69). Participants could select multiple languages.

B. Education

Most participants (72%; 49/69) had at least a bachelor's degree, with 37% (25/69) holding a graduate degree. Of the participants with a graduate degree, 46% (19/41) had degrees in education, 41% (17/41) had degrees in social work, and 12% (5/41) had degrees in human services. As shown in Figure 4, a comparison of the highest education level reported by family participants and the highest education level reported by staff participants, shows that staff participants were more than twice as likely to have a bachelor's degree or graduate degree (100%; 34/34) than family participants (46%; 16/35); child welfare staff and ECE administrators are required to have a bachelor's degree. Of the family participants, 46% (16/35) held a bachelor's degree or higher, with 23% (8/35) of family participants holding a graduate degree. Several (11%; 4/35) family participants reported their highest level of education as an associate's or technical degree and 29% of family participants (10/35) reported completing some college or technical school. Some (11%; 4/35) family participants reported their highest level of education as a high school diploma or GED.

Figure 4. Highest Level of Education by Participant Role

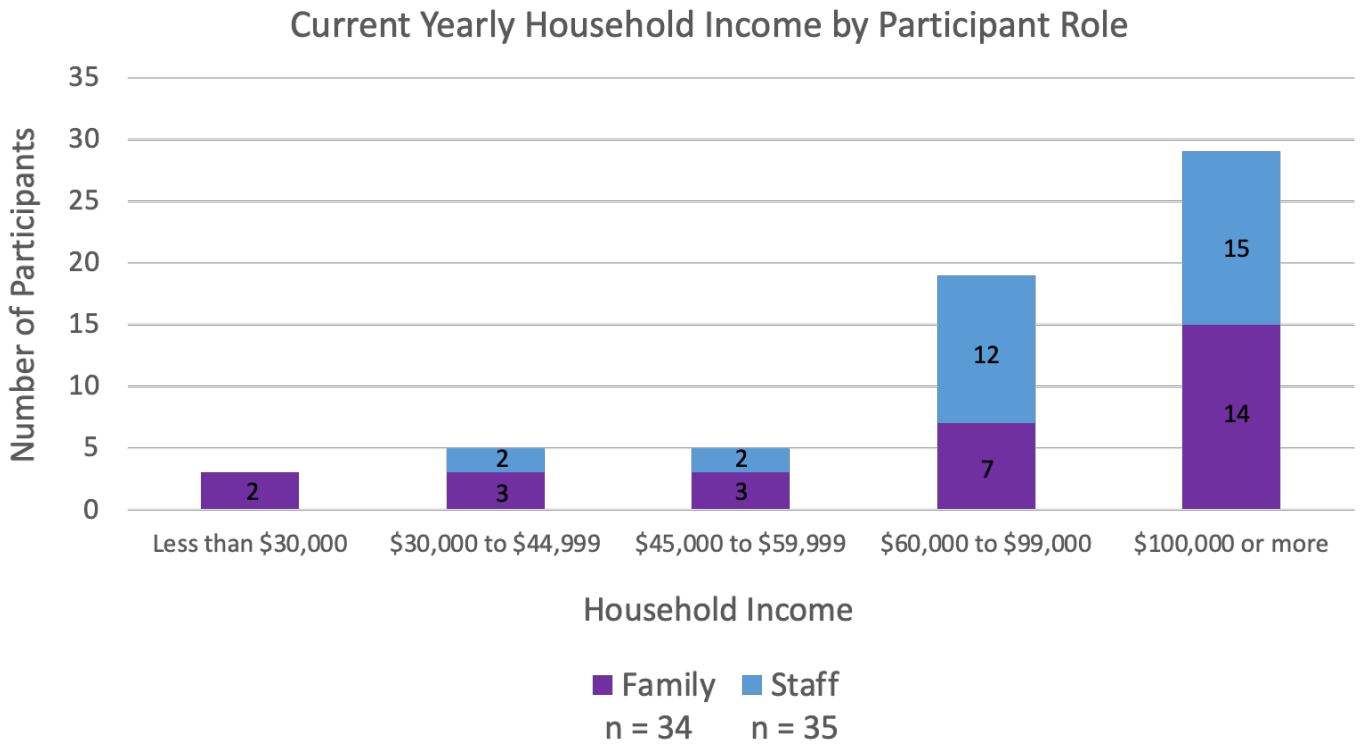


Note. One family participant and one staff participant preferred not to respond.

C. Income and Work

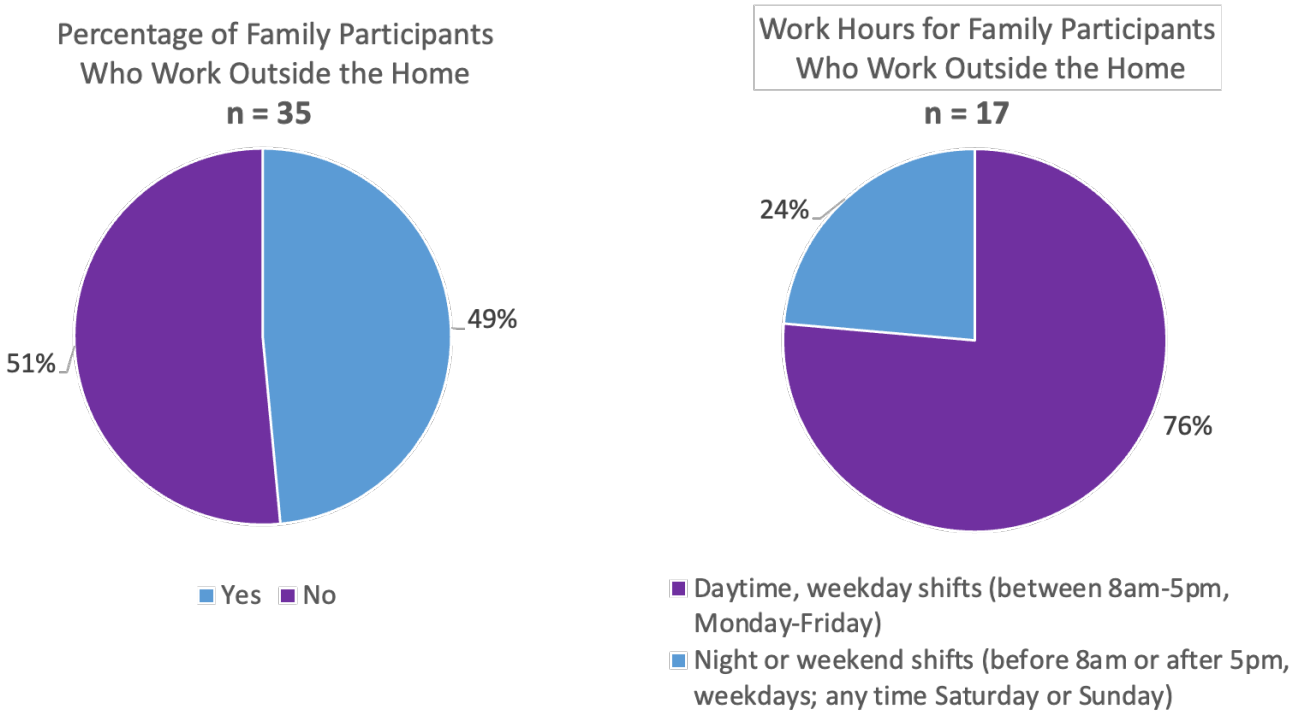
Most participants (71%; 48/69) had household yearly incomes over $60,000, with 43% (29/69) of participants with household yearly incomes over $100,000. A few participants (4%; 3/69) reported household yearly incomes under $30,000 and 10% of participants (7/69) did not respond to this question. Of the 35 family participants, 9% (3/35) reported household yearly incomes less than $30,000 and 63% (22/35) reported household yearly incomes over $60,000, with 43% (15/35) of family participants reporting household yearly incomes of over $100,000.

Figure 5. Current Yearly Household Income by Participant Role



Of the family participants, 49% (17/35) reported working outside the home and 52% (18/35) reported not working outside the home. Of the family participants who responded they worked outside the home, 47% (8/17) reported their position was salaried and 82% (14/17) reported receiving benefits as part of their job. Family participants who worked outside the home reported working between 5 and 50 hours per week, with most (59%; 10/17) of these participants working 40 hours per week. Most of these participants (76%; 13/17) reported working daytime, weekday shifts (Monday-Friday, 9am-5pm) and 24% (4/17) reported working night or weekend shifts.

Figure 6. Percentage of Family Participants Who Work Outside the Home and Their Work Hours



D. Geography

Table 2 depicts the number of family participants and the number of staff participants in each county. Due to the statewide recruitment strategy implemented in March 2023 to recruit additional family participants, family participants are represented across more counties than staff participants. Staff were recruited only from counties where the local human services agency had agreed to partner with the research team in recruitment for the study.

Table 2. Number of Family and Staff Participants Recruited in Each County

County	**Number (%) of Family Participants (n = 35)**	**Number (%) of Staff Participants* (n = 34)**
Anoka	1 (3%)	-
Becker	6 (17%)	4 (12%)
Big Stone	1 (3%)	-
Clay	5 (14%)	7 (21%)
Hennepin	2 (6%)	7 (21%)
Mille Lacs	1 (3%)	-
Olmsted	3 (9%)	11 (32%)
Pine	1 (3%)	-
Ramsey	1 (3%)	-

Rice	1 (3%)	-
St. Louis	7 (20%)	2 (6%)
Stearns	1 (3%)	2 (6%)
Wright	5 (14%)	1 (6%)

**Some staff participants lived in different counties than they worked. Staff participants were asked in focus groups/interviews about the county where they worked.*

E. Data and Sample Considerations

As the report transitions into discussing the findings of this study, it is important to highlight some data considerations. First, qualitative data are not intended to be generalizable to entire populations (e.g., the voices of the five foster family participants from Clay County cannot be generalized to represent all experiences of foster families in the county or the state). Instead, qualitative data are intended to provide greater detail about a specific situation over an identified period of time. Thus, it is of the utmost importance to hear from as many diverse (i.e., across roles, race/ethnicity, gender, class, and geography) voices as possible when using qualitative methods.

The sampling methodology allowed the researchers to reach Minnesotans across multiple roles, counties, and regions of the state, and yet, the study faced recruitment challenges which ultimately limited the racial/ethnic diversity of the study sample. The final study sample was majority White, female, and middle-upper class. As described earlier, there was a notable, but not unexpected, difference in the highest education level attained by staff in comparison to families, with staff participants being more than twice as likely to have a bachelor's degree or graduate degree (100%, 34/34) than family participants (46%, 16/35). No participants in this study identified as Asian American, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, or Middle Eastern/Arab American. Additionally, given the study aims, this study utilized a county-based recruitment strategy to cast a wide net of potential participants across Minnesota. Future research that is interested specifically in the experiences of particular groups (e.g., racial/ethnic groups, families for whom English is a second language) could consider group-specific recruitment strategies.

While the researchers prioritized the recruitment of families and workers specifically from counties with higher Native American/American Indian and African American/Black populations, considering the disproportionate representation of these communities in foster care, some local human service agency administrators in areas with these demographic characteristics reported that their staff were working over capacity and therefore the agency was unable to partner with the research team in recruitment. Other local human service agencies in counties with similar demographics agreed to partner in recruitment but faced significant challenges in recruiting for this study. It is important to acknowledge that many human service agencies are severely understaffed and experience high rates of turnover, contributing to high workloads for agency staff that may make it challenging (if not impossible) to add recruitment for a study to their list of crucial day-to-day responsibilities. Study timelines

further limited the ability of the research team to work more closely with additional counties and community-based organizations to expand recruitment across the state.

Notably, a few county agencies in areas of the state with more racially/ethnically diverse populations reported that several studies had been recently conducted with foster families and biological families served by their agencies, and they did not want to overburden families with another study. Additionally, it is important to note that the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to and exacerbated both of the recruitment issues detailed above: during the pandemic and beyond, staffing shortages were rampant across disciplines and research studies were plentiful to better understand the impacts of the pandemic on communities. While the latter is positive, it is also important to coordinate research efforts whenever possible, to recognize when communities are being over-tapped for research, and to always work to ensure that research is wanted by and also directly beneficial to the individuals and communities being recruited for research studies.

It is important to note that this study focuses on county-based foster care placements, which include children from indigenous communities and may include children who were originally placed with counties that are now within a tribal system or whose case has been transferred for tribal oversight. It is necessary to conduct culturally-sensitive research with tribal communities as partners and central stakeholders; this report includes recommendations for the state to: 1) consult with tribes about whether a study on the barriers and facilitators to ECE participation for American Indian children in foster care is wanted or needed by their communities, and if so, 2) fund and conduct additional community-engaged studies, in partnership with indigenous researchers, to better understand the intersection of foster care placement and participation in Tribal Early Childhood programs, such as the Tribal Early Learning Initiative and Tribal Home Visiting, and to explore strategies to reduce barriers and improve access to early care and education programs for young American Indian children in foster care. *Section XI: Considerations for Future Research* provides detailed recommendations for future research.

VII. Findings: Barriers to ECE Participation

The following sections present the findings using counts (number of participants who mentioned a barrier) and percentages. If a barrier was mentioned more than once by a single participant, it was given the same weight in the calculations as a participant who mentioned the barrier only once. However, given the nature of focus groups, it is possible that more participants considered a barrier to be important even if they did not verbalize this in the focus group. Finally, as qualitative data are not intended to be generalizable to entire populations, the findings presented in this section reflect only the experiences of the participants of the study. Future engagement with participants with other identities, backgrounds, experiences, and from other locations across the state could elicit different findings. Data from this study can help policymakers and other stakeholders better understand the nuanced and often complex experiences of families as they work to access ECE.

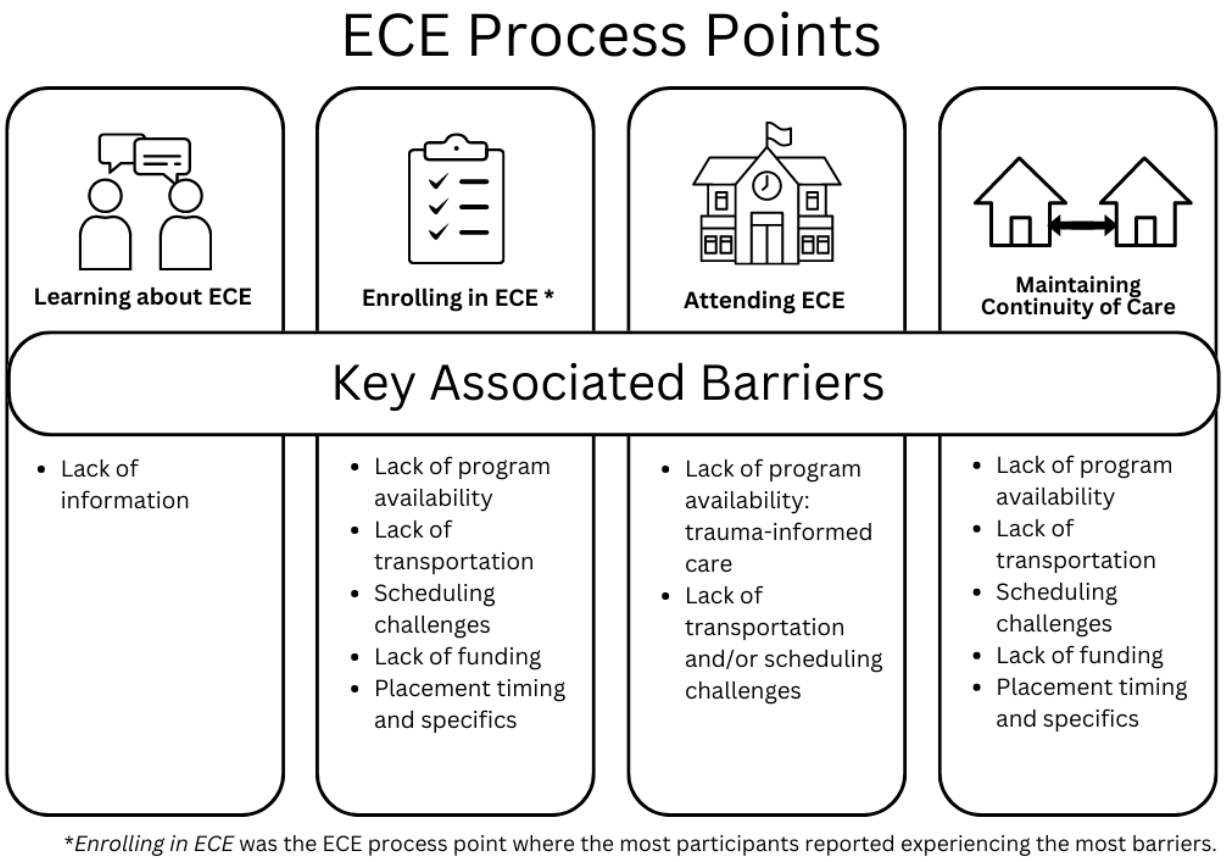
This section presents the barriers findings from qualitative interviews with foster families, biological families with young children in foster care, child welfare workers, and ECE administrators across the state of Minnesota. Findings are organized into the following sections: Barriers across ECE process points; lack of program availability; lack of information; and lack of funding for families. Data shared in this report have been de-identified to protect participant confidentiality. Participant quotes were edited for clarity.

A Note on "Barriers". *Throughout this section, various barrier themes are highlighted. It is important to note that some of these barriers <u>were</u> surmountable by family participants. For example, a family participant may have talked about transportation as a barrier to ECE participation, but ultimately was still able to access and attend ECE – but at a personal cost. Families mentioned having to "choose" to leave their out-of-home jobs to be a stay-at-home parent or missing out on promotions in order to accommodate schedules, including ECE programs. Family participants also discussed the financial costs incurred to participate in ECE programs, particularly child care. In this case, cost was a barrier to ECE participation, but it was surmountable for some family participants, although challenging. Other family participants in this study may have found these same barriers to be <u>insurmountable</u>, and thus the same barriers may have prevented them from accessing ECE altogether.*

A. Barriers Experienced within the ECE Process

Interviews with stakeholders in the *Administrative and Contextual Insights* report (Appendix C) revealed that families experience barriers at different points in the ECE process, from learning about and enrolling in ECE to attending ECE and maintaining continuity of care. Thus, during data analysis for this report, the research team organized qualitative themes using a similar framework to consider how specific barriers discussed by families and staff may cluster under different points in the ECE process (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Barriers to ECE Participation Experienced within the ECE Process



Similar to what was highlighted in the *Administrative and Contextual Insights* report, most barriers discussed by staff and family participants occurred during the enrollment process, when families often had the necessary information to enroll in ECE, but experienced additional challenges accessing funding and spots in ECE programs. In fact, unique **barriers that clustered under the *enrollment* process were mentioned most often by participants**. Participants also underscored that families enrolled in ECE may have trouble attending ECE, which can impact ECE engagement and contribute to family stress. Unique **barriers that clustered under the *attendance* process** often included transportation issues and scheduling conflicts. Further, participants discussed barriers that occurred when families were learning about ECE, including lack of accessible and accurate knowledge on ECE programs, scholarships, and funding. Unique **barriers that clustered under the *learning about* process** were most often tied to lack of information about ECE programs and resources. Lastly, participants described challenges to ECE participation that occur when a child transitions into foster care, moves from one foster family to another, or leaves foster care through reunification or adoption, and how these transitions can hinder continuity of ECE participation. Unique **barriers that clustered under *maintaining continuity of care*** often involved lack of funding, program availability, and transportation.

It is important to note that although some families may experience a specific barrier at a certain point in the ECE process, other families may experience a similar barrier at a different point in

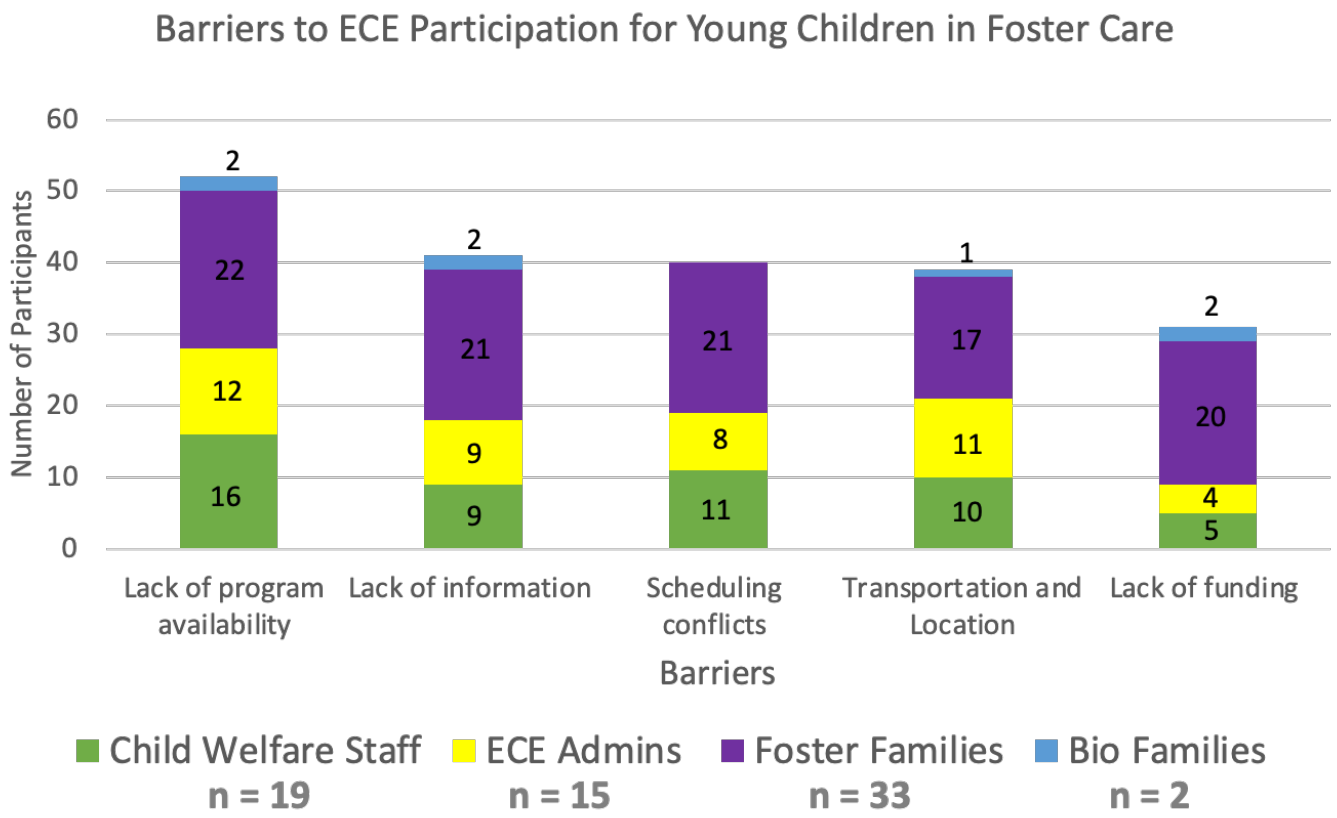
the process. For example, lack of transportation may impact some families' decisions to enroll in ECE, preventing them from accessing ECE altogether. Other families may choose to enroll in ECE despite transportation challenges; however, this may ultimately impact their ability to attend regularly. **The extent to which a particular barrier impacts participation, and how, may also depend on the unique context of the family, including where they live and the resources available to them.**

Moreover, families reported experiencing multiple interacting barriers across different points in the ECE process. As such, **barriers at certain points in the ECE process may have compounding effects, increasing barriers overall and negatively impacting ECE participation.** For instance, limited information on ECE program availability, funding and transportation may lead to enrollment in programs that do not offer transportation or accept Early Learning Scholarships, which can then make it difficult to attend ECE regularly. Limited and inaccurate information on ECE programming may also impact continuity of care, especially for families transitioning into foster care, reunification, and/or adoption. Despite this complexity, using these parts of the ECE process as a framework to conceptualize where barriers to ECE cluster can help to differentiate between insurmountable and surmountable barriers, as well as entry points and facilitators that support ECE participation for this population.

The following sections highlight specific barrier themes from interviews with participants, including lack of program availability, lack of information, and lack of funding, as well as two barriers (scheduling conflicts, transportation and location) that are connected to the theme "lack of program availability" (Figure 8). The key barriers that were mentioned by participants in this study reflect the findings from similar studies in this topic area (laid out in *Section IV. Issue Overview*). Figure 8 displays these overarching themes by the number of participants that mentioned the barrier, and by role (e.g., foster family, biological family, child welfare staff, and ECE administrator).

Lack of program availability was the barrier mentioned most often and was a top issue for all four roles. Most foster families (67%; 22/33) and both biological families (100%; 2/2) mentioned lack of program availability as a barrier, as well as 84% (16/19) of child welfare staff, and 80% (12/15) of ECE administrators. Further, 63% of foster families (21/33) mentioned **lack of information** as a key barrier, as did 100% of biological families (2/2), 47% of child welfare staff (9/19), and 60% of ECE administrators (9/15). Foster families (61%, 20/33) and biological families (100%, 2/2) also talked about **lack of funding** as a key barrier, but just 26% of child welfare staff (5/19) and 27% of ECE administrators (4/15) discussed this barrier. **Scheduling** was mentioned as a barrier by 64% of foster families (21/25), 58% of child welfare staff (11/19) and 53% of ECE administrators (8/15), but not by the two biological families. Lastly, **transportation and location** barriers were mentioned by 52% of foster families (17/33), 50% of biological families (1/2), 53% of child welfare workers (10/19) and 73% of ECE administrators (11/15).

Figure 8. Barriers to ECE Participation for Young Children in Foster Care by Participant Role



While it is interesting to see how some key barriers were emphasized more by some roles than others, the differences across roles were not stark and therefore readers of this report should not assign too much meaning out of these varying mentions across roles. Qualitative data are not intended to be generalizable to whole populations, including to whole disciplines or roles. Thus, while these subtle differences may result in additional questions and points of inquiry for future research, any differences seen across roles in this qualitative data are more likely due to individual experiences and levels of expertise in this topic than broader structural or value differences across roles.

B. Lack of Program Availability

Similar to what was mentioned by stakeholders in the *Administrative and Contextual Insights* report, the barrier mentioned most often by participants was **lack of program availability**, which was often cited as a **barrier to enrolling in ECE**. Lack of program availability was mentioned by **69% of families** (24/35) and **82% of staff** (28/34). Participants highlighted the lack of ECE programs overall, the **"waitlists beyond belief"** for ECE programs, as well as the limited number of **trauma-informed** programs and/or **high-quality child care programs that accept Early Learning Scholarships**.

I don't think that funding would have been an issue for us because we had that scholarship. It's just that we weren't able to apply it to the daycares that would have accepted it since they were full. - Foster Family

Some participants discussed **staff shortages** as a barrier related to program availability, which was exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic.

We have a huge shortage of child care. I think the biggest gap is when we have relative caregivers that have jobs outside of their home and finding that child care is... I mean, there's always a waiting list. And then those facilities obviously have to have enough staff, and because of staff shortages in this area because of COVID, there are just not openings. - Child Welfare Staff

Participants also underscored how program availability can **differ by program and location**, and that it can be **more challenging for certain families and children**. For instance, **26% of participants** (18/69) mentioned that lack of **program availability was worse** for families with children **aged three and under**. One foster parent highlighted that, *"there's just always a need for that birth to two."*

One of the biggest barriers is that we don't have enough programming within the city as a whole for three-year-old's unless you happen to have funds for quality child care. - ECE Administrator

Participants also discussed additional difficulties with **program waitlists** specific to foster families who do not have the time to wait before enrolling the child in their care in ECE. This may be especially true for **relative foster families** who may **not be expecting to care for a young child**, as well as for foster families who receive short-term and respite placements. As stated by a foster parent, *"in foster care, we don't have time for a waitlist list... We need help with the kiddos right away."* Compared to many biological parents who can prepare for their child's birth during pregnancy, foster parents often **don't know when a young child will come into their care**, preventing them from joining ECE waitlists in advance. Another foster parent stated, "if *you don't get on the waiting list while you're pregnant, you're not getting in."* Thus, lack of program availability not only **impacts enrollment**, but also **continuity of care** for young children previously in ECE programming moving across families and locations during foster care, reunification, or adoption. Because program availability is a key concern for foster families, some families even mentioned that it can **impact their decision to accept foster placements**, especially placements for children under three.

With taking Baby home directly from the hospital, even as I was calling places, it was like you needed to be on a waitlist for infant child care six months before they were even a glimmer in anybody's eye. Before you know you're pregnant, you have to be on waitlist. And as foster parents, we don't have that luxury. We get like five hours, it's like, "Hey, do you have room?" And it's like, "We do, but we also need child care." - Foster Family

We were thinking this was going to be super short-term, up until about four months ago. We were getting to reunification and it was super awesome, so it was like, I'm not going to put her on an eight-month long waitlist: she's not going to be here by the time that spot opens up. And now we're at that [point] where had I just put her on the list, I would have got a spot. - Foster Family

Scheduling Conflicts and Transportation

Lack of program availability directly links to two other key barriers to ECE participation for children in foster care: scheduling conflicts and transportation. **Scheduling conflicts** were mentioned by **60% of families** (21/35) and **56% of staff** (19/34), while **transportation challenges** were mentioned by **51% of families** (18/35) and **62% of staff** (21/34). Both of these barriers most often impacted ECE attendance but could also impact a family's decision to enroll in ECE and maintain continuity of care.

Participants discussed how scheduling conflicts can impact a family's participation in ECE, as available ECE programming often **conflicts with work schedules** and **other child services and appointments**. Families had to figure out how to schedule multiple services in addition to ECE, which could make it **challenging to attend** ECE regularly and/or created **conflicts at work**. Participants also noted that scheduling conflicts are often **connected to transportation challenges**, as families also had to figure out how to get their children to and from ECE throughout their already hectically scheduled days. Participants mentioned how these scheduling and transportation barriers could further compound when ECE programs were **not well-staffed and/or trauma-informed** and **staff sent children home for behavioral issues related to trauma.**

Daycare was going to kick him out [for behavioral issues], so I kept asking for help, and I'm like, I have a job, I have to keep my job. I lost two promotions because I wasn't at work enough. I'm having to work late at night or early in the morning, to make sure that I get my hours in and get my job done because of all this transportation. - Foster Family

Although participants emphasized the lack of program availability and transportation options overall, they also discussed how there is **need for more programming** and **transportation** that **accommodates non-traditional work schedules**. Participants highlighted that there is **less program availability** for parents who need child care at **night time** or on the **weekends**, and that ECE programming and transportation scheduling **may not align with a family's unique schedule**. Some ECE programs, for example, are held for a few hours in the morning while many parents are working full-time. Thus, even when transportation is available, families may need **additional child care** in the afternoon, which can be difficult to find with limited program availability.

Obviously, most daycares are 7-5, Monday through Friday, and we have a lot of families that we work with that work weekends and nights and they don't have child care. We have

maybe two [programs] in the whole city that [offer] after-hours care or weekends. I think that's a huge barrier for our families that are kind of like the "non-traditional" [families]. - Child Welfare Staff

Participants also noted that the **capacity to transport a child to ECE programs may differ from one family to the next**, and can be affected by **employment commitments**, **additional children** in the household, and/or the **schedule** and **location** of the ECE program in which the child is enrolled. Therefore, scheduling conflicts and transportation challenges can be exacerbated for **working families**, **families caring for multiple children and/or younger children**, families **living in more rural areas and/or in extreme weather conditions**, and families with **fewer resources** (e.g., help from relatives, financial buffers to cover private child care, family vehicles).

This particular child has two baby siblings, and I didn't want to commit to dragging these babies out at 7:30 in the morning when it's 20 below [zero] to take [the child] to [ECE]. So I was going to end up having to choose, am I going to commit to taking these babies out in the cold every morning, or am I going to give up the program? We had to give up something. Had that transportation been available, everybody would have been able to be where they needed to be. - Foster Family

Participants also discussed that, as some programs and counties **do not offer transportation** to and from ECE programming, the **driving distance** to ECE programs may be too far for families and/or too burdensome for children who need to attend multiple appointments (e.g., doctor's appointments; occupational, speech, and/or physical therapy services) each week. As such, some families may choose not to enroll in ECE and others may end their participation in ECE.

We live out in the country and we have eight kids. One of them is my foster baby and we are running back and forth twice a day to bring them to preschool, pick them back up, because they won't drive to where we are. I mean, it takes 20 minutes one way to get to town and then back home and it just was not doable while taking care of the other kids. So, the busing issue was really a hindrance and [the child] probably would've done really well [in ECE], but it just wouldn't work. - Foster Family

Given the **differences in a family's capacity to attend ECE** based on variations in transportation and scheduling challenges across families, programs, and locations, some children in foster care moving across families and locations may lose **continuity of care**. For example, a transition to a new home may result in a change in the child's county or school district, which may mean the child is no longer eligible for transportation to and from their ECE program. One participant in Greater Minnesota explained that although child welfare staff do everything they can to assist in maintaining continuity of care during transitions, sometimes it is not possible for the child to continue their ECE participation. A challenge for continuity of care may also occur when the child's new family resides in the same county and school district as the previous family, but the new family lives further away from the ECE programming in which the child was enrolled or has a schedule that conflicts with the ECE programming. This can be particularly true in counties that cover a large geographic area, where even moving a child from one area of the county to

another can result in a distance from their current ECE program that is too far for the child's new family.

> *Since they moved into my care, we lived in a different side of town, and so they said that they couldn't do transportation anymore because they didn't have a bus coming over by my house in the morning. So, my two kids had to actually switch from one of the Head Start centers to a different Head Start center in town, because if I wanted transportation, I had to do that. - Foster Family*

> *We're a rural county, so sometimes if we remove [children] from one town and the children have to be placed 30 minutes away, that can be a barrier for them to get services just because there's so much travel involved. - Child Welfare Staff*

> *I would definitely say because we don't offer transportation specifically in Head Start or Early Head Start, that's definitely a barrier. Then when we have foster families move out of the area, for Head Start we're only allowed to serve our service area. That means that a child has to transition to another center, and transitions when children are in foster care are not ideal: We want consistency as much as possible. So, that does create hardship. - ECE Administrator*

Access to transportation and programming tailored to family schedules and needs wasn't the only consideration brought up by participants. Several participants, particularly families, also raised concerns around the **safety and logistics of transportation**. These concerns can influence **enrollment decisions**, and/or **increase stress and worry** for families actively enrolled in ECE.

> *Why I haven't enrolled him in a [local ECE] program is because there's kind of a bad reputation for transportation, with who's hired, and the lack of oversight for the kids on the buses and in the vans taking them to and from [programming]. - Foster Family*

C. Lack of Information

As discussed by stakeholders in the *Administrative and Contextual Insights* report, **66% of families** (23/35) and **53% of staff** (18/34) underscored that **lack of information** can be a barrier to participation in ECE. Participants highlighted that there is a lack of information for both **families** and **staff**, which often clusters under the **learning about** and **enrollment** points in the ECE process, impacting ECE participation for children in foster care.

Lack of Information on Available Programs and Funding Resources

Participants emphasized how challenging it can be for families to **learn about** and **access information** related to ECE, including information on the **scope and availability of programs** in their area and **sources of funding** such as Early Learning Scholarships.

Parents don't always know about options that are available to them. It's helpful when we suggest to them and provide them with that information, but without our involvement, they may have not known about options that are available to them. - Child Welfare Staff

There are programs that are available that people just don't even [know about], myself included. I learn about something new every day, almost, like, "Oh wow, I didn't know that's a resource for families." If you don't know to ask for it, then it gets missed. - Foster Family

Although **lack of information** can inhibit families from learning about ECE in the first place, participants discussed how it can also **prevent families from enrolling in and accessing high-quality ECE**, particularly when families do not have sufficient information on how to apply for an Early Learning Scholarship and/or enroll in programs that accept Early Learning Scholarships.

We got an [Early Learning Scholarship] but I have been trying to kind of call and get information on where I'm supposed to actually enroll [the child in foster care] and how to do this, and I haven't really gotten a whole lot of information. - Foster Family

We didn't have any awareness of the [Early Learning Scholarship] that would have helped us place the kiddos in a Parent Aware site. We had a sibling group for about eight months and they were placed in a care setting that tended to their safety needs, but it didn't really help foster their growth in the same way that would've perhaps happened in a four-star Parent Aware site, which we've since experienced. That is a regret that I have.
- Foster Family

Participants also provided examples of when families have had to **pay out-of-pocket** for ECE programming because they were **unaware of scholarship and funding opportunities**. Thus, although they were able to learn about and access programming, they were unable to learn about and access the Early Learning Scholarship, in particular. Although some families may be able to afford ECE without funding, this may not be true for many other families caring for children in foster care in Minnesota.

We didn't leverage the [Early Learning] Scholarship. I actually didn't know about the Scholarship for the first year and a half as a foster parent – nobody mentioned it – so we just paid out-of-pocket. - Foster Family

Challenges Navigating "the System" and Application Processes

Additionally, there is often also a **lack of information and support** for families while navigating **"the general convoluted nature of the system"** which can impact enrollment and increase the time it takes to enroll in ECE. Family and staff participants discussed challenges including **understanding qualification criteria**, **filling out paperwork**, and **figuring out how funding is applied,** including for ECE providers. Families also highlighted some examples of how the information they received was inaccurate and/or not up-to-date, which created confusion and ultimately impacted their participation in ECE.

We do have the [Early Learning] Scholarship, but I find it's very confusing sometimes to understand how the dollars are applied. I had started getting bills once and I'm like, "Why do I get bills suddenly?" And it's just trying to figure all that out, or if you work with a small provider like a home daycare, they may be four-star rated, but maybe they just don't know how to work the system, so that creates some complications, too. - Foster Family

When transitioning into **reunification**, obtaining child care can be an essential component to moving a child back into the care of their biological parent(s), especially when the parents work outside of the home. One biological family participant noted the challenges of navigating the application process and securing Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) funding for child care, which their child would be eligible for once reunified (but not while in foster care).

Well, I've been waiting, I got my application in towards the end of February, and I guess I didn't have all my pay stubs. Since beginning of March, I've been waiting, I've had to do the application twice now, and I guess the first time I did it, I didn't know they needed pay stubs, they needed a receipt from rent and medical records I'm paying on, and I didn't know I needed any of that because I didn't see the email. But I ended up going and redoing the application again after two weeks, and then I saw that email and I got all that in right away. - Biological Family

It was also clear from interviews and focus groups that information can be particularly challenging to find for **families with less experience navigating the system**, such as new parents and relative foster parents. In contrast, more experienced foster families and/or foster families with their own biological children may already have some knowledge of ECE programs and resources that can serve as entry points to participation. Specifically, relative foster parents who were not planning to care for children, and other new foster and biological parents with limited personal experience seeking out and enrolling in ECE, **may not have access to the same resources and information to learn about and access ECE programming.**

The relative foster parents have a harder time than our already licensed foster parents because the experienced foster parents have an easier time navigating [the system] than the relative foster care [families]. These relative foster parents are trying to navigate this all by themselves: "What do I need filled out? Who can sign this, who can sign that?"
- Child Welfare Staff

Similarly, lack of information on ECE can be especially daunting for **single parents** navigating the system on their own, as well as **parents who are new to a local community** and its available resources.

For single [parents] like myself, I have four other [children], but I've never been having to do it on my own. It's new to me and a lot of it gets overwhelming, especially with all the paperwork and everything. [It would be helpful] just to have more help with all of that kind of stuff. - Biological Family

For me in particular, I am doing this primarily because I'm trying to keep my family together, and this isn't easy. It's not easy being a single parent or grandmother at this stage. - Relative Foster Family

We moved, and then it's kind of like starting all over. So even though it's the same county, it's different resources, it's different people. I don't know all the same people here that I did in terms of county connections and school connections and everything like that. So, essentially starting from scratch with a much younger demographic of placements that we've had. - Foster Family

Child Welfare Staff Need Local, Up-to-Date Information to Share with Families

Child welfare staff in particular are a **key source of information** for families on ECE programming. However, several participants discussed how an apparent **lack of information at the staff level can trickle down to impact lack of knowledge for families**. Although some child welfare staff mentioned that they receive information on ECE from their agency and supervisors and are encouraged to refer families to ECE, other child welfare staff discussed how less guidance is provided and *"it's up to [individual staff] to track programs that are available to the families [they are serving]."* Families also highlighted how their knowledge of ECE and access to resources can *"really depend on the [child welfare] worker"* they are assigned to and that some child welfare staff have less experience and training related to ECE than others. Further, child welfare staff can experience heavy caseloads and burnout, limiting their capacity to focus on ECE in addition to other critical child and family needs, like safety.

The social workers, God bless the social workers. They're completely overwhelmed in their own capacity. So, we've worked with phenomenal life-changing social workers, and we've worked with social workers who are not phenomenal and life-changing. - Foster Family

We've come across that, where we've had kind of a newer social worker, and I've educated her on some of those [ECE] programs that we could sign up for, when it's almost like she should know before I know. - Foster Family

This lack of information can additionally place an undue burden on already busy families and staff to seek out information for themselves, which can often be a very time-consuming process. Family and staff participants alike noted making **dozens of phone calls to ECE programs**, seeking information and/or an available spot for a young child in foster care.

If you are looking for preschool, you have to call these places and say, "Okay, I got a placement today. Do you have a spot open?" It's not like you have a pamphlet that's a standard: here's what you can get them into. You have to do your own work on that. - Foster Family

I think we kind of have that system, like Parent Aware, but they're not accurate [in current program availability]. I've called them or they're holding spots for another family, so that's very difficult. We had an infant that we couldn't find daycare for three years. I called like 30 facilities and I'm like, "Holy cow, what is this foster parent supposed to do with this child?" So, we spend our entire work day trying to find daycare. - Child Welfare Staff

Overall, participants emphasized that **lack of available and accurate information for families on ECE programming, funding, and enrollment processes** can impact ECE participation for families with young children in foster care. Lack of information can stem from a l**ack of knowledge, information-sharing, and community informational resources**. Exploring opportunities to provide locally relevant, up-to-date information to families and staff, and navigational support to families, could be essential to increasing ECE participation for young children in foster care.

D. Lack of Funding to Cover ECE Costs for Families

Many participants, including **63% of families** (22/35) and **27% of staff** (9/34), stressed **lack of funding** to cover ECE costs as a barrier to ECE participation for children in foster care. **Costs were typically associated with child care**, often for children aged 0-3 who are not age-eligible for other ECE programming options. Lack of funding often clusters under the **enrollment** process but can also impact ECE **attendance** and **continuity of care**.

Finances are a big barrier when it comes to child care. We obviously have a lot of resources available, but they sometimes don't cover the entire cost. So, it ends up being pretty burdensome to pay for the cost of child care when the alternative is just keeping kids home with you during the day. Or, sometimes our daily rates that we provide foster parents and stipends don't cover the cost of daycare, so they're actually having to pay out-of-pocket. Sometimes, they're not going to send them because they're spending quite a bit of money. - Child Welfare Staff

Participants also highlighted that similar to ECE program waitlists, there are **waitlists for scholarships** that **lengthen the enrollment process** for families who need immediate child care support. Many families are in **need of funding for ECE programming** so they can continue working and providing for their family. Thus, **family-level resources**, such as income and access to other forms of child care, can impact whether families enroll in ECE programming regardless of financial costs.

I've actually been denied scholarships for daycare for a set of three kiddos. They didn't get the scholarship, so we had to pay daycare for them. They just said there was no money for them. None of them were in school, so I had to work a full-time job and keep all three kids home. I was surprised not even one kid got the scholarship: all three of them were denied because there was no money. - Foster Family

With foster families, sometimes it's hard because you need that care right away. [I hear], "If we're going to take a placement, I need child care because I work full-time." Then you're having to wait for an opening or drop $400 on a deposit to secure a spot when you haven't been given any financial compensation from the county yet, because it's a brand new placement. - Child Welfare Staff

Given that some families need to enroll in ECE despite funding concerns, lack of funding can also impact ECE **attendance** and/or **increase financial stress** for families who have to **pay out-of-pocket** for ECE. This can sometimes be the case when families receive funding for one source of ECE programming (e.g., Parent Aware-rated child care), but have to pay out-of-pocket for another (e.g., a private child care site to accommodate work schedules). For children with **additional needs**, including trauma experience and special needs, not only may it be harder for families to find and schedule programming, but there may also be **challenges securing funding** to cover the cost of each program and service the child needs.

She still has a scholarship which pays for daycare, but it won't pay for the Pre-K class that she's only in for a couple hours a day. So, I have to pay for that. - Foster Family

We got him in right away after he had come to us, but we paid out of pocket, because he wasn't eligible for CCAP, which was a little breath-taking. So, that was also tricky for us. - Foster Family

Critically, because **priority status for funding is often tied to foster care status and/or income requirements**, children transitioning to and between foster families and into reunification or adoption may lose priority access to funding if they have not yet received an Early Learning Scholarship (which stays with the child until they turn five or enter kindergarten). Participants discussed how once children leave foster care, they are **no longer prioritized** on waitlists for Early Learning Scholarships or for program seats, unless they meet other priority criteria. This loss of priority status could then **complicate efforts to maintain continuity of care** in ECE programming.

Foster children are fortunate because they usually go to the front of the line, but once those children are adopted and they no longer meet any income requirements, then they go back to the back of the line, even if they were in the program to begin with. - Foster Family

E. Compounding Effects of Interrelated Barriers

It was clear from interviews and focus groups that **key barriers** discussed by families and staff were **interrelated** and could have **compounding effects** on one another. For example, limited access to programs that accept Early Learning Scholarships links to **lack program availability** and **funding** for families because of long **waitlists** for **programs accepting scholarships**. Lack of program availability is also exacerbated for families with more **scheduling conflicts** and who are looking for care during **non-traditional work hours,** and is also linked to **transportation needs** to and from programming in **rural areas**. Therefore, not only is it important to consider each of

these barriers separately to better understand their impact on ECE participation for children in foster care, but also **in conjunction**, to acknowledge the **layered complexity** families can experience and **how these barriers interact** in real world contexts for this population.

> *We went and applied for the [Early Learning Scholarship], but the closest daycare that takes the grant is 30 miles away. So, we asked our local daycare, "Hey, would you consider [accepting the scholarship]?" And they said it's just too much work and they don't always get their money. So, I think that the hardest part for us is just finding a daycare that will take the [Early Learning Scholarship] just so it does help us a little bit. - Foster Family*

Key Takeaways:
Findings: Barriers to ECE Participation

- Families experienced barriers to ECE participation at different points in the ECE process: Learning about ECE, enrolling in ECE, attending ECE, and maintaining continuity of care.
- Key barriers mentioned by families and staff included:
    - Lack of program availability
        - Scheduling conflicts
        - Transportation challenges
    - Lack of information for families and staff
    - Lack of funding to cover ECE costs for families
- Barriers discussed by participants were often interrelated and could have compounding impacts on one another.

VIII. Findings: Facilitators to ECE Participation

This section presents the findings on facilitators to ECE participation from qualitative interviews with foster families, biological families with young children in foster care, child welfare workers, and ECE administrators across the state of Minnesota. Findings are organized into the following sections: Knowledge and efforts of child welfare and ECE staff; existing policies and prioritization mechanisms; and ECE program and service delivery. This section also includes discussion around how families reported using personal networks and individual advocacy to bridge system and service gaps; which, while not direct system-based facilitators, may have indirectly impacted families' ability to access ECE. Data shared in this report have been de-identified to protect participant confidentiality. Participant quotes were edited for clarity.

A. Knowledge, Efforts of Child Welfare and ECE Staff

Most participants (48%; 33/69) said the efforts and knowledge of **child welfare staff** facilitated ECE participation for young children in foster care. Four of these participants specifically noted the value of child welfare staff's level of experience, and three others described how peer and supervisor support and pooling knowledge across workers facilitates ECE participation for young children in foster care. **Families made up 49% (17/35) of the participants who mentioned the knowledge and support of child welfare staff as a facilitator to ECE participation.** In their remarks, the families described how child welfare staff made a positive contribution to ECE participation. For example, **one foster family participant** talked about how helpful it was when the child welfare worker contributed their expertise by advocating for the child at meetings:

> *We've gone through one case where the caseworker advocated right alongside us for all the things the kid needed. They were at all of the meetings. If they couldn't be there, they were there virtually through a phone call at the same time. If they were present or not really made an impact on moving the timeline along, but also just what services were advocated for. We only have one voice, and if we can get multiple people speaking into it, the kids are served so much better. - Foster Family*

Further, **35% of participants** (24/69) said the efforts and knowledge of **ECE administrators/staff** facilitated ECE participation for young children in foster care. **Child welfare staff** described how valuable it was to work with experienced ECE staff who specifically understand how to work with foster families:

> *I think in the area there's been a lot of staff that have been around a long time and so they've worked with our agency and have a good understanding of the need for flexibility and how to work with us and our families. - Child Welfare Staff*

Another participant described the value a great child care provider offers to children in foster care:

The child care providers themselves, just absolutely stretched to their absolute limit and [still] constantly showing up and communicating information. These are kiddos who have had so much interrupted connection, and they are fostering deep bonds with these kids; they're fostering really healthy relationships and deep care, which I think is really helpful for that attachment piece. Just watching their capacity to love these kiddos for the time that they have, it seems really helpful. - Foster Family

Despite the clear benefits of ECE referrals by child welfare staff, **it often fell on the individual case workers themselves to advocate for ECE**. While many of them did successfully champion ECE for their foster families, it was not always required or encouraged in local agency or unit policies and culture, creating inconsistencies as **not every case worker recommended ECE for all of their families.** As one **child welfare staff participant** observed:

Not that [government agencies] don't encourage [recommending ECE], they just don't tell us to do it. They're just like, "Here's your case, do it." They'll introduce us to programs, that kind of thing. And it's up to us to track programs that are available to our families during supervision. - Child Welfare Staff

For example, some **child welfare staff** reported referring ECE on a case-by-case basis if the family asked for it, or if they thought the children could benefit from ECE programs and services:

I would say that I make a handful of referrals [to ECE programs]. I think it just depends on if the family's requesting it, and then if I notice any concerns with the child, then I will make a referral. But I would say I've definitely made a handful of referrals. - Child Welfare Staff

I typically recommend [ECE programming] when working with those really little ones to get them Early Childhood Special Education, getting them the services they need. Early intervention is very important. - Child Welfare Staff

Others reported that they would systematically recommend ECE to all families:

[I refer families to ECE] a hundred percent of the time [because] it's a great opportunity for these kiddos to start working on their social skills with other peers, and if they get to go to Head Start or be part of a program, it gives that parent a break. - Child Welfare Staff

However, the **reliance on individual-level efforts for child welfare staff may create inconsistency** where some child welfare staff may advocate for ECE, but others do not know which programs are available, or, with so much on their plate already, do not prioritize ECE referrals for their families. One more experienced **child welfare staff participant** highlighted the importance of championing ECE to new staff members who may not understand the significance of ECE programs in the first years of life for children in foster care:

I really encourage them to utilize the services at a much younger [age]. If they have little kids on their caseload, making sure that they're accessing everything that they possibly can. Well-child visits, education, everything that they can because if we don't do those things, we're not going to really help the kid long-term. - Child Welfare Staff

In fact, these **peer-to-peer networks of information-sharing** were often reported as crucial for facilitating ECE referrals from child welfare staff, even when they are encouraged at the agency-level to advocate for ECE. As one **child welfare staff participant** described:

We get a lot of support from our supervisors and recommendations like, "Have you done X, Y and Z?" But I would say a lot of it comes from peers and colleagues, like, "Oh, I used this resource and it was helpful for this kid," or, "This might be beneficial for that family," or getting feedback from the whole team. - Child Welfare Staff

Related to staff knowledge and efforts was the facilitator of **community-based outreach and cross-agency information-sharing**, which were mentioned by **16% of participants** (11/69). The participants offered concrete examples of how to share information among professionals and families to improve ECE participation: One child welfare staff participant noted that local ECE program staff give talks at meetings at the county agency to help child welfare staff stay informed about program availability. In another county there are **quarterly convenings of individuals and organizations who provide services to young children.** An **ECE administrator participant** described the value of these meetings for facilitating ECE participation:

We are able to talk about our work, talk about how we might support one another, how we might serve families. And so those connections have proven to be very valuable. It's specifically around families, and Early Childhood [Education] is one component of the discussion. So public health is there, tons of nonprofits, schools, private schools, Head Start, Early Head Start, county workers. - ECE Administrator

Two child welfare staff participants spoke about the importance of giving foster families information about the Early Learning Scholarship, as well as a **directory of child care providers who accept this funding**. One ECE administrator noted how their program **dedicates resources to make it easier for families to get information** about ECE and apply to ECE programs. The ECE administrator participant described the changes made as a result of this focus:

We're sending out recruitment materials to the county and all over about applying for Head Start. We have QR codes and posters in the community for families just to pull it up on their smartphone, and they can apply off their smartphone. And now it's all in a welcome website, so once we get the application and we determine whether they're eligible or not, and foster children are automatically eligible, then they're sent to a welcome page where the additional forms that we need are available right there as fillable forms. Our application is a fillable [digital] form, and that seems to have really helped our families as far as access. - ECE Administrator

B. Existing Policies and Prioritization Mechanisms

Existing state and federal policies were an additional theme the research team identified in the data as facilitators to ECE participation for young children in foster care. **Over a third of participants** (33%; 23/69) mentioned **existing state and federal policies related to funding and prioritization of children in foster care** as a facilitator, such as federal policies that provide free enrollment and automatic eligibility in Early Head Start and Head Start for children in foster care.

Policy related to the Early Learning Scholarships was noted by **6% of participants** (4/69) as a facilitator to ECE participation for young children in foster care. They positively remarked on the policy's specification that the **scholarship follows the child when there is a change in caregivers or ECE programs** and noted the importance of this component to ensuring that funding is available for the child's ECE participation even if a new caregiver lives in a different county or school district.

In addition, **13% of participants** (9/69) spoke about **policies that prioritized children in foster care for ECE program seats** (and on waitlists, if seats were not available). It is noteworthy that these nine participants were: three child welfare workers, three ECE administrators, and three foster families. From each of these three perspectives, the prioritization of children in foster care for entry into ECE programs (if seats were available) was noted as a facilitator.

> *The one thing that we always count on for children in foster care is that they automatically qualify and move to the top of the list if there's a waiting list for these services. That is very helpful. Just by us notifying the Head Start programs and other preschool programs that this child is in foster care, it will move them to top of the list. - Child Welfare Staff*

C. ECE Program and Service Delivery

A third theme in participants' discussions about factors that facilitate ECE participation for young children in foster care was ECE program and service delivery. The research team identified four aspects of ECE program and service delivery that were described in the data:

- **About one-fifth of participants** (20%; 14/69) spoke about how **transportation provided by ECE programs** facilitated ECE participation.
- Further, **17% of participants** (12/69) also described facilitating factors such as **flexible schedules** for screening, child care, and other ECE programs. For example, one school district began to offer early childhood screening appointments one weekend per month to accommodate the work schedules of parents.
- A similar sized subgroup, including **16% of participants** (11/69), talked about how attention to **making the enrollment processes for ECE programs accessible** and "smooth" facilitated ECE participation.

- Finally, **14% of participants** (10/69) noted that **coordinating services across agencies** and **providing programming in the home** were effective strategies to facilitate ECE participation.

D. Family Solutions: Bridging Systems and Service Gaps

Despite these facilitators, families still reported having to **bridge the gaps in services** to learn about, enroll in, and attend ECE programs. Several participants reported accomplishing this by championing ECE through **individual advocacy** or by **joining support groups and leaning on their personal networks.** Although beneficial for the families that were able to successfully bridge these gaps in services, not all families may have the time, capacity, or knowledge and resources to do so, creating disparities in which children and families may be able to access ECE through these particular strategies.

Families Lean on Support Groups and Personal Networks

Of the family participants, 34% (12/35) reported relying on personal networks and support groups to navigate ECE systems. **Support groups** for foster parents are sometimes necessary to **overcome information barriers**, as these groups may provide information regarding ECE services which foster parents were not made aware of through interactions with the child welfare and early education systems. One **foster parent** described how important her network of foster parents was for her to get an Early Learning Scholarship and enroll in a preschool program that had experience with children in foster care:

> *[I am in] a faith-based group of foster families that are all doing this together. It was another mom in that group that told me, "Hey, do the [local name for Early Learning Scholarship]." I wouldn't have known that had it not been for that mom in the group. And another mom in the group suggested the preschool that I ended up going to because they have a lot of foster kids. - Foster Family*

Another **foster parent** noted how they felt overwhelmed and therefore relied heavily on their foster family support group to learn about navigating the ECE system:

> *I feel lost, to be honest with you. I don't have biological children. This is our first go-around as we get a little bit further into having kids with different needs, and I think right now it's more word-of-mouth from people like the [foster family] support group. They're the best source of information for me. - Foster Family*

Other family participants reported using **personal networks** to learn about ECE programs and get help enrolling. For example, one **foster parent** had a relationship with a director of an ECE center who would often help them enroll the children in their care, and another **foster parent** leaned on the knowledge of their friend who was a child welfare worker.

We had a standing relationship with the director at the center here that worked. She was really great and would basically make things happen so that she could fit whatever kids we had. I think she valued [what we were doing] and saw kids come in with some challenging behaviors and change. That's such a cool thing to see kids get regulated and feel safe and let their guard down. I think she appreciated that, and so she was like, "Whatever you guys need, we'll make it work." - Foster Family

I have a friend that's a former case worker. I used her as a resource for different things, so she's been my biggest source of pushing me to do things, to say, "Go after these resources and push for more things," just because I don't know what I can do, how hard I should push, being a newbie. - Foster Family

In fact, both of the **biological families** in the study emphasized how knowing someone in the ECE system facilitated enrollment for their children, helping to better ensure **continuity of care** after reunification:

The person I'm dating, her daughter actually works at a daycare center here in the town we live in, and we got [my child] into that daycare center. - Biological Family

I have a family member who works at [an ECE center], and she helped me fill out the application now because it's such a long waiting list to get your baby in, and then the process of having to find the funding for it takes a while, too. - Biological Family

Foster Families Care About and Advocate for the Children in Their Care

In addition to these support groups and personal networks, many foster parents reported needing to engage in **individual advocacy** to get their children in programs and services. Of the families who participated in this study, **54% (19/35) reported the need to engage in individual advocacy** to access ECE programming in some way, as underscored by these **foster parent participants**:

Neither [foster child] was involved [in ECE] when they first came here, and I pushed pretty hard for it. I actually used to be an Early Head Start substitute teacher, so I know how important that is. And I really, really pushed hard and advocated to get both of these two kiddos in there. - Foster Family

I kind of get a free pass with enrolling because I have always worked for school districts, so I kind of have an "in" to know who to contact, and I'm not worried about being a little bit pushy about getting the kids into programs when I feel like they need to be into a program. - Foster Family

I've always had social workers very open to that idea [of ECE], but not necessarily initiating it. So I would usually be the one who would initiate and say, "Hey, this is what we need. I want to try and get this either in early childhood screening or I want to get them in an early

preschool program," or something like that. Usually social workers have been really open to that but then every single time it has fallen completely on me to contact the school, get the forms, fill out the forms, send them back and meet with the school district. - Foster Family

Key Takeaways:

Findings: Facilitators to ECE Participation

- Child welfare and ECE staff expertise and support was the biggest facilitator to ECE participation for the families in this study.
- Existing policies, such as prioritization mechanisms like waitlist priorities for children in foster care, facilitated participation in ECE.
- Characteristics of local service delivery, such as transportation provision and funding for families, can facilitate ECE participation.
- Families often needed to find solutions to bridge the gaps in information and services by engaging in individual advocacy and leaning on support groups and personal networks.

IX. Considerations: Family Contexts, Resources, and Ability to Bridge the Gaps

It is important to concurrently **consider the varying family contexts** and the specific barriers and facilitators to ECE for young children in foster care. The **unique needs of individual children**, **the experience and resources available to individual families**, and the **family type** (e.g., non-relative foster family, relative foster family, biological family) all can impact how families experience barriers and facilitators to ECE participation. Some of these differences have been addressed in conjunction with the specific barriers and facilitators of the previous sections. This section provides a space for some additional child and family considerations.

A. Considering the Unique Needs of Each Child

One of the key pieces to reflect upon when considering the barriers outlined in this report is that children in foster care often have experienced trauma, which can impact their need for additional services and trauma-informed care. Children being separated from their parents is a traumatic experience, regardless of the circumstances surrounding the removal. As such, many children in foster care have mental health needs that must be addressed through additional services, creating more **scheduling and transportation** logistics that may hinder ECE involvement. In fact, almost half, or **49% of participants** (34/69) discussed the trauma and special education services many children in foster care need. **Almost half of family participants** (49%; 17/35) were aware of this and advocated for services to address these needs:

> *These kids that are in care, they've been through some stuff. Even if they don't have this egregious traumatic background, being removed from your caregiver, whether it was not a great situation or not, is traumatic in itself. - Foster Family*

> *I just think that these kiddos go through a lot as it is. It's traumatizing no matter what age they're at to be in an out-of-home placement, and they should be screened [for special services] from the get-go and maybe even screened a little bit further down the road even after because things don't always show up right away either. - Foster Family*

Further, participants noted that some ECE programs were **not trauma-informed** and/or **did not have the staff capacity** to support children with higher levels of need, and some **child welfare staff** reported that children on their caseload were kicked out of ECE programs, highlighting barriers to attending ECE for children in foster care:

> *I did have a kid get kicked out of a daycare program once for his behaviors, because he had pretty high mental health needs. I wouldn't say that it happens often, but it has happened. - Child Welfare Staff*

> *I have had a few that have very special needs, and because of the behaviors, sometimes depending on what those behaviors look like, sometimes programs that we work with here*

in our county will cut the children down to half days because of the need for extra staff to constantly be with them. Then they get less programming instead of more.
- Child Welfare Staff

B. Considering the Unique Contexts of Each Family

There can be differences across families that impact the way families are able to navigate barriers and leverage additional facilitators to ECE participation. There may be differences in terms of resources, preparation, and knowledge regarding ECE, where relative foster families in particular may experience greater barriers around **lack of information**. Families' **prior experiences and education** as foster parents, child welfare staff, or early education providers can also impact how well families are able to **navigate these systems**. Almost a third, or **29% of family participants** (10/35), indicated that they or their family members worked in early childhood-related fields. These **family participants** stressed that their work and educational experiences uniquely facilitated participation in ECE for their children in foster care:

I came into foster care already having taught in ECFE and having been a parent-infant specialist for ECFE, and so I had a lot of numbers already, and I knew how to navigate that.
- Foster Family

I'm a therapist for the county that we live in. I work in the system, I work with foster families, I work with kids in care, so I have an upper hand in that way, but still it's different. There's all these little nuances and technicalities of being on the other side of that.
- Foster Family

My husband worked in disability for 20 years, and so his knowledge of the system has been a huge benefit in this. But that is purely because of his line of work, which didn't necessarily draw us to doing this work or not, but it was a huge added benefit. - Foster Family

A final contextual facilitator for families was having **flexible work schedules and/or a financial buffer** which allowed families to overcome the barriers of **scheduling conflicts** and **program availability**. In fact, **46% of families** (16/35) underscored that they would have struggled to overcome barriers to ECE – including not being able to access ECE resources – if they did not have at least person in the home who was a stay-at-home parent, a parent who worked from home, or a parent who had flexible work hours:

My husband and I say this all the time: If we didn't have the jobs we have, we could never have done any of this successfully. It's almost impossible. - Foster Family

I'm just thankful that I've been able to have a little bit more flexibility. But if I wasn't flexible, I don't know that it would work. If I had a strict "this-to-this" job where I was somewhere away from my house, that would be almost impossible. - Foster Family

The biggest barrier was working; you need a stay-at-home parent pretty much, especially in

this age range before they're in school, because child care is hard to access. - Foster Family

I'm so fortunate that I'm able to stay home. But that is a huge barrier that if I had to go to work every day and I had three kiddos, either all day daycare before or after school care, it's not there. - Foster Family

In fact, some of the families highlighted that their **resources and experiences with the system** allowed them to engage successfully in **individual advocacy**:

I tend to be a bit of a more proactive foster parent than some just because of my background as a therapist and stuff like that. I really believe in getting kids services right away. - Foster Family

As a family, our own capacity to answer phone calls, to have access to technology, to have access to email, to have a consistent post-office box and to be really grounded in those ways is a real privilege. - Foster Family

Many of the families in the sample were privileged in terms of **financial resources (**43% of families [15/35] reported making $100,000 or more per year), **job flexibility** (46%; 16/35 reported flexible working conditions that facilitated ECE involvement), and **education** and **experiences within the various relevant systems** (29%; 10/35 reported having education or work-related experiences in the education or child welfare systems). Thus, it is quite telling that many participating families ***still*** struggled to navigate ECE systems and faced significant barriers along the way. Some of this reflects that many people who participate in studies come from White and upper-middle class backgrounds, which is not representative of the diverse American population (Roberts et al., 2020). However, this also speaks to the pervasive issue that if participants with resources and support still struggled, **families without these resources likely struggle to a more severe degree, potentially making accessing ECE nearly impossible.**

Throughout the study, participants across all roles **demonstrated deep care** for children in foster care, and **recognized how important ECE** is for helping children in foster care and their families thrive. **Family participants** were especially cognizant of this:

People are so good. I think our overwhelming experience in foster care has been to see how many helpers there are, which is such a fun thing because it is hard. So the teachers in the preschools are phenomenal, the social workers are phenomenal, the visitation folks who are carrying some of that, we've had really good luck with ECFE. - Foster Family

I know firsthand, when I go up to my child's school, they're teaching him. He can write his name, he knows how to do different things, like hands aren't for hitting or hands are for hugs. How to calm them down. And they have different phrases where I'm like, "That's so cool." - Biological Family

I am such a believer of daycare or preschool of some form. I have seen kids absolutely transform from a little shell of a timid child to somebody that walks into the room just bursting with energy and happiness. The confidence that comes with that is... I mean, I could cry. It's devastating that it can't be easier. - Foster Family

However, participants also acknowledged that there **must be changes** to facilitate ECE participation for young children in foster care. While there are facilitators within the existing systems that help children in foster care enroll and engage in ECE, it is important to consider **which families have the resources to overcome barriers and leverage facilitators**, and, as the report moves into **recommendations**, how to make ECE programs and resources accessible for all families.

Key Takeaways:

Considerations: Family Contexts, Resources, and Ability to Bridge the Gaps

- Barriers and facilitators may affect families in different ways and to varying extents based on a variety of family characteristics.
- Families with access to more financial, time, and other supportive resources (like personal networks) may have a greater ability to bridge system and service gaps.
- Even the families who reported having financial flexibility to make life changes in order to access ECE struggled to overcome barriers to ECE participation, and some incurred steep personal costs.
- Participants across roles care deeply for children in foster care and recognize how important ECE is for helping children in foster care and their families thrive.

X. Recommendations

The recommendations section begins by highlighting **participant recommendation themes** and then moves into the specific **study recommendations,** which build upon participant recommendation themes and take into consideration the findings from the full extent of this study as well as current efforts in Minnesota. Participants offered several recommendations to better facilitate participation in ECE programming for young children in foster care. These recommendations can be broadly categorized into calls to **enhance information-sharing** and **increase program and service availability**.

A. Participant Recommendations

Enhance Information-Sharing

Of the participants, 48% (33/69) recommended increasing information-sharing in some capacity to facilitate ECE participation for children in foster care. This was very important across all of the participant roles in this study: for families (37%; 13/35), child welfare staff (42%; 8/19), and especially for ECE administrators (80%; 12/15).

One thing that participants specifically called for within this broad category of increasing information-sharing involved creating **tangible sources of information about ECE programming and scholarships**, like pamphlets or brochures:

> *The county should be reaching out in getting more pamphlets or educational resources. I think a lot of parents don't know the benefits of Early Childhood Education. In some respects, it wasn't required for a lot of different things. - Child Welfare Staff*

> *Even having a directory of programs, I feel like would be so helpful. If I knew, "Here's every daycare, here's which ones have openings, here's which ones don't, here's how much they cost." So, you have all that information all in one, and you can kind of figure out which option is going to be the best one for your family. - Child Welfare Staff*

> *[It would be helpful if there were] brochures, information for us as foster parents: Here's the pamphlets of where to go for childhood screening. Maybe a list of local daycares. Just different things that could be accessible that a newer foster parent or one newer to the age group might not know about. - Foster Family*

> *When children are placed, it would be really lovely if the placement receives information about Early Childhood [Education] options in their particular area. I would really love to see that happen at county levels where a child could be anywhere in the county and be able to access Head Start, Early Head Start, child care, ECFE… those kinds of things.*
> *- ECE Administrator*

Further, some **foster family participants** recommended having a **"point-person" or liaison** within a county, whose job it is to facilitate ECE access for children in foster care:

> *Maybe just [having] a point person with the county, instead of expecting every single social worker to be equipped with the time and the knowledge. Even just a single point person that we could be directed to or have a video care conference with at the onset of a case, to say like, "Hey, here's what we noticed. What do you notice? What do we know from their histories?" So, not to usurp the case planning from the social worker, but just to help facilitate that service connection as soon as possible. - Foster Family*

Some child welfare staff and ECE administrators also recommended using **other services and locations**, like public health departments, hospitals and healthcare clinics, and libraries, to provide information about ECE programming for foster families:

> *I don't want their only exposure to Head Start and Early Head Start just to be through child protection. I think it's less threatening if it's coming from an agency more in the medical profession or Public Health, some place that's not as threatening. - Child Welfare Staff*

ECE administrators also recommended employing **follow-up mechanisms** so that families do not get "lost in the cracks," especially if they have unmet needs that could be helped:

> *If we call everybody for a follow-up, the majority of people say, "Yeah, I got that done" and we can document it so we know what happened, which is good because then we can see trends if there's problems. And then there's a small number of people where you're doing multiple contacts. And it could be parents' needs, it could be finances, all the things we've talked about. It could be they don't know how to navigate the system. You just have to figure out what that is and go from there. - ECE Administrator*

Other **ECE administrators** recommended **culturally-specific and language-specific services and support** to help all families navigate the ECE systems:

> *Being able to communicate in home languages with families [is important] because right now 50% of our enrollment is children from families where English is not their home language. So, we have staff that represent the cultures and languages of our families and that makes such a huge difference in every step of the process. - ECE Administrator*

Increase Program and Service Availability

The second overarching recommendation from participants was **increasing program availability**. This was very important for the families in the study, as **46% of families** (16/35) emphasized the need for more ECE programming. **For staff, 44%** (15/34) also agreed.

To accomplish this, participants recommended **increasing funding for ECE programming**, such as **more staff, full-day programming, and transportation**, as these **ECE administrators** noted:

> *Families would love full-day, but we don't offer full-day, it's half-day. And again, that comes down to funding. So, if we had funding and could do a full day with transportation, that would obviously meet families' needs best. If we had more funding, we could have more classrooms, more teachers, more times offered, full-day programming, and transportation. - ECE Administrator*

> *[We need] enough funds so when a family, no matter what the age of the child, finds a program that they want to join, money is not a barrier, transportation is not a barrier. - ECE Administrator*

> *Providing transportation and providing all-day programming are really critical elements to helping families navigate both their work life and providing for their families, as well as for their child's life in terms of providing consistency for learning and placement and things for children to grow and learn during the day. - ECE Administrator*

The **families** in the study also agreed that **more all-day programming, more spots in classrooms, regular transportation, and in-home programming** would be helpful:

> *In the town where I work, the school district there will actually pick up the Head Start children at their home and then they'll bring them to the elementary school and then our Head Start bus goes there to pick them up. So, that would be nice if other school districts could do the same thing. That would be helpful for parents. - Foster Family*

> *I think there's a lot of value in doing work in the home. That would be super great. I know in more metro areas there are more in-home programs available for early childhood: they have a lot of programs that will come to the house and work with kiddos. That would be great if we had that available in all areas. - Foster Family*

B. Study Recommendations

Building upon the participant recommendation themes of **enhancing information-sharing** and **increasing program and service availability**, the researchers offer the following specific and actionable recommendations, many of which build upon current efforts in Minnesota.

Information-sharing

- **Build upon the information-sharing efforts of the Preschool Development Grant and other collaborations**[16] to increase family awareness of available ECE programs and

[16] CEED and CASCW have partnered to create an interdisciplinary website (https://cd4cw.umn.edu/) that shares accessible, evidence-based early childhood resources with child welfare professionals and trainers.

resources, including the Help Me Connect[17] online navigation tool and the current community resource hubs[18] across the state. Continuing to support and expand upon these existing efforts could help families across the state more easily find the information they need, in the format that works best for them, to better access ECE programs. Expanding community resource hubs can also help ensure that the process for learning about and accessing ECE is responsive to cultural and racial equity and specific needs of families caring for children in foster care.

    - In addition to these efforts, **expanding community information entry points, like through healthcare settings and local departments of health,** could provide additional opportunities for families to learn about available ECE programs, and to see ECE programs as an important resource for child development.

- **Invest in robust training for child welfare and ECE staff and administrators.** Training needs were brought up by family and staff participants throughout the study, and there are different needs between disciplines:
    - **Child Welfare Staff and Administrators:** Child welfare staff are often a first touchpoint to ECE programs and resources available in Minnesota for families caring for children in foster care. However, family participants reported different experiences based on the specific child welfare worker assigned to their case. Some child welfare workers prioritized telling families about ECE programs and resources, even helping families with the application process, and others did not. State guidance is needed to ensure that all child welfare staff and administrators have up-to-date knowledge of the programs and resources available for children in foster care, as well as a foundational understanding of the importance of ECE for child development and child and family wellbeing. State guidance[19] to Increase the consistency of child welfare staff and administrators' knowledge across the state may greatly impact ECE participation for young children in foster care.
    - **ECE Staff and Administrators:** Family participants similarly noted discrepancies in accessing ECE based on how trauma-informed the ECE program and staff were in their interactions with the children in their care and with themselves as parents. It is important for the state to invest in additional trauma-informed training and programming to better serve children who have experienced trauma, and to provide training and information to ECE staff and administrators to better prepare them to engage with and support families caring for children in foster care. Trainings should build upon existing efforts in Minnesota and the work of the Preschool Development Grant (e.g., the Knowledge and Competency Framework; the Toolkit for Healing Centered Practice) and could further support efforts to ensure that ECE programs are responsive to cultural and racial equity

[17] Visit the Help Me Connect website at https://helpmeconnect.web.health.state.mn.us/

[18] Learn more about the PDG's community resource hubs by visiting https://education.mn.gov/MDE/dse/early/preschgr/local/index.htm

[19] In 2020, the Minnesota Department of Human Services published a report, "Quality child care and early education for children involved with child welfare services" (eDoc 7353), available at https://edocs.dhs.state.mn.us/lfserver/DHS-7353A-ENG

concerns and specific needs of families caring for children in foster care.

- **Establish state-wide guidance and local support to enhance consistent information-sharing at the local level.** There are a few areas where this study revealed discrepancies in information-sharing across human service agency locations and/or ECE programs:
    - **Clarify Information around Early Learning Scholarships:** Family as well as staff participants in different counties did not understand that the local (sometimes colloquial) names for the Early Learning Scholarship was indeed the Early Learning Scholarship (e.g., participants mentioned "the Northland Foundation Grant" and "the Milestone Grant" but not the Early Learning Scholarship). Ensuring that all staff and families easily understand that this resource is available across the state of Minnesota is essential, despite how (or through whom) the Early Learning Scholarship is distributed locally. To increase transparency and access to resources, such as the Early Learning Scholarship, the name of statewide initiatives should be maintained at the local level or embedded as part of the local name for the resource or program. This is particularly important when considering continuity of care, should a child be reunified with their parent(s), move to another foster placement, or move into an adoptive home in another county; workers and families caring for children in foster should have an understanding that Early Learning Scholarships are a statewide offering, and not just something local to their area.
    - **Establish and Support Child Welfare Agency Information-Sharing and Referral Procedures:** Not all child welfare staff participants reported engaging in systematic referrals to direct families caring for young children in foster care to ECE programs and resources. Prioritization by the state could make it more clear to local agencies and staff that ECE participation is an essential part of family and child wellbeing. Therefore, creating statewide guidance in addition to local supports to ensure that every staff member is providing information on ECE programs and resources to eligible families could increase ECE participation for families caring for children in foster care. Participants recommended that local agencies could work to develop locally-relevant brochures, a call sheet for local programs, and/or an up-to-date local online database to help facilitate ECE participation. Technical support in these efforts at the state level could also help facilitate this information-sharing mechanism. It is critical to make this as easy as possible for child welfare staff, and to be cautious against creating another mandate without appropriate resources that could become another "checkbox" for child welfare staff. For example, the state could commit to going to local agencies to conduct any necessary trainings. The state should additionally consider how high caseloads and low staffing levels impact the ability of child welfare staff to engage in the ECE referral process, on top of other current requirements.
    - **Invest in and Support Child Welfare and ECE Staff to Systematically Implement Follow-up Procedures after Referrals to ECE Programs:** Throughout the study, examples from ECE staff in particular exemplified how follow-up mechanisms can be impactful facilitators to bringing families into ECE programs. Establishing

follow-up mechanisms requires financial investment to support staff time to intentionally and meaningfully engage in follow-up procedures. This investment should not be dependent upon an individual county or district's resources, and instead should be supported at the state level financially and in terms of guidance to ensure follow-up procedures are consistently efficacious across the state.

Program Availability

- In line with recommendations from the Great Start for All Minnesota Children Task Force[20] in their final report[21], the research team recommends the state **invest in ECE programs themselves so programs can recruit, hire, and retain well-trained staff.** Investing in ECE programs so they can compensate staff well could increase program capacity by 1) expanding the number of highly-qualified staff and 2) reducing staff turnover. The Great Start Task Force final report (linked above) provides detailed recommendations in this area for consideration.
    - Additionally, expanding upon Preschool Development Grant efforts to **invest in prospective ECE staff through Child Development Associate Degrees** could help increase the pipeline of qualified ECE staff in Minnesota.
- **Consider how transportation and scheduling impact families' ability to access ECE programs.** Strategies for addressing these barriers may include:
    - **Investing in safe and trauma-informed, age-appropriate, reliable transportation for young children:** Transportation should be physically and emotionally safe, age-appropriate and trauma-informed, and reliable for families and children to feel secure in the transportation service. Transportation should have all the appropriate safety equipment to keep young children physically safe and should be supervised by a professional trained in trauma-informed care for young children.
    - **Increasing the availability of in-home services:** Providing quality in-home services[22] can help families engage in ECE despite transportation limitations and/or scheduling conflicts. In-home services also support increasing families' knowledge of child development and how best to support the children in their care during typical family routines.
    - **Investing in local ECE programs to allow for non-traditional class and screening times:** Family and staff participants noted that creating alternative class times (e.g., evenings, weekends) and available times for early childhood screenings

[20] Learn more about the Great Start for All Minnesota Children Task Force by visiting https://mn.gov/mmb/childrens-cabinet/great-start-childrens-task-force/

[21] The Great Start Task Force's final report is downloadable from the Task Force homepage (see 20).

[22] Relatedly, the Parents as Teachers (PAT) program was implemented in 2018 as part of Minnesota's Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) 5-year implementation plan. PAT is a home visiting program serving children from prenatal to entering kindergarten with the goals to increase parent knowledge of early childhood development, provide early detection of developmental delays and health issues, prevent child abuse and neglect, and increase children's school readiness and success. The final FFPSA implementation plan is available on the MN DHS website.

(which qualitative data from the *Administrative and Contextual Insights* report identified as one entry point to learning about ECE programs and resources) can help families engage in ECE, particularly those with challenging and/or non-traditional schedules.

Continue to Prioritize ECE Access for Young Children in Foster Care

- As also emphasized in the *Administrative and Contextual Insights* report, in order for ECE participation rates to improve and be sustained over time, **it is important that ECE access for young children in foster care remain a policy priority in Minnesota**. This includes creating funding structures and system infrastructure that can be sustained long-term to support family and child wellbeing through ECE participation. Policies should also maintain prioritization of young children who have experienced foster care post-reunification or post-adoption in order to ensure that children who have experienced foster care continue to receive the benefits of ECE services once they leave foster care.
    - **Prioritization of this issue is particularly important when considering how access to resources changes for children in foster care after reunification or adoption**. While this study focused on recruiting families who currently or recently (within the last 12 months) have cared for a young child in foster care in order to better understand specific barriers and facilitators to ECE participation for this group of children, a few participants were in the reunification process or had adopted a child they had been caring for within the last year. Given the timeline of the current study, which centered the experiences of families caring for children currently (or recently, within the last 12 months) in foster care, this study did not focus on how resources continued after reunification or adoption. Yet, the researchers did at times hear from the few participants who had gone through or were currently going through the reunification or adoption process how they lost support (e.g., from their case worker) and/or resources (e.g., financial support from agencies, prioritization status as a child in foster care) that made it difficult to maintain continuity of care in ECE programs post-reunification or post-adoption. Therefore, **it is recommended that a future study be conducted that focuses the voices of families who have young children who *were* in foster care but have been reunified or adopted** to better understand barriers to ECE participation after the child has left foster care. Additional considerations for future research are outlined in the next section.

Key Takeaways:
Recommendations

- Building off participant recommendations to enhance information-sharing and increase program availability, the researchers recommend:
    - Building upon the information-sharing efforts of the Preschool Development Grant to increase family awareness of available ECE programs and resources and expanding community information entry points, like through healthcare settings and local departments of health.
    - Investing in robust training for child welfare and ECE staff and administrators, including: training for child welfare workers on the benefits of ECE and the resources available; and training for ECE staff on how to better engage with and support children in foster care and their families.
    - Establishing state-wide guidance and local support to enhance consistent information-sharing at the local level, including:
        - Clarifying information around Early Learning Scholarships and using a common nomenclature statewide
        - Establishing and supporting child welfare agency information-sharing and referral procedures
        - Establishing and supporting follow-up procedures for child welfare and ECE staff
    - Investing in ECE programs so programs can recruit, hire, and retain well-trained staff.
    - Given how transportation and scheduling impact families' ability to access ECE programs, considering the following:
        - Investing in safe, trauma-informed, age-appropriate, reliable transportation for young children
        - Increasing the availability of in-home services
        - Investing in local ECE programs to allow for non-traditional class and screening times

XI. Considerations for Future Research

This section introduces considerations related to potential future research in this topic area to guide and refine policy. In this section, components of the legislation that were not included in this study and recommendations for future studies that can address those areas of inquiry are addressed.

A. Engaging Additional Stakeholders and Communities

Research studies and other data collection activities (e.g., continuous quality improvement efforts, community needs assessments) can face challenges when working to engage diverse voices across a variety of identities and lived experiences, even when researchers like those in this study use intentional recruitment strategies to engage different communities. Furthermore, it is important to recognize how research studies have at times caused great harm to individuals, families, and communities, and the memory of this historical harm and subsequent lack of trust in institutions conducting research (government as well as academic) can impact whether a person chooses to participate in a study. Crucially, it can take a notable amount of participant resources, time, and effort to engage in a research study, which may hinder some persons from participating.

It is important, then, that future studies to deepen understanding of the barriers and facilitators to ECE participation for young children in foster care consider who is most able and likely to participate in research, and how to best engage those who are perhaps not as likely and/or able to participate. Studies and other data collection activities that are intentional about centering engagement across a variety of communities take time and resources to build trust and offer compensation to participants, especially if they may be losing wages or incurring costs (e.g., for child care) in order to participate. Partnering with community-identified leaders and community-based organizations to build trust and long-lasting relationships within the community are also intentional ways to conduct community-centered research. Partnering with researchers who specialize in community-based participatory research (CBPR)[23] and support community members to conduct rigorous research is another methodology that can be considered to continue to engage family and community voices going forward.

As previously mentioned, making concerted efforts to coordinate studies can also ensure that families and communities are not over-tapped for similar studies over a short period of time. If it is desired to solicit feedback from families on an annual basis, this should be done in a way that is the least burdensome to families and also inclusive of families who may not have the same resources to participate in research studies, as outlined above. Transparency is crucial to building relationships and maintaining trust, and families should be informed of how their feedback is being used to impact policy and practice throughout the state.

Finally, per the legislation, this study collaborated and consulted with stakeholders at the Minnesota Departments of Human Services and Education, county agencies, early care and

[23] To learn more about community-based participatory research, visit https://nrcrim.org/using-community-based-participatory-research-cbpr.

education providers (including school districts), and foster families and biological families in developing the content of the report. Given this study's timelines and scope, the judiciary and public health commissioners were not consulted as part of this research study. The voices and expertise of these stakeholder groups could be particularly helpful in a future study on child wellbeing (discussed in *Section XI, D: Defining and Measuring Child Wellbeing*).

B. Culturally-focused Studies with American Indian Tribal Partners and Systems

This study focuses on county-based foster care placements, which include indigenous children and may include children who were originally placed with counties that are now within a tribal system or whose case has been transferred for tribal oversight; the legislation guiding this report does not require engagement and stakeholder feedback with American Indian Tribal partners and systems. The quantitative portion of this study (outlined in the *Administrative and Contextual Insights* report, attached as Appendix C) found that American Indian/Alaska Native children in foster care had the lowest rates of ECE participation in the state. Thus, it is recommended that the state **consult with tribes to determine if more information around the barriers and facilitators to ECE access for children in foster care has been identified as a need** within their various communities. If so, it is then recommended that the state fund a study led by tribes and indigenous researchers[24] to better understand the barriers and facilitators to ECE participation for young American Indian children in foster care, and to put forth recommendations to improve access for these children.

Any future research with tribes should build upon, and not duplicate, the tribal engagement that was a part of the Preschool Development Grant.[25] As part of this work, an Indigenous Evaluation 101 Guidebook[26] was developed by Bowman Performance Consulting (Shawano, WI) and Wilder Research (Saint Paul, MN). For more information and updates on the work under the Preschool Development Grant, visit the grant's homepage[27] on the MDE website.

[24] Research with tribes should always be led by tribes: Research should only be conducted if the tribes need and/or desire the research to be conducted and research should be led by indigenous researchers. Sufficient funding, time, and project flexibility must be allocated to build trust and relationships as a central component of any study with tribal nations. If the research is in partnership with the University of Minnesota, researchers should consult the guidebook being developed through the UMN Office of Native Affairs. More guidance for engaging in indigenous research is available via this online resource from the Center for Native Child and Family Resilience (https://cncfr.jbsinternational.com/IWOK).

[25] For more on the efforts of the Preschool Development Grant, visit the MDE website at https://education.mn.gov/MDE/dse/early/preschgr/

[26] Access the Indigenous Evaluation 101 Guidebook from the Wilder Research website at https://www.wilder.org/wilder-research/research-library/indigenous-evaluation-101-guidebook

[27] See 25.

C. Annual Reporting on Measures for Children Who Have Experienced Foster Care

The *Administrative and Contextual Insights* report in this study included quantitative data on counts and rates of participation in ECE programs by young children (aged 0-5) in Minnesota who have experienced foster care, as well as counts and rates of participation that were disaggregated by children's race, ethnicity, age, and county of residence. This content is consistent with the legislation guiding this report [*Laws of Minnesota 2021, 1st Spec. Sess., chapter 7, art. 14, section 20*]. Data for the *Administrative and Contextual Insights* report were downloaded from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Data System (ECLDS). To facilitate the analysis, data were integrated, cleaned, and analyzed by the Minnesota Departments of Human Services and Education; findings were provided to the University of Minnesota research team for interpretation.

To provide this quantitative reporting on an annual basis, **consistent funding is required to cover the staff time** needed to clean the data, analyze the data, and then prepare a written report complete with detailed tables and charts. In addition, funding and staff time must be allocated to address the limitations of the current data system that were revealed through these analyses. A complete description of these limitations is included in the *Administrative and Contextual Insights* report (Appendix C). Examples include:

- **Enrollment data are not true indicators that ECE educational and/or child care services were received, were of high-quality, or received consistently.** ECLDS contains inconsistent attendance data: attendance data are not available for all programs and are also not included in all circumstances in ECLDS for programs that *do* have attendance data. Therefore, the amount of programming (dosage) received by each child could not be ascertained by ECLDS data.
- **The structure of the data as provided to ECLDS made it difficult to identify program participation across academic years,** which limited the ability to analyze participation in the ECE program prior to foster care entry.
- **Linking data between systems, including identification of unique individuals, is not perfect:** There may be some cases where the identity of a child was known in one or both systems but was not reconciled and flagged as the same individual when the data systems were integrated.
- **Head Start (HS) and Early Head Start (EHS) data are not included in ECLDS**, as these "federal-to-local" programs are not required to report enrollment data to the state (although some programs do choose to report data to the state for inclusion in ECLDS).
- The **data included in ECLDS are cohort-based data**, with each cohort of students changing from year-to-year; thus, **meaningful longitudinal analysis is challenging without additional analytic capacity**. Longitudinal analysis where data clearly follow individual children across several years can help identify trends over time which could then inform interventions to increase ECE participation. Program and child outcome

data are important because they support stakeholders' understanding of program impacts on children's developmental and academic growth.

D. Defining and Measuring Child Wellbeing

The legislation that guided the research also requested recommendations for:
"regularly reporting measures for children who have experienced foster care. Measures of early childhood wellbeing include administrative data from developmental screenings, school readiness assessments, well-child medical visits, and other sources as determined by the commissioner."

Given the timeline and resources of this study, and the study's focus on barriers and facilitators to ECE participation for young children in foster care, data from this research study do not address definitions and measures of early childhood wellbeing. Nor does it include an inventory of current administrative data that may already include reliable and valid measures of wellbeing. Most, but not all, ECE programs collect authentic assessment data on young children in their care to determine the most appropriate instructional strategies to use in programming and to determine if developmental delays exist with children. These data provide some insight on the wellbeing of children in Minnesota, but the lack of consistent measures across various ECE programs makes it difficult to present an aggregate report on child wellbeing in Minnesota at this time. Future research is needed to determine how different ECE programs and communities in Minnesota define wellbeing; how administrators perceive current measures of wellbeing; and, what is needed to integrate existing and new measures into a data system that state and local organizations can easily access to guide program improvements.

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Appendix A: Description of ECE Programs

This section was provided by MDE and DHS staff. The descriptions include the eligibility requirements for each program, including age requirements and if foster care involvement is a relevant eligibility factor. Because the School Readiness Plus program serves a relatively small number of children statewide (approximately 500 four-year-old students per year on average), and is very similar to the Voluntary Prekindergarten program, these programs were combined for analytic purposes and in their description.

1. Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE)

Infant and Toddler Intervention services and Preschool Special Education services are federal programs under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). In Minnesota, Early Intervention services and Preschool Special Education services are provided through local school districts and cooperatives. These services are free to eligible children and families regardless of income or immigration status.

Early Intervention services are provided in the child's home or community settings by local districts or cooperatives. The families/caregivers of children found eligible are central to the planning and delivery of services as well as for determining the outcomes. Children are eligible for early intervention services through Part C IDEA if they are under the age of three, and have: 1) Demonstrated a developmental delay of 1.5 SD in at least one area of development (physical, communication, cognitive, social or functional), have a diagnosed condition that is known to have a high correlation with delays in development, or based on informed clinical opinion. They do not need to demonstrate an educational need.

Preschool Special Educations services are most commonly provided within district programs but may also be provided in community care settings as well as the child's home. School districts or cooperatives provide instructional and therapy services according to the educational needs of the child that has been found eligible for services. Children receiving early childhood special education programming and services (ages 3 through 6) receive services under PART B/619 of IDEA. They have qualified for a categorical disability based on eligibility criteria or they have met criteria for developmental delay. Developmental delay criteria for children age 3 to age 7 must show a delay of at least 1.5 SD in at least 2 areas of development. Children receiving services and supports under IDEA Part B must demonstrate an educational need.

Link: https://education.mn.gov/MDE/fam/ECSE/

2. Voluntary Prekindergarten and School Readiness Plus (VPK/SRP)

Voluntary Prekindergarten (VPK) and School Readiness Plus (SRP) are publicly funded prekindergarten programs designed to prepare eligible 4-year-old children for success as they enter kindergarten the following year. Programs use play-based learning, coordinated transitions to kindergarten and family-centered program planning to create high-quality early learning opportunities that meet the needs of each child. Programs offer free transportation.

Link: https://education.mn.gov/MDE/fam/elsprog/vpk/

3. School Readiness

School Readiness is a preschool program designed to help prepare 3- and 4-year-olds to enter kindergarten. All Minnesota school districts provide a School Readiness program. Programming and services vary between districts, with class options for different days of the week and half-day or full-day options. Some School Readiness programs also offer services like home visiting or wrap-around care.

4. Early Childhood Screening

Early Childhood Screening supports children's learning and promotes health and development. Screening is a way for schools to meet with parents/guardians and children in order to listen to their successes and concerns. Screening in districts and some charter schools is offered between the ages of 3 and the start of kindergarten or first grade (through age 7). Screening is required within the first 90 days of attendance for many prekindergarten programs and within the first 30 days of kindergarten or first grade. Parents/guardians may conscientiously object to screening. Screening may link families to free early learning opportunities and resources such as Head Start, Early Childhood Family Education, prekindergarten programs, Early Childhood Special Education, Early Learning Scholarships, home visiting programs, or other resources.

Link: https://education.mn.gov/MDE/dse/early/elprog/scr/

5. Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE)

Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE) is a program for families and children. ECFE is based on the idea that families provide their children's first and most significant learning environment and parents/caregivers are children's first and most enduring teachers. ECFE works to support parents/caregivers and to strengthen and empower families. The goal is to enhance the ability of all parents/caregivers and other family members to provide the best possible environment for their child's learning and development.

ECFE is a program offered through school districts and is available to all Minnesota families with children ages birth to kindergarten entrance. Some ECFE programs also serve pregnant mothers and families with children up to third grade. Each ECFE program offers different programming and services, which are designed based on the needs identified in communities.

Link: https://education.mn.gov/MDE/fam/elsprog/ECFE/

6. Early Learning Scholarships

Early Learning Scholarships support access to high-quality child care and early education as one way to close the opportunity gaps faced by many children in households with low incomes. Families with children at or below 185% of federal poverty guidelines, or participating in one of eight public programs, one of which is foster care, are eligible. Children must be three or four years of age by September 1 of a school year, though eligibility is birth through age four for children in the following four prioritized categories: children of a teen parent pursuing a high school diploma or GED, children in foster care, children in need of child protection, or a child in a family who is or has been experiencing homelessness in the past 24 months. A scholarship must be used at a Parent Aware-Rated program. Parent Aware is a rating tool to help parents select high-quality child care and early education programs.

Link: https://education.mn.gov/MDE/fam/elsprog/elschol/

7. Head Start (HS)

Head Start services and programs help to prepare low-income families and preschool children (ages 3-5) for their transition to public school kindergarten. Head Start programs promote children's development through services that support early learning, health, and family wellbeing. The program helps children with early learning, health, nutrition and social services while being responsive to each family's ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds.

8. Early Head Start (EHS)

Early Head Start helps families with infants, toddlers (ages 0-3) and expectant families prepare for success. Programs promote children's development through services that support early learning, health, and family wellbeing. The program helps children with physical, cognitive, social and emotional development while being responsive to each family's ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds.

9. Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP)

The Child Care Assistance Program provides financial assistance to help families with low incomes pay for child care so that parents may pursue employment or education leading to employment, and so that children are well cared for and can thrive as learners. Minnesota counties and two tribal nations provide child care assistance services to 23,024 children and 11,359 families during an average month.

Families at or below 67% of the state's annual median income and receiving cash assistance (or who have received cash assistance in the past 12 months) are eligible. All other families must be at or below 47% of the state's annual median income to be eligible. Parents must participate in authorized activities, such as work, school or looking for a job, and cooperate with child support for all children with an absent parent. Child care assistance serves children age 12 or younger, or age 14 or younger if the child has special needs. Children in foster care are not eligible.

Families can choose any legal child care provider registered to receive child care assistance in the county or tribal nation (for White Earth and Red Lake Nations) where the family lives. This includes licensed and certified child care centers, licensed family child care providers, and legal nonlicensed providers (commonly known as family, friend, or neighbor).

Link: https://mn.gov/dhs/child-care/

Appendix B: Qualitative Methodology (Extended)

From early March 2023 to late April 2023, the University of Minnesota research team conducted a total of 37 focus groups and interviews with 69 family and worker participants across the state of Minnesota. The University of Minnesota research team, in consultation with the Minnesota Departments of Human Services and Education, identified county agencies across the state of Minnesota for outreach to partner in recruitment for the study. Ultimately, eight county agencies agreed to partner in recruitment for the study and participants from 13 counties participated in the study through additional statewide outreach in March 2023. All 69 participants who were eligible for the study and invited to participate in a focus group or interview agreed to be involved and went through the consent process as approved by the University of Minnesota Institutional Review Board (IRB). All qualitative data utilized in this project came directly from interviews with foster families and biological families of young children in foster care and professionals working within child and family serving systems. No additional data and/or specimens were incorporated. This study was approved by and is subject to the oversight of the University of Minnesota IRB (STUDY00017517).

This study focuses on county-based foster care placements, which include indigenous children and may include children who were originally placed with counties that are now within a tribal system or whose case has been transferred for tribal oversight.

Sampling Methodology and County Agency Recruitment Partners

In January 2023, the research team developed a sampling methodology using federal **Rural Urban Commuting Area (RUCA) codes** to identify counties across Minnesota for outreach. The codes are developed by the US Department of Agriculture Economic Research Services division, and classify U.S. census tracts using measures of population density, urbanization, and daily commuting. The RUCA codes range from 1-10, with 1 being the most urban and 10 being the most rural. The codes are categorized as follows: 1-3=metro (1=metro core), 4-6=micropolitan (4=micro core), 7-9=small town (7=small town core), 10=rural. Using the classification presented by the RUCA codes allowed the researchers to look at the nuance of rurality across counties in Minnesota to better understand potential access to resources by common commuting patterns, including access to ECE programs. For example, where other classifications may signify Clay County as a rural county, the RUCA codes take into consideration commuting patterns into the Fargo/Moorhead area, which then gives Clay County a designation of “1” (metro core) in the RUCA characterizations.

County RUCA codes were examined in conjunction with the ECE participation rates laid out in the *Administrative and Contextual Insights* report (Appendix C). Counties were ultimately identified and selected for outreach in consultation with the Minnesota Departments of Human Services and Education to ensure inclusion of varied rurality (RUCA code), region of Minnesota, and rates of ECE participation for young children in foster care in the county. Efforts were also made to prioritize outreach to local human service agencies in counties with high Native American/American Indian populations and African American/Black populations, given the disproportionality of involvement in the foster care system for these communities.

Initially, seven local human service agencies were identified and contacted by the research team to partner in recruitment efforts for the study. County agency administrators were sent an email detailing the purpose and processes of the study, and were asked to partner in recruitment of foster families and biological families of young children in foster care being served by their agency, as well as child welfare workers at the agency who worked directly with families of young children (aged 0-5) in foster care. The research team also conducted follow-up phone calls to reach agency administrators. Administrators were asked if they would be willing to send emails to potentially eligible families and workers and/or to reach out to families via phone using email and phone scripts prepared by the research team and approved by the University of Minnesota IRB.

When agency administrators responded that they were not able to participate, the research team included additional agencies in the recruitment plan based on the criteria presented above. Through this process, 22 local human service agencies were ultimately contacted by the research team. Eight human service agencies agreed to partner in recruitment. Eight human service agencies were not able to be reached after multiple attempts to contact agency administrators. Six human service agencies declined to participate, often citing the limited capacity of staff and/or the over-saturation of research studies that had been conducted with families served by the agencies over the last few years. County agencies were offered a $1,000 honorarium to cover the cost of additional recruitment efforts. Of the eight human service agencies that partnered in recruitment, one accepted the honorarium.

To amplify the study's reach to eligible families across the state, a statewide recruitment methodology was approved by the IRB and implemented in March 2023. The research team partnered with multiple University of Minnesota schools, departments, and research centers, the Minnesota Association of County Social Services Administrators (MACSSA) regional chairs, and several local and statewide community-based organizations that serve families with children in foster care or child welfare system involvement to get the word out to families via listservs, newsletters, and social media posts. When recruitment and data collection ended in April 2023, participants from 13 counties had engaged in the study through focus groups or interviews.

Participating Counties by RUCA Code and ECE Participation Rate during AY 2019

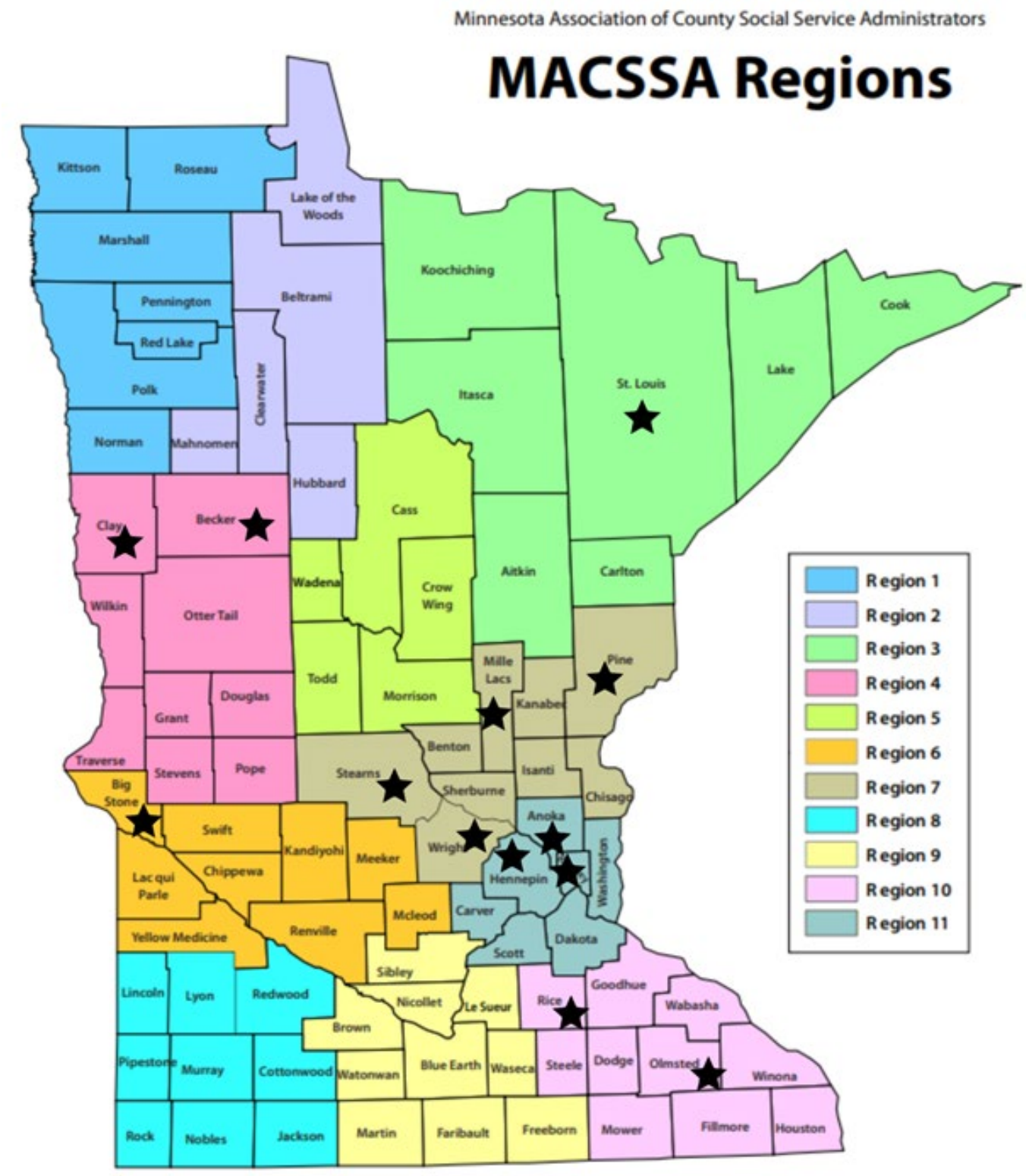
County	**RUCA code**	**High/low** ECE participation**	**ECE participation rate (number of children in foster care)**
Anoka	1 (metro core)	Low	39.2% (176)
Clay*	1 (metro core)	High	57.4% (54)
Hennepin	1 (metro core)	Medium	48.3% (1,083)
Olmsted*	1 (metro core)	Low	36.5% (63)
Ramsey	1 (metro core)	Medium	47.0% (529)
Stearns*	2 (metro)	High	51.2% (129)
Wright*	2 (metro)	Low	35.9% (78)
Rice	3 (metro)	Low	38.7% (75)
St. Louis*	3 (metro)	Medium	40.0% (415)

Mille Lacs	7 (small town core)	Low	39.8% (98)
Becker*	8 (small town)	Medium	47.1% (70)
Pine	8 (small town)	Medium	41.9% (43)
Big Stone	10 (rural)	High	50.0% (2)

**Partnered in recruitment and enough participants were simultaneously recruited for focus groups to be conducted.*
***Low ECE participation was categorized as <40%; Medium was categorized as 40<49.9%; High was categorized as >50%. The highest percentage of ECE participation for an agency in Minnesota with over 50 children in foster care in academic year (AY) 2019 was 57.4% (Clay County). The lowest percentage of ECE participation for an agency in Minnesota with over 50 children in foster care in AY 2019 was 31.2% (Beltrami County). Data tables detailing the counts and rates of ECE participation for AYs 2019-2021 are available in Appendix E of the December 2022 report, attached to this report as Appendix C.*

The above table is organized by RUCA code, with "1" signifying the most metropolitan and "10" signifying the most rural. Clay, Olmsted, Stearns, Wright, St. Louis, and Becker counties all agreed to partner in recruitment and recruited enough simultaneous participants to conduct at least one county- and role-specific focus group. Hennepin and Mille Lacs counties also agreed to partner in recruitment but had challenges with recruitment, resulting in no county-specific focus groups being conducted in those counties. The remaining counties were reached through the statewide recruitment efforts, with one or more statewide family participants living in each of these counties. **Participants in the study came from six MACSSA regions**: St. Louis County (Region 3); Clay and Becker counties (Region 4); Big Stone County (Region 6); Stearns, Wright, Mille Lacs, and Pine counties (Region 7); Olmsted and Rice counties (Region 10); and Hennepin, Ramsey, and Anoka counties (Region 11). The researchers are grateful to every county agency, University-affiliated partner, and community-based agency who partnered in recruitment for this study.

Participant Counties by MACSSA Region



Note. The original map is from the MACSSA website and has been edited to denote counties in which participants resided.

Participant Recruitment

Families and Child Welfare Staff

Once a county agency administrator agreed to partner in recruitment for the study, they were provided with email and phone scripts to aid in recruitment of eligible families and email scripts to support recruitment of eligible staff. All emails and phone scripts contained the contact information of the research team and instructed interested persons to contact the research team directly to determine eligibility and discuss the study in more detail: participants self-selected into the study if they were interested in participating. County agencies were not responsible for answering questions about the study, determining eligibility of participants, or performing consent procedures, and were instead instructed to refer interested persons to the research team. Interested persons contacted the research team via phone or email and were asked a series of questions to determine eligibility. The eligibility criteria for the study was as follows:

- Participant was a biological parent or guardian of one or more children aged 0-5 who are currently or recently (within the last 12 months) in foster care.
- Participant was a current or recent (within 12 months) relative or non-relative foster parent of one or more children aged 0-5.
- Participant was a child welfare professional working directly with families in the child welfare system and/or out-of-home care.
- Participant was an early childhood education administrator.

ECE Administrators

Once a county human services agency agreed to partner in recruitment for the study, members of the research team worked to identify and recruit ECE administrators in that county. ECE administrators were identified through selecting a school district that geographically overlapped with a Head Start service area in the county, where possible. School districts were further prioritized by outreach based on number of Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten and School Readiness Plus seats, for which children in foster care are a priority group. ECE administrators for school-based programs were recruited alongside Head Start administrators for the identified service areas. ECE administrators were also recruited through the snowballing method, where an ECE administrator would recommend another ECE administrator for recruitment.

Data Collection and Study Procedures

Once participants were confirmed by the research team as eligible, the research team answered any questions eligible participants had and worked to schedule focus groups and/or interviews with participants, depending on participant availability. Participants were informed at multiple points about the study purpose; how the study data would be used and who would have access to the data; the content and expected length of the focus group or interview (90 minutes for focus groups, 30 minutes for one-on-one interviews); and that the interview would be conducted via the video call software Zoom or in person at a private, neutral local location

(e.g., a local public library). While two focus groups with foster families were originally scheduled to be in person, due to hazardous winter weather conditions both focus groups were moved to Zoom. All participants who had originally intended to participate in person confirmed with the research team that they were capable of joining via Zoom. The participation confirmation email also emphasized that participation in the study was voluntary, and the identity of the study participants would remain confidential. After the focus group or interview, each participating family was emailed a $100 digital gift card to their email address as an honorarium for their time and insight as well as to help cover any potential costs incurred to participate (e.g., child care costs). Staff participants were not offered compensation for participating in the study.

Informed Consent Process

The consent form was provided as an attachment to the participation confirmation email and described the study in further detail. The consent form was then explained to all participants by members of the research team, who all have current CITI certifications in Social and Behavioral Research, at the start of each focus group or interview. Participants were invited to ask questions about the study at the time they were confirmed eligible (either via phone or email), in their participation confirmation email with the attached consent form, and after the consent form was explained to participants at the start of each focus group or interview. Participants were asked to sign the consent forms if they still wanted to participate (all participants agreed to participate) and send them back digitally to the research team during the focus group or interview. Once the research team received all consent forms, the research team proceeded with the data collection portion of the focus group or interview.

Data Collection and Management

Participants engaged in a role- and county-specific focus group or interview (e.g., foster families in Clay County) or in a statewide foster family focus group or interview, based on participant availability. All ECE administrators participated in interviews. Researchers used the video call software Zoom (password-protected) to conduct and record the interviews. All interested participants confirmed they were able to participate in a focus group or interview in English, and all participants consented to recording as part of the consent process. Two research team members were present for each interview (typically one researcher and one graduate research assistant, but sometimes two researchers); one researcher conducted the focus group or interview, based on the focus group/interview protocol designed by the research team specifically for this study, and the second research team member took running notes of the focus group/interview as a precaution in case the Zoom recording was inaccessible. Participants were asked about barriers and facilitators to ECE program participation, and recommendations related to increasing ECE participation for young children in foster care.

An mp4 audio file was extracted from each Zoom recording and sent out for professional transcription to the transcription service Scribie. One research team member reviewed each transcript for accuracy and to de-identify the transcript. Zoom video recordings were saved on a password-protected digital drive accessible only by the research team. After transcripts were validated and de-identified, all Zoom video recordings were destroyed.

At the end of each focus group or interview, participants were asked to complete a 10-question demographics survey through the survey software Qualtrics. No identifying information (e.g., name, email address) was collected as part of this survey. Participants were able to skip or not respond to any or all questions, as desired. Sixty-eight out of the 69 participants completed the survey (99% completion rate).

Data collection concluded in April 2023.

Data Analysis

Data-Analytic Strategies

The research team used the qualitative data analysis software NVivo (NVivo Mac, Release 1.7.1) to complete analysis of the focus group/interview transcripts. The data analysis process was iterative. Initially, two research team members (one from CASCW and one from CEED) drafted an *a priori* codebook based on relevant literature and the findings from the *Administrative and Contextual Insights* report. Then, the *a priori* codebook was reviewed, revised, and consensed by the full research team to create a revised codebook. Revisions may have included the addition or deletion of a code, or clarification of a code's definition. Then, each transcript was analyzed by two research team members, who used the revised codebook to analyze each subsequent transcript. Finally, a subgroup of the full research team, a four-member interdisciplinary analysis team (consisting of one researcher and one graduate research assistant from CASCW and one researcher and one graduate research assistant from CEED), met regularly throughout the analysis process to clarify definitions of the codes and document areas that needed further exploration or discussion, and to identify and discuss emerging themes.

After analyzing and coding the content of all 37 transcripts, researchers developed an outline for presenting the qualitative findings. The outline was based on the purposes of the study, the content of the focus group/interview protocol, and the analysis of the qualitative data. The outline delineated three areas of findings: barriers, facilitators, and recommendations. Then, within each area, the researchers used codes from the qualitative analysis to distinguish between barriers and facilitators to participation in ECE programs for young children in foster care, and opportunities and considerations to increase their participation in ECE programs. Through this process the researchers identified a set of key themes present in the qualitative data. After reviewing the focus group/interview excerpts coded to each theme for accuracy, researchers calculated the number and percentage of individual participants who mentioned each key theme at least one time. If a theme occurred more than once by a single participant, it was given the same weight in the calculations as a participant who mentioned the theme only once.

Methodological Integrity

In the early stages of the analysis process to assess the coder team's collective understanding of the codebook, the three researchers responsible for coding all 37 transcripts, each coded the same two transcripts from some initial focus groups (one transcript of a child welfare staff focus

group in one county and one transcript of a foster family focus group in another county). Then, researchers used the coding comparison query function in the NVivo software to calculate intercoder reliability between the three researchers who had coded both initial transcripts and all subsequent transcripts. Intercoder reliability was run at the paragraph level, which was the most relevant to this study in capturing themes as well as avoiding miscalculations due to coding styles (e.g., one coder coding the timestamp in a transcript and another not). Coding comparisons were run for each possible coding pair, and then averaged to identify a group total. The intercoder reliability average between the analysts was 0.53. NVivo notes that Kappa coefficients of 0.4-0.75 are considered fair to good. This tool of intercoder reliability was used to further discussion between researchers and to come to consensus where agreement was not found initially.

Appendix C: *Early Care and Education Participation for Young Children in Foster Care: Administrative and Contextual Insights* Report

Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare

CEED | Center for Early Education and Development
University of Minnesota

Early Care and Education Participation for Young Children in Foster Care:

Administrative and Contextual Insights - *Corrected*

January 4, 2023

Authored by:
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About the Authors

Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare (CASCW)

The Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare (CASCW) is located in the School of Social Work in the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Minnesota. CASCW works to improve the well-being of children and families involved in the child welfare system by educating and informing workers, policymakers, and the public.

Traci LaLiberte, PhD, is the Executive Director of CASCW and served as Principal Investigator for this study.

Kristine Piescher, PhD, is the Director of Research and Evaluation at CASCW and served as Co-Principal Investigator for this study.

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Center for Early Education and Development (CEED)

The Center for Early Education and Development (CEED) is located in the Institute of Child Development at the University of Minnesota. CEED's mission is to improve developmental outcomes for children through applied research, training, and outreach.

Ann Bailey, PhD, is the Director of CEED and served as Co-Principal Investigator for this study.

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Report Overview

Corrections to the December 2022 Report: *The Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) submitted clarifications to the definition of Early Learning Scholarships that had been provided to the University research team by MDE. MDE also submitted clarifying language around the age of children included in the quantitative sample and the ECE programs examined in the quantitative analysis. These minor corrections can be found in Section I, B; Section I, D; and, Section V.*

Study Background
The Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare and the Center for Early Education and Development at the University of Minnesota were commissioned by the Minnesota Department of Human Services to conduct a study to better understand barriers and facilitators to early care and education (ECE) participation for young children in foster care in Minnesota.

Study Limitations
Some of the limitations of this study that prevented the complete fulfillment of the mandates laid out in the legislation include: challenges in analysis given the availability (or lack thereof) of quantitative data; issues integrating data across systems; and data reliability issues when including all ages and ECE programs as specified in the legislation.

Key Quantitative Findings
Data contained in the Early Childhood Longitudinal Data System (ECLDS) were analyzed by the Minnesota Departments of Human Services and Education; findings were provided to the University of Minnesota research team for interpretation.

- A majority (56.3%) of young children in foster care were not enrolled in any ECE program in academic year 2019. Participation rates for young children in foster care (43.7%) were comparable to participation rates of the general child population (44.1%) in Minnesota.
- African American/Black children had the highest rates of ECE participation (49.9%) and American Indian/Alaska Native children had the lowest rates of ECE participation (38.6%).
- Although children less than one year of age were the largest age group in foster care in Minnesota, they had the lowest rate of ECE participation (25.9%).
- Most counties (72%) had ECE participation rates for children in foster care under 50%.

Preliminary Qualitative Findings
Interviews with key stakeholders were conducted to qualitatively explore the broad-level data systems, policy, and practice context of ECE participation for young children in foster care.

- There is a need for increased and improved data collection and integration to help local and state authorities better reach, serve, and support families in accessing ECE.
- Barriers to ECE participation look different across locations because counties, districts, and programs often operate differently and have access to different resources.
- Families may experience barriers to ECE participation across different points in the process, including barriers to learning about, accessing, engaging in ECE, and maintaining continuity of care.

Remaining Qualitative Activities
In 2023, the University of Minnesota team will conduct focus groups across the state to center the voices, experiences, and recommendations of families of origin, families providing foster care, and child welfare workers and ECE providers regarding barriers and facilitators to participation in ECE programs for young children in foster care. Aggregate findings from this study will be shared in a final report to the Minnesota Legislature in June 2023.

Contents

I. Executive Summary

A. Introduction

Participation in early care and education (ECE) programs has been found to increase the health and well-being of young children and families and could serve as an important tool to reduce educational disparities and long-term social inequities for disadvantaged children. Yet, many eligible children – like young children in foster care – are not enrolled in these programs and thus miss out on potential benefits. Despite research indicating that ECE participation can serve as a supportive pathway for achieving child welfare system goals (e.g., child safety and well-being), few studies have examined the low ECE participation rates for children in foster care, including barriers and facilitators to participation.

To address gaps in ECE participation rates for children in foster care, the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare (CASCW) and the Center for Early Education and Development (CEED) at the University of Minnesota were commissioned by the Minnesota Department of Human Services (DHS) to conduct a mixed-methods study on ECE participation for young children (aged 0-5) in foster care in Minnesota. The purpose of the study is to better understand the barriers and facilitators of participation in ECE programs for young children in foster care in Minnesota and to present findings in an interim report and a final report to the Minnesota Legislature.

For this interim report, the aim of the study was twofold:

- To quantitatively describe recent ECE participation rates for young children in foster care by race, ethnicity, age, and county; and
- To qualitatively explore the broad-level data systems, policy, and practice context of ECE participation for young children in foster care through interviews with key stakeholders.

Findings from the interim report will inform a second phase of qualitative data collection in 2023 (see *Section VII: Description of Remaining Qualitative Activities*), culminating in a final report to the Minnesota Legislature with recommendations for increasing access and engagement in ECE programs for young children in foster care in Minnesota.

B. ECE Program Descriptions

As defined by the legislation [*Laws of Minnesota 2021, 1st Spec. Sess., chapter 7, art. 14, section 20*], for purposes of this study "early care and education program" means: Early Head Start and Head Start under the federal Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007; special education programs under Minnesota Statutes, chapter 125A; early learning scholarships under Minnesota Statutes, section 124D.165; school readiness under Minnesota Statutes, sections 124D.15 and 124D.16; school readiness plus under Laws 2017, First Special Session chapter 5, article 8, section 9; voluntary prekindergarten under Minnesota Statutes, section 124D.151;

child care assistance under Minnesota Statutes, chapter 119B; and other programs as determined by the commissioner.

Brief descriptions of the publicly funded ECE programs included in this study are presented below. For detailed program descriptions, see *Appendix A: Description of ECE Programs.*

1. **Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE), Parts B and Part C:** Federally funded programs to provide support and services to infants, toddlers, and preschool children with disabilities and/or developmental delays and their families.
2. **Voluntary Pre-K (VPK)** and **School Readiness Plus (SRP):** Publicly funded prekindergarten programs designed to prepare eligible 4-year-old children for success as they enter kindergarten the following year.
3. **School Readiness:** Preschool program designed to help prepare 3- and 4-year-olds to enter kindergarten.
4. **Early Childhood Screening:** Screening program to identify possible health or developmental concerns in infants and young children who may need a health assessment, mental health assessment, or educational evaluation.
5. **Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE):** Program for families and children designed to enhance the ability of all parents, caregivers, and other family members to provide the best possible environment for their child's learning and development.
6. **Early Learning Scholarships:** Scholarships designed to increase access to high-quality ECE programs, improve school readiness for all young children, and close the opportunity gaps faced by many children in low-income households. Children must be three or four years of age by September 1st of a school year, though eligibility is 0-4 for children in the following prioritized categories: children of a teen parent pursuing a high school diploma or GED, children in foster care, children in need of child protection, or a child in a family who is or has been experiencing homelessness in the past 24 months.
7. **Head Start (HS)** and **Early Head Start (EHS)**: Federally funded preschool programs to help to prepare low-income families and children for success and their transition to public school kindergarten.
8. **Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP):** Provides financial assistance to help families with low incomes pay for child care so that parents may pursue employment or education leading to employment, and so that children are well cared for and can thrive as learners. Children in foster care are <u>not</u> eligible for CCAP benefits.

Data from the following seven programs are systematically entered into the Early Childhood Longitudinal Data System (ECLDS), which was the primary data source for the quantitative analysis in this report: Early Childhood Special Education Parts B and C, Voluntary Pre-K, School Readiness Plus, School Readiness, Early Childhood Screening, Early Childhood Family Education, and Early Learning Scholarships. Data from these programs were analyzed for young children in foster care by race, ethnicity, age, and county. Data from Head Start and Early Head Start are not systematically integrated with ECLDS. While CCAP data are available in ECLDS, children in foster care are not eligible for CCAP benefits; thus, CCAP data were not included in the quantitative analysis of this study.

C. Study Limitations

It is important to note some of the limitations of this study that prevented the complete fulfillment of the mandates laid out in the legislation. Study limitations include: challenges in analysis given the availability (or lack thereof) of quantitative data and issues integrating data across systems; data reliability issues when including all ages and programs as specified in the legislation; and stakeholder engagement limitations, which are acknowledged in the legislation. These limitations are presented in more detail as follows:

1. Although the legislation mandates an exploration of participation for children under six years of age, the University of Minnesota team received data from the state for **children aged 0-4.** MDE and DHS staff determined that because many kindergarten-aged children are not eligible for ECE programs, including 5-year-olds in the analysis would have presented inaccurate counts and rates. For example, 5-year-olds may be marked as "not enrolled" in ECE programs but may be in kindergarten and therefore ineligible for ECE (and already receiving educational programming through their kindergarten classroom).
2. The quantitative findings by race, ethnicity, age, and county **do not include children enrolled in Early Head Start or Head Start** because data from these programs are not systematically integrated with ECLDS.
3. The quantitative findings **do not include children enrolled in the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP)** as children in foster care are ineligible to receive CCAP benefits.
4. This study focuses on county-based foster care placements, which include indigenous children and may include children who were originally placed with counties that are now within a tribal system or whose case has been transferred for tribal oversight. **It is necessary to conduct culturally-sensitive research with tribal communities as partners** and central stakeholders; the final report will include recommendations for the state to fund and conduct additional community-engaged studies, in partnership with indigenous researchers, to better understand the intersection of foster care placement and participation in Tribal Early Childhood programs, such as the Tribal Early Learning Initiative and Tribal Home Visiting, and to explore strategies to reduce barriers and improve access to early care and education programs for young American Indian children in foster care.

D. Quantitative Methods and Findings

Quantitative Methods

The quantitative findings in this report are based on data contained in the Early Childhood Longitudinal Data System (ECLDS). The purpose of the quantitative analysis, as defined by legislation [*Laws of Minnesota 2021, 1st Spec. Sess., chapter 7, art. 14, section 20*] was to provide counts and rates of participation in early care and education (ECE) programs by young children (aged 0-5) who have experienced foster care and, to the extent practicable, to disaggregate the counts and rates of participation by children's race, ethnicity, age, and county of residence. To facilitate the analysis, data were integrated, cleaned, and analyzed by the Minnesota

Departments of Human Services and Education; findings were provided to the University of Minnesota research team for interpretation.

Limitations of the Quantitative Data

The quantitative analysis revealed several limitations in using ECLDS data. In addition to quantitative data challenges discussed as part of study limitations, additional limitations of these data must be taken into account when interpreting the quantitative findings. This section can also serve as a guide for ongoing efforts to improve existing administrative data systems. A complete discussion of the limitations of the ECLDS data used in this analysis appears in *Appendix D: Quantitative Methodology (Extended)*. A subset of these limitations most critical for interpreting the data presented in this summary are as follows:

1. Data were requested for three consecutive academic years (2019, 2020, and 2021), but there were concerns about the data integrity of academic years (AYs) 2020 and 2021, given changes in reporting and/or participation due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, **AY 2019 was analyzed to provide a pre-pandemic snapshot** of ECE participation for this population.
2. The quantitative analysis does not examine participation in privately funded ECE programs. Additionally, findings likely **overestimate the participation in publicly funded ECE programs** that provide educational programming or child care services by young children in foster care because the "enrolled in ECE" count in ECLDS includes children who have participated in Early Childhood Screening and Early Learning Scholarships. Neither of these programs offer educational programming or child care services. Future research should disaggregate Early Childhood Screening and Early Learning Scholarships data from ECE programs that provide educational and/or child care services.
3. **Enrollment data are not a true indicator that ECE educational and/or child care services were received, and received consistently.** ECLDS contains inconsistent attendance data: attendance data are not available for all programs and are also not included in all circumstances in ECLDS for programs that *do* have attendance data. Therefore, the amount of programming (dosage) received by each child could not be ascertained by ECLDS data.

Quantitative Findings and Considerations

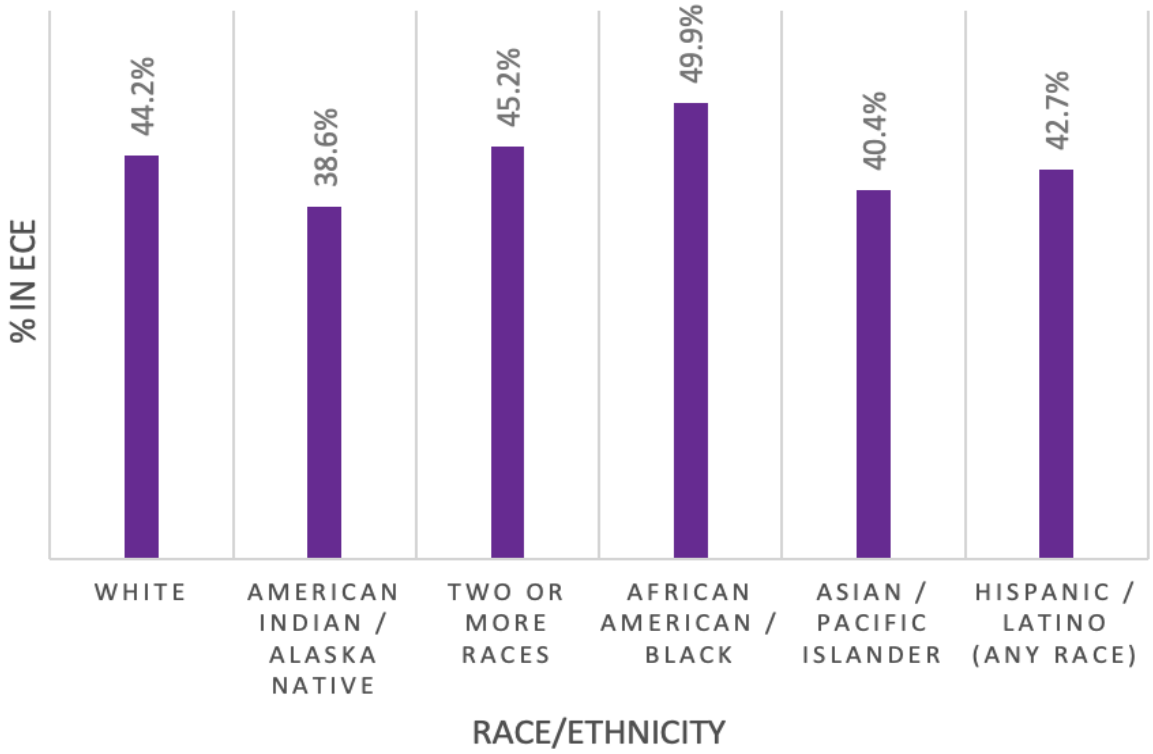
This section provides a high-level overview of the quantitative findings based on aggregate participation data across the seven ECE programs included in ECLDS (Early Childhood Special Education Parts B and C, Voluntary Pre-K, School Readiness Plus, School Readiness, Early Childhood Screening, Early Childhood Family Education, and Early Learning Scholarships) for academic year 2019 for children aged 0-4 in foster care. These data include Early Childhood Screening and Early Learning Scholarships, which do not provide educational programming or child care services.

- A majority (56.3%) of young children in foster care (n=5,404) were not enrolled in any ECE program in AY 2019. Participation rates for young children in foster care were comparable to participation rates of the general child population in Minnesota.

    - ***Consideration:*** *While these data indicate there may be shared experiences across families in Minnesota, given the limitations to the data and subsequent analysis noted above, we need the insights of people with lived experience in this area: foster and biological families, child welfare workers, and ECE providers.*
- For some of the programs with higher rates of participation among young children in foster care than children in the general population (e.g., Early Learning Scholarships), it could be that the categorical eligibility of children in foster care may be facilitating access to those benefits for families providing foster care.
    - ***Consideration:*** *Examining pathways to increase access and availability of ECE programs for young children in foster care – who may face more access barriers than other children and families – can help policymakers explore avenues to ultimately increase ECE program access for <u>all</u> young children in Minnesota.*
- A majority of counties (72%) had ECE participation rates for young children in foster care under 50%. All 11 Minnesota Association of County Social Service Administrators (MACSSA) regions in Minnesota had ECE participation rates under 50% for this population. Counties (n=78, as some public human service agencies serve multiple counties) with the lowest and highest ECE participation rates (min=0%, max=75%) also had small populations of young children in foster care (min=1 child in foster care, max=7 children in foster care).
    - ***Consideration:*** *When analyzing county-level data, it is important to examine counts (number of children in foster care) as well as rates (of ECE participation) to better understand sample size and how meaningful the rates may be in comparison to other counties.*
- African American/Black children had the highest rates of ECE participation (49.9%) and American Indian/Alaska Native children had the lowest rates of ECE participation (38.6%). American Indian/Alaska Native children, African American/Black children, and children of multiple races are disproportionately represented in the foster care system.
    - ***Consideration****: It is important that a culturally-sensitive and community-centered study on ECE participation for young children in foster care be conducted in partnership with the tribal nations of Minnesota, especially given the disproportionate number of American Indian/Alaska Native children in foster care and accompanying low rate of ECE participation for this group of children.*
- Although children less than one year of age were the largest age group in foster care in Minnesota, they had the lowest rate of ECE participation (25.9%). This is partially due to the small number of publicly funded early childhood programs in ECLDS that serve infants.
    - ***Consideration****: ECE participation for infants can support families by promoting community and parenting practices, providing relief from child care responsibilities, and allowing caregivers to continue and/or pursue gainful employment. Increased outreach for this age group could benefit families.*
- Data limitations ultimately impact what we are able to understand about ECE participation for young children in foster care. The way in which data were able to be analyzed for this report may be obscuring some existing patterns.

- ***Consideration**: Increasing data integration across systems and expanding uniform data collection practices in a way that can accurately track the services received by individual children can expand our understanding of ECE participation counts, rates, and outcomes for young children in foster care.*

ECE Participation for Young Children in Foster Care by Race and by Ethnicity during AY 2019



Note. ECE enrollment includes Early Childhood Screening and Early Learning Scholarships, which are programs that do not provide educational programming or child care services. *Also displayed as Figure 2 in Section V, D: Quantitative Findings.*

E. Qualitative Methods and Findings

Qualitative Methods

From September 2022 to October 2022, the University of Minnesota research team conducted a total of 18 interviews with 19 professionals from the Minnesota Department of Human Services, the Minnesota Department of Education, and relevant community organizations. Interviewees were asked questions about their professional background and current role as it relates to ECE participation and foster care, as well as broad-level (e.g., policy) barriers and facilitators to participation in ECE programs for young children in foster care in Minnesota and recommendations to increase participation. Interviewees with administrative data experience were also asked about their understanding of the strengths and challenges of working with state administrative data systems relating to ECE participation for this population, and

recommendations to improve current administrative data systems.

Researchers intentionally invited stakeholders with different areas of expertise to participate in the interviews to capture a broad-level (e.g., data systems, policy, and practice) context to better understand ECE participation for young children in foster care. Thus, the variance in the interviewees' level of expertise and experience in the areas examined is an important consideration when interpreting the qualitative results of this interim report.

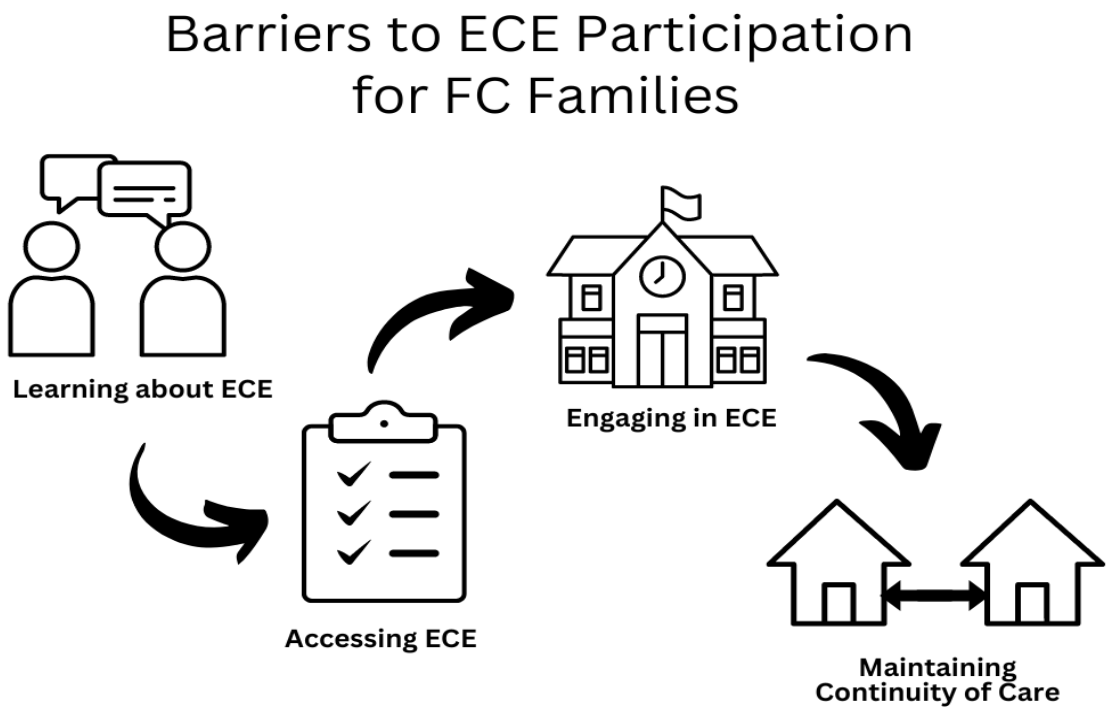
Qualitative Findings and Considerations

This section provides a high-level overview of the qualitative findings based on interviews with key stakeholders:

- There is a need for increased and improved data collection and integration to help local and state authorities better reach, serve, and support families in accessing ECE and maintaining continuity of care.
    - ***Consideration:*** *Data integration across systems is key to providing real-time data that can help state and local agencies better coordinate services for families. Prioritizing staff training could help bridge these gaps by increasing knowledge on the best data collection and interpretation practices.*
- Barriers to ECE participation look different across locations because counties, districts, and programs often operate differently and have access to different resources. These differences can create challenges to equitable access to ECE and continuity of care.
    - ***Consideration:*** *Strategic and sustainable investments by the state could help mitigate some of these differences across locations. Investments in the quality and accessibility of programs, as well as staff training and knowledge, could ultimately connect more children to ECE and provide higher quality services to children in foster care.*
- Families may experience barriers to ECE participation across different points in the process, including barriers to learning about, accessing, and engaging in ECE, and then maintaining continuity of care. Barriers may also be different across families (e.g., non-relative families providing foster care and kinship families, families with children with special needs).
    - ***Consideration:*** *It is important to consider and collect data on how barriers vary across different families with children in foster care.*
- Prioritization by individuals, programs, agencies, and the state helps create momentum for positive change.
    - ***Consideration:*** *Prioritization and collaboration is key to success in a siloed, county-administered system. There are opportunities to build upon current efforts, including eligibility and service coordination activities in Minnesota supported by the Preschool Development Grant[28], and to ensure that prioritization efforts are well-funded and sustainable long-term.*

[28] Minnesota's Preschool Development Birth through Five grant is a partnership of the Minnesota Departments of Education, Health, and Human Services, along with the Children's Cabinet to align education and care systems across the state. Learn more: https://education.mn.gov/MDE/dse/early/preschgr/

Barriers to ECE Participation for Foster Care (FC) Families



Note. Also displayed as Figure 9 in Section VI, B: Qualitative Findings.

F. Remaining Qualitative Data Activities

In January 2023, the University of Minnesota research team will begin a second phase of the qualitative study. The remaining qualitative data activities for this study will center the voices, experiences, and recommendations of families of origin, families providing foster care, and child welfare workers and ECE providers regarding barriers and facilitators to participation in ECE programs for young children in foster care.

The University of Minnesota research team, in consultation with the Minnesota Departments of Human Services and Education, will identify key regions across the state of Minnesota to serve as the focus of this second stage of the study. Key regions will be identified by their utilization (or lack thereof) of ECE programs by young children in Minnesota's foster care system. Beginning in early 2023, the University of Minnesota research team will partner with child welfare and ECE administrators in the identified regions to recruit child welfare workers, ECE providers, and foster and biological families of young children (0-5 years of age) in foster care to participate in a focus group to better understand barriers and facilitators to ECE participation for this population. Each participant will engage in one role- and region-specific focus group (e.g., families providing foster care in a specific county or region). Aggregate findings from this study will be shared in a final report to the Minnesota Legislature in June 2023.

II. Study Background

To address gaps in early care and education (ECE) participation rates for young children in foster care, the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare (CASCW) and the Center for Early Education and Development (CEED) were commissioned by the Minnesota Department of Human Services (DHS) to conduct a mixed-methods study on ECE participation for children under age six in foster care in Minnesota. The purpose of the study is to better understand the barriers and facilitators of participation in ECE programs for young children in foster care in Minnesota and to present findings in an interim and final report to the Minnesota Legislature. For this interim report, the aim of the study was twofold: to quantitatively describe recent ECE participation rates for young children in foster care by race, ethnicity, age, and county; and to qualitatively explore the broad-level data systems, policy, and practice context through interviews with key stakeholders.

Study findings shared in this interim report focus on administrative data systems, and broad-level policy and practice relating to ECE participation for young children in foster care. These findings are intended to inform considerations for state-level policies, such as improving 1) our understanding of ECE participation for children in foster care through administrative data systems, 2) outreach efforts to families with children in foster care, and 3) the quality and equitable accessibility of ECE programs. Findings from the interim report will also inform a second phase of qualitative data collection in 2023, incorporating the perspectives of foster and biological families, ECE providers, and child welfare workers, culminating in a final report to the Minnesota Legislature (see *Section VII: Description of Remaining Qualitative Activities*). The final report will include recommendations to the Minnesota Legislature on increasing access and engagement in ECE programs for young children in foster care in Minnesota.

III. Legislation

The following legislation describes the reporting requirement and content relevant to this interim report based on legislation from Laws of Minnesota 2021, 1st Spec Sess., Chapter 7, Article 14, Section 20.

Subd. 1. Reporting requirement

- The commissioner of human services shall report on the participation in early care and education programs by children under six years of age who have experienced foster care, as defined in Minnesota Statutes, section 260C.007, subdivision 18, at any time during the reporting period.
- For purposes of this study, "early care and education program" means Early Head Start and Head Start under the federal Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007; special education programs under Minnesota Statutes, chapter 125A; early learning scholarships under Minnesota Statutes, section 124D.165; school readiness under Minnesota Statutes, sections 124D.15 and 124D.16; school readiness plus under Laws 2017, First Special Session chapter 5, article 8, section 9; voluntary prekindergarten under Minnesota Statutes, section 124D.151; child care assistance under Minnesota Statutes, chapter 119B; and other programs as determined by the commissioner.

Subd. 2. Report content

- The report shall provide counts and rates of participation in early care and education programs disaggregated, to the extent practicable, by children's race, ethnicity, age, and county of residence.

Subd. 3. Data and collaboration

- The report shall use the most current administrative data and systems, including the Early Childhood Longitudinal Data System, and publicly available data. The report shall identify barriers to other potential data sources and make recommendations about accessing and incorporating the data in future reports.

IV. Issue Overview

This section provides an overview of what is currently known about ECE participation for young children in foster care.

A. ECE Participation for Young Children in Foster Care

Participation in ECE programs has been found to **positively impact school readiness** (Ansari et al., 2019; Lipscomb et al., 2013; Lipsey et al., 2018; Puma et al., 2012), child **cognitive development and health** (Camilli et al., 2010; Puma et al., 2010), and **early gains in school achievement** (Hill et al., 2015; Reynolds et al., 2010), as well as **increased education attainment** into adulthood (Campbell et al., 2012) and **reduced likelihood of engaging in criminal activity** in adulthood (Garcia et al., 2019). Studies have also shown that **participation in ECE programs can improve parenting practices** (Ansari et al., 2016; Vogel et al., 2013) and **parent involvement in their child's education** (Puma et al., 2010). Critically, participation in quality ECE programs has been found to be particularly **impactful for young children at a disadvantage** as measured by mothers' education level (Garcia et al., 2019), low-income status (Burger, 2010; Dinehart et al., 2012), child welfare system involvement (Dinehart et al., 2012; Hajal et al., 2019; Klein et al., 2018; Kovan et al., 2014), and/or living in foster care (Lipscomb et al., 2013; Pears et al., 2016, 2022).

Yet, the Minnesota Department of Education estimates there were **almost 41,000 children** who were eligible for, but not yet receiving Early Head Start or Head Start services in Minnesota last year (Minnesota Head Start Association, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic (school year 2020-2021) exacerbated underenrollment trends, as **enrollment rates declined for Minnesota children** across Early Childhood Special Education programs, Voluntary Pre-K and School Readiness Plus programs, and statewide enrollment in kindergarten generally (Minnesota Department of Education, 2021). ECE participation for children supervised by the child welfare system is **consistently and concerningly low**, even as federal guidelines have prioritized ECE program enrollment for child welfare services-supervised children (Klein et al., 2016).

Despite the categorical eligibility and low participation rates of young children in foster care, a large portion of research exploring barriers to ECE participation has focused on low-income families, and **few studies have examined the low participation rates for children with child welfare system involvement and/or living in foster care.** For example, research from a broad Wilder Research study examining the health and well-being of Minnesota children found that just 28% of eligible children living in poverty were enrolled in Early Head Start or Head Start programs in Minnesota in the 2015-2016 school year (Chase et al., 2018), but the data were not disaggregated to examine participation rates among children in foster care. It is essential that this gap in knowledge be addressed and that participation rates among young children in foster care be examined: Minnesota-based studies have found that when compared to children who are low-income but not involved in the child protection system, **children with child protection system-involvement have fared worse in terms of academic achievement** (Kovan et al., 2014;

Susman-Stillman et al., 2022 *unpublished manuscript*). Concerningly, young children in the child protection system often do not receive the early interventions they need to thrive in a school environment and beyond (Lipscomb et al., 2012; Ward et al., 2009), and studies have found that **children in foster care are particularly at-risk for lower school achievement** compared to their peers in parental care (Pears et al., 2005; Piescher et al., 2014; Trout et al., 2008).

Even as research findings have indicated that ECE participation can serve as a supportive pathway for achieving child welfare system goals, such as child safety and well-being (Klein, 2016), several **policy and structural challenges** to the integration of early learning systems and child welfare systems still exist at federal and local levels, creating system-level barriers to ECE participation (Brodowski et al., 2016; James Bell Associates, 2015; Lee et al., 2015; Meloy et al., 2012, 2015). Studies have identified that, for children in the general population, additional **barriers to ECE participation occur on the family level**, including cost, transportation limitations, and perceptions of discrimination (Ansari et al., 2020; Beatson et al., 2022; Mitchell et al., 2017). While these barriers may have some cross-over to those experienced by families providing foster care, ultimately **little is known specifically about barriers and facilitators to ECE participation for young children (aged 0-5) in foster care**, particularly in the United States (two recent international studies explored foster caregivers' decisions to participate or not participate in ECE programs: see Cameron et al., 2020 and Metoo et al., 2020).

B. Barriers and Facilitators to ECE Participation

To date, **existing research on ECE participation has rarely focused on young children in foster care and their families.** Much of what we know about participation in ECE programs for this population has come from randomized control trials and program evaluations, which often focus on one intervention or program (like Head Start). Additionally, these quantitative studies have often limited their samples to children aged 3 or 4 (e.g., Lipscomb et al., 2013; Magnuson & Waldfogel, 2016), because they would be eligible to enroll specifically in a pre-K program. This has resulted in **limited knowledge around ECE participation for children aged 0-2**. Yet, children less than one year old are the largest age group entering the foster care system in Minnesota, making up **15.9% of annual entries** (US Children's Bureau, 2020). These quantitative studies also often lack nuanced data collection, in-depth exploration of data, as well as sufficient population reach, which qualitative or mixed methods studies can more readily provide. The few studies that have used qualitative interviews to explore barriers and facilitators to ECE participation have restricted their examination to low-income families, families of a specific demographic or background (e.g., Latino/a immigrant families in Ansari et al., 2020), and/or have been conducted outside of the unique policy context of the United States (e.g., Beatson et al., 2022 in Australia; Meetoo et al., 2020 in England; and Mitchell et al., 2017 in New Zealand).

Among the few studies that have explored the barriers to ECE participation for young children in foster care, several **structural and systems elements** have emerged as themes in barriers to ECE participation, including: a **lack of vacancies in high-quality ECE programs** (James Bell

Associates, 2015; Mitchell & Meagher-Lundberg, 2017); a **lack of understanding of the benefits of high-quality ECE programs** among child welfare and court system workers, resulting in low referrals to ECE programs (James Bell Associates, 2015; Lee et al., 2015); challenges due to **limited collaboration** between ECE agencies and child welfare agencies, including a lack of historical collaboration and personnel turnover (James Bell Associates, 2015; Lee et al., 2015); and **issues with integrating data systems** to better understand gaps and needs around ECE participation for young children in foster care (James Bell Associates, 2015). Policies have also been found to serve as barriers to ECE participation, such as the **variation in receipt of and accommodations granted for child care subsidies** (specifically, the federal Child Care and Development Fund program) by state and family type (e.g., families providing foster care are less likely to receive child care subsidies; Lipscomb et al., 2012; Meloy et al., 2015); and **policies that restrict ECE program eligibility and availability based on family type** (e.g., family of origin or family providing foster care; Lee et al., 2015). A lack of stability in child care subsidies (Lipscomb et al., 2012) and foster placement changes and/or case closures (Lee et al., 2015) have also been found to create disruptions in ECE participation for children in foster care.

On the family level, two international studies found that **foster parent meaning-making around ECE** and foster parent roles as important attachment figures for children – often prioritizing attachment and emotional stability over formal education – as well as **hectic schedules**, served as barriers to ECE participation for families providing foster care (Cameron et al., 2020; Meetoo et al., 2020). One study of ECE participation among the general population in Australia found that similar beliefs around maternal roles and the value of ECE kept families from enrolling young children in ECE programs (Beatson et al., 2022). Additional studies outside of the United States context and not relating specifically to children in foster care identified barriers to ECE participation including: **direct and indirect costs**, such as fees and transportation (Beatson et al., 2022; Mitchell & Meagher-Lundberg, 2017); a **lack of cultural relevance in ECE programming** (Mitchell & Meagher-Lundberg, 2017); and **fear and mistrust of programs** that were perceived by families to be rooted in discrimination and/or educational inequality based on race/ethnicity (Ansari et al., 2020). Mitchell & Meagher-Lundberg (2017) also illustrated that a range of personal reasons and circumstances outside of aggregate study themes additionally played a role in facilitating or hindering participation in ECE programs for individual families.

Even less has been expressly identified in the literature in terms of facilitators to ECE participation for children in foster care. Studies in Australia and New Zealand highlight that the **effective promotion of the benefits of high-quality ECE programs** can positively influence participation (Beatson et al., 2022; Mitchell & Meagher-Lundberg, 2017). Similarly, Tilhou et al. (2021) identified that **collaboration across sectors** in local communities could increase access to educational and health and wellness programs for families with children in foster care**.**

Given the limitations of what is currently understood around the barriers and facilitators to ECE participation for young children in foster care, this study provides an important opportunity to expand our understanding of these barriers and facilitators within the unique local policy context of the state of Minnesota. Using **quantitative data analysis**, in partnership with analysts from the Minnesota Departments of Human Services and Education, to provide a

better understanding of the current context, and **qualitative interviews** with a wide range of stakeholders, the full span of this study (to be completed in spring 2023, see *Section VII: Description of Remaining Qualitative Data Activities*) will provide crucial insight into the barriers and facilitators to ECE participation for young children in foster care. By better understanding the **broad policy, practice, and data systems context** (shared in this interim report), in addition to the **experiences of families and workers** in this area (to be shared in the final report), Minnesota policymakers and administrators will be better equipped to improve access to the myriad benefits of ECE programming for young children in foster care.

V. Quantitative Findings and Considerations

This section presents the key findings from quantitative analysis of data sourced from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Data System (ECLDS), which integrates data elements from the Minnesota Department of Education and Minnesota Department of Human Services (Social Service Information System; SSIS). To facilitate the analysis, data were integrated, cleaned, and analyzed by the Minnesota Departments of Human Services and Education; findings were provided to the University of Minnesota research team for interpretation. The purpose of this quantitative analysis was to better understand the rates of ECE participation (measured by whether a child is enrolled in one of the seven publicly funded early childhood programs included in ECLDS in one academic year) for young children in foster care by race, ethnicity, age, county, and Minnesota Association of County Social Service Administrators (MACSSA) region.

A. Quantitative Data Limitations

Before discussing the quantitative methodology and findings, it is important to highlight what may be understood from these data and what remains unclear, given the limitations to the quantitative data available for the analysis shared in this report:

1. In this section, **ECE participation is defined as whether a child was enrolled** in any publicly funded early childhood program included in ECLDS in the same academic year they experienced a foster care placement. This study does not examine participation in privately funded ECE programs. There are several publicly funded early childhood programs in the ECLDS data system, including **Early Childhood Screening** and **Early Learning Scholarships**, which are programs that do not provide educational programming or child care services. For example, a child who was marked as having been screened through the Early Childhood Screening program may not have been enrolled in an educational or care setting, but would still be counted in the total "enrolled in ECE" count, resulting in an overcount of participation in educational programming and/or child care services for this population. As mentioned by interviewees in a subsequent section of this report (see *Section VI: Preliminary Qualitative Findings and Considerations*), Early Childhood Screening can serve as an entry point for families to hear about and understand ECE resources, but a completed screening is **not a guarantee that a child will participate** in a high-quality ECE setting. In another example, a child may be receiving an Early Learning Scholarship but not yet be enrolled in a high-quality ECE setting. Per analysis of the integrated data, this child would also be counted in the total "enrolled in ECE" counts and percentages, **even though they may not be receiving high-quality educational programming and/or child care services**.
2. **Enrollment data are not a true indicator that ECE educational and/or child care services were received, and received consistently.** Children may be enrolled in an educational or care setting but not be able to participate in that setting for a variety of reasons, many of which were discussed in our qualitative interviews with key

stakeholders (see *Section VI: Preliminary Qualitative Findings and Considerations*). In addition, ECLDS contains inconsistent attendance data: attendance data are not available for all programs and are also not included in all circumstances in ECLDS for programs that *do* have attendance data. Therefore, the amount of programming (dosage) received by each child could not be ascertained by these data.

3. **The structure of the data as provided to ECLDS made it difficult to identify program participation across academic years,** which limited the ability to analyze participation in the ECE program prior to foster care entry. Data are provided on participation rates for children in foster care where there was overlapping ECE program participation during the academic year, and where the participation in the ECE program for that particular academic year appeared to begin after the child was placed into foster care. While the timing of foster care placement and ECE program enrollment was examined, **it is difficult to determine whether foster care preceded ECE program involvement or whether it came after** because of inconsistencies in data reporting regarding enrollment dates across program types, and because data were analyzed separately for each academic year rather than being analyzed longitudinally**.** Thus, these data were ultimately not included in the report due to concerns around reliability of the data. Having a better understanding of the timeline of when children entered a foster placement and how, or if, that coincided with enrollment in an ECE educational or child care setting, and who was involved in this process and at what point, could have implications for increasing ECE participation for this population.
4. **Linking data between systems, including identification of unique individuals, is not perfect:** There may be some cases where the identity of a child was known in one or both systems but was not reconciled and flagged as the same individual when the data systems were integrated. The match rate was requested by the MDE team, but was not accessed by MDE prior to the publication of this report. However, data linking complexities go beyond the match rate. As records within SSIS are updated, DHS analysts saw instances where a single child showed multiple race values or multiple birth dates. Sometimes this was due to differing information from different counties. Other times, the same county provided differing information for the same child. This suggests the records were updated, leading to multiple values being stored in ECLDS. Attempts by the DHS and MDE team to reconcile this against live SSIS data often failed as PERSON_IDs had since changed (e.g., identity had been reconciled to another record).
5. **There are some concerns about the completeness and reliability of the data entered into the EESTUDENT data source**, which was used for School Readiness and Early Childhood Family Education program identification. These data are currently being moved into the new MDE Ed-Fi data system. MDE continues to work with school districts to ensure accurate data entry. These circumstances may limit the accuracy of these initial estimates of participation rate for School Readiness and Early Childhood Family Education.
6. The **School Readiness Plus** program serves a relatively small number of children statewide (approximately 500 four-year-old students per year on average) and is very similar to the Voluntary Prekindergarten program. These programs were combined for

analytic purposes, as small sample sizes make it difficult to conduct meaningful analyses.

7. Although the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) is included in the legislation surrounding this report and data on CCAP is available in ECLDS, **data on CCAP benefits were not included in this report, as children in foster care are ineligible for CCAP**. This ineligibility was confirmed by leadership from the CCAP program area in October 2022.
8. The **Early Childhood Screening** program is intended to screen children prior to or within 30 days of enrollment in kindergarten. Once a child is screened, they do not need to be screened again. The data included in this section present a single year snapshot of the number of children that were screened in that year. For example, a child who was four years of age and did not receive a screening during academic year 2019 could have been screened in the prior year and therefore did not need to be screened again, or a child could be screened in the next year and still meet state requirements. However, earlier access to screening (available at age 3) is encouraged because screening can facilitate access to additional ECE supports and services.
9. **Head Start (HS) and Early Head Start (EHS) data are not included in ECLDS**, as these "federal-to-local" programs are not required to report enrollment data to the state (although some programs do choose to report data to the state for inclusion in ECLDS). Head Start and Early Head Start enrollment numbers for children in foster care were not available for the analyses presented in this report by race, ethnicity, age, and county (using ECLDS data). Numbers from federal reporting requirements of these programs were used to the level practicable to determine general participation rates in the state.
10. The **data included in ECLDS are cohort-based data**, with each cohort of students changing from year-to-year; thus, **meaningful longitudinal analysis is challenging without additional analytic capacity**. Longitudinal analysis where data clearly follow individual children across several years can help identify trends over time which could then inform interventions to increase ECE participation. Program and child outcome data are important because they support stakeholders' understanding of program impacts on children's developmental and academic growth.

Going forward, it is important to note that **current data sharing agreements limit the use of ECLDS data for research** purposes without special permission from the governance process used to support ECLDS. This can inadvertently create barriers to better understanding ECE participation for young children in foster care and to integrating information and subsequent efforts across agencies at the state and local levels.

B. Description of Quantitative Methods

This report uses data contained in ECLDS, which combines select data collected by the state departments of Education, Human Services, and Health into one online, interactive database using a standardized matching process to connect children across programs. Data are linked at the level of the child and academic year so that program involvement is seen as occurring in the same academic year as the child experienced foster care. Data on foster care and relevant ECE

programs (Table 1), including Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) services, Voluntary Prekindergarten (VPK), School Readiness Plus (SRP), School Readiness, Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE), Early Childhood Screening, and Early Learning Scholarships were analyzed. Because the School Readiness Plus program serves a relatively small number of children statewide, and is very similar to the Voluntary Prekindergarten program, these programs were combined by DHS and MDE staff for analytic purposes. For an expanded description of programs, see *Appendix A: Description of Programs*.

***Table 1**. Description of ECE Programs*

Program	Description	Age	Eligibility Criteria & Cost
Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE): Part B Part C	Federally funded programs to provide support and services to infants, toddlers and preschool children with disabilities and/or developmental delays and their families.	3-4 0-2	Free for eligible children regardless of income or immigration status.
Voluntary Pre-K (VPK) School Readiness Plus (SRP)	Publicly funded prekindergarten programs designed to prepare eligible 4-year-old children for success as they enter kindergarten the following year.	4	Free for all age-eligible children, pending availability of funding and capacity at the school district-level. Children in foster care are prioritized for available seats in VPK. Children in foster care are included as a required category for receiving SRP-funded seats.
School Readiness	Preschool program designed to help prepare 3- and 4-year-olds to enter kindergarten.	3-4	Sliding fee scales are used; however, no family can be turned away due to inability to pay for services. Children in foster care are included as a required category for receiving School Readiness-funded seats.
Early Childhood Screening	Screening identifies possible health or developmental concerns in infants and young children who may need a health assessment, mental health assessment, or educational evaluation.	3-4	Free for all age-eligible children.
Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE)	Program for families and children designed to enhance the ability of all parents, caregivers and other family members to provide the best possible environment for their child's learning and development.	0-4	All children who meet the age requirement are eligible. Sliding fee scales are used; however, no family can be turned away

			due to inability to pay for services.
Early Learning Scholarships	Scholarships designed to increase access to high-quality early childhood programs for 3- and 4-year-old children with the highest needs to improve school readiness for all young children and close the opportunity gaps faced by many children in low-income households. Eligibility is 0-4 for children in the four prioritized categories discussed in Section 1,B: Program Descriptions.	0-4	Children in foster care are categorically eligible, pending availability of scholarships.
Head Start (HS) Early Head Start (EHS)	Federally funded preschool programs to help to prepare low-income families and children for success and their transition to public school kindergarten.	3-4 0-3	Children in foster care are categorically eligible, pending availability of open seats.
Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP)	Provides financial assistance to help families with low incomes pay for child care so that parents may pursue employment or education leading to employment, and so that children are well cared for and can thrive as learners.	0-4	Children in foster care are <u>not</u> eligible.

Note. Ages displayed in Table 1 are from 0-4 in alignment with the data analyzed in ECLDS for this report. Some programs listed in this table serve children older than age 4.

C. Description of Quantitative Data

Data were requested by DHS and MDE staff for **cohorts of children who experienced foster care** in academic years 2019, 2020, and 2021 and were **five years old or younger** at the time of the reporting. Given the ages of children served in each program, data for **children aged 0-4** were analyzed and provided by DHS and MDE to the University team for interpretation. Although not shown here, five-year-old children, and some children older than five, can receive services for some of these programs. This would occur in cases where children are in classrooms where ECE services are provided, but the district does not directly receive funding for the program. An exception would be five-year-olds who are age-eligible for early childhood special education services, but could also be counted under different special education services once the child is enrolled in kindergarten. Because of this, **it was determined by the DHS and MDE team that including children who turn 5 years old (by September 1st of the school year) in the analysis would create percentages that are not meaningful**: non-participation by a 5-year-old could mean they were in kindergarten and therefore ineligible for ECE programming, not that they were *eligible* for ECE programming but were not *accessing* ECE. Therefore, for the purposes of this report, the focus was on children not yet age-eligible for kindergarten (children aged 0-4).

For all identified children in foster care, data were provided on program participation in any of the seven ECE programs included in ECLDS for each academic year, including child enrollment dates. **Children may have been enrolled in more than one ECE program** in one academic year (e.g., the child participated in an Early Childhood Screening or received an Early Learning

Scholarship and was also enrolled in another ECE program). Therefore, the total enrollment counts per program do not add up to the total number of young children in foster care enrolled across all ECE programs in ECLDS: **duplicate counts were removed to present an accurate "total" statistic**. The data for analysis contained participation rates for each program and subprogram shown by statutorily required factors, including: **race of the child** (using census categories), **ethnicity of the child** (Hispanic, non-Hispanic), **age of the child**, and **county**.

Although DHS and MDE staff obtained three years of data (AY 2019, AY 2020, AY 2021) from the ECLDS data system, the main analysis provided to the University team for interpretation centered on academic year 2019. **Focusing on AY 2019 data provides a snapshot of ECE participation prior to the COVID-19 pandemic**, which impacted participation rates across the state and may have created issues in data reliability due to changes in required data collection practices during the pandemic. Although there was some fluctuation in ECE participation across years for given programs, participation rates were relatively stable (Table 2). *For complete quantitative methodology, see Appendix D: Quantitative Methodology (Extended). Aggregate ECE participation counts and rates for young children in foster care from AYs 2020 and 2021 (by race, ethnicity, age, and county) are available in Appendix E: Data Tables. For program-specific tables for AYs 2020 and 2021, contact Amy Dorman at dorm0039@umn.edu.*

***Table 2**. ECE Participation for Young Children in Foster Care for AYs 2019, 2020, and 2021 by Program*

ECE Program	% in Program (2019)	% in Program (2020)	% in Program (2021)
Any ECE program	*43.7%*	*45.0%*	*43.9%*
ECSE	25.5%	23.2%	24.4%
ECSE (Part B)	23.9%	24.5%	22.4%
ECSE (Part C)	18.0%	17.3%	16.1%
VPK/SRP	11.3%	14.4%	12.4%
School Readiness	9.9%	10.9%	9.9%
ECFE	2.0%	1.8%	1.1%
Early Childhood Screening	26.4%	23.8%	20.7%
Early Learning Scholarships	16.1%	22.0%	19.1%

*Note. "*Any ECE program" includes enrollment in at least one early childhood program in ECLDS, including Early Childhood Screening and Early Learning Scholarships. Reporting for ECFE during AY 2021 was especially impacted by the pandemic.

D. Quantitative Findings

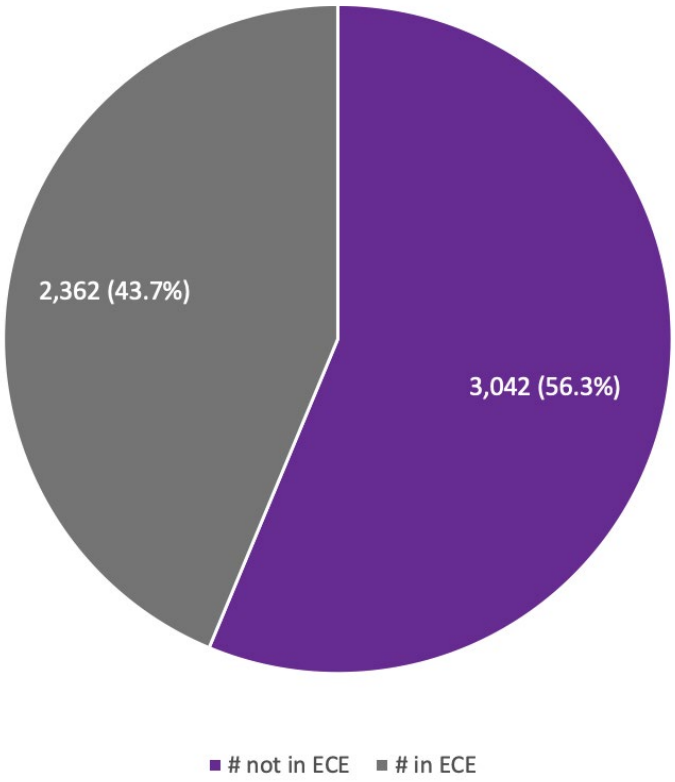
This section provides findings based on aggregate participation data for academic year 2019 across the seven publicly funded early childhood programs included in ECLDS for children aged 0-4 in foster care. As mentioned earlier, although Early Learning Scholarships and Early Childhood Screening do not provide educational programming or child care services directly,

they were included for the purposes of this report in the "any ECE" category. Additionally, Early Head Start and Head Start are not included in the main analysis of this section because program data are not available in ECLDS. Data on CCAP are also not included in this section because children in foster care are ineligible for the program.

Overall ECE Participation Rates of Young Children in Foster Care

Of the 5,404 children reported as having a foster care placement in AY 2019, **43.7% (2,362) of children in foster care were reported as enrolled** in one of the seven early childhood programs included in ECLDS (Figure 1). It is estimated that **56.3% (3,042) of eligible children in foster care were <u>not</u> enrolled** in any ECE program during AY 2019.

Figure 1. *Number of Children in Foster Care Enrolled in an ECE Program During AY 2019.*



Note. ECE enrollment data include Early Childhood Screening and Early Learning Scholarships, which are programs that do not provide educational programming or child care services.

ECE Participation for Young Children in Foster Care by Race/Ethnicity

As depicted in Table 3, rates of ECE participation for young children in foster care across racial groups (excluding *Unknown/Declined, n=146*) and ethnicity (*Hispanic/Latino*, across any race) **vary by 11.3 percentage points** from the highest rate of participation to the lowest rate of participation. **African American/Black children** (n=772) experienced the **highest rate** of ECE participation at **49.9%** and **American Indian/Alaska Native children** (n=1,142) experienced the

lowest rate of ECE participation at **38.6%.** In comparison, **44.2% of white children** (n=2,133) participated in ECE, **45.2% of children of two or more races (n=1,102)** participated in ECE, and **40.4% of Asian/Pacific Islander children** (n=109) participated in ECE. The percentage of **Hispanic/Latino children** (across any race, n=510) who participated in ECE was **42.7%.**

Table 3. *ECE Participation for Young Children in Foster Care by Race and by Ethnicity during AY 2019.*

Race/Ethnicity	# in FC	# in ECE	% in ECE
White	2,133	943	44.2%
American Indian/Alaska Native	1,142	441	38.6%
Two or more races	1,102	498	45.2%
African American/Black	772	385	49.9%
Asian/Pacific Islander	109	44	40.4%
Hispanic/Latino (any race)	*510*	*218*	*42.7%*

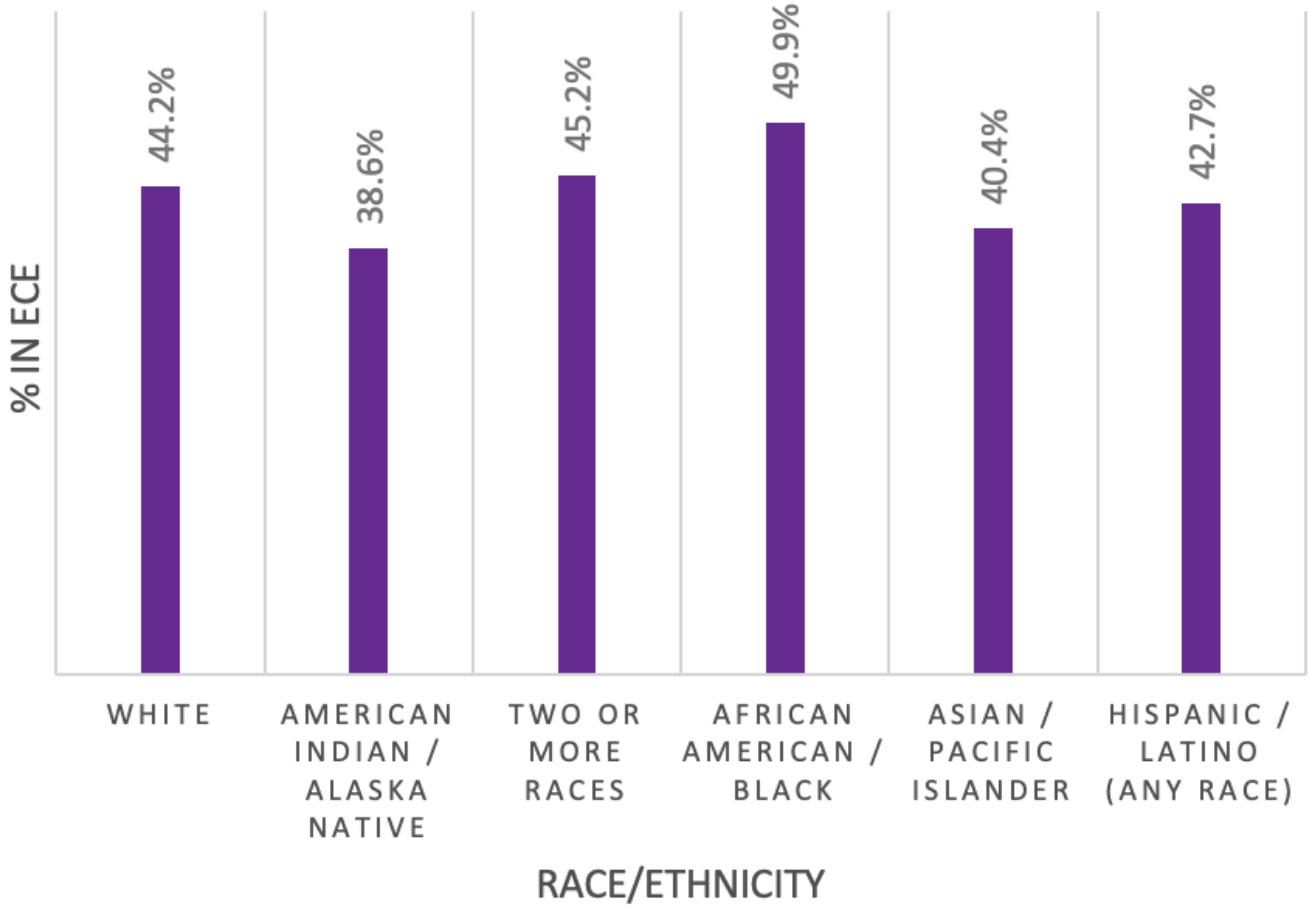
Note. ECE enrollment data include Early Childhood Screening and Early Learning Scholarships, which are programs that do not provide educational programming or child care services.

These numbers are further depicted in Figures 2 and 3. Figure 2 shows the percentage of young children in foster care within each racial and ethnic group who were enrolled in ECE in AY 2019. Figure 3 illustrates participation by race and ethnicity by the total number of children in foster care (shown in gray) alongside the number of children in foster care enrolled in ECE (shown in purple). When we break down the sample of young children in foster care who are eligible for ECE programming by racial and/or ethnic groups (excluding *Unknown/Declined, n=146*), we see that, depending on the racial or ethnic group, **between 50.1-61.4%** of children in foster care were **not enrolled in ECE programs in AY 2019 (mean≈56%).**

It is important to note that while white children make up the majority of children in foster care in Minnesota, **American Indian/Alaska Native** children, **African American/Black** children, and children of **multiple races** are **disproportionately represented in the foster care system**, a reality that is not made evident from the data presented in Figure 3. Data from Child Trends show that in fiscal year 2020, **white children** made up **67%** of the general child population in Minnesota, and **34% of the foster care population**. In contrast, **American Indian/Alaska Native children** made up closer to **1%** of the general child population, but **21% of the foster care population** in Minnesota. **African American children** and **children of multiple races** made up

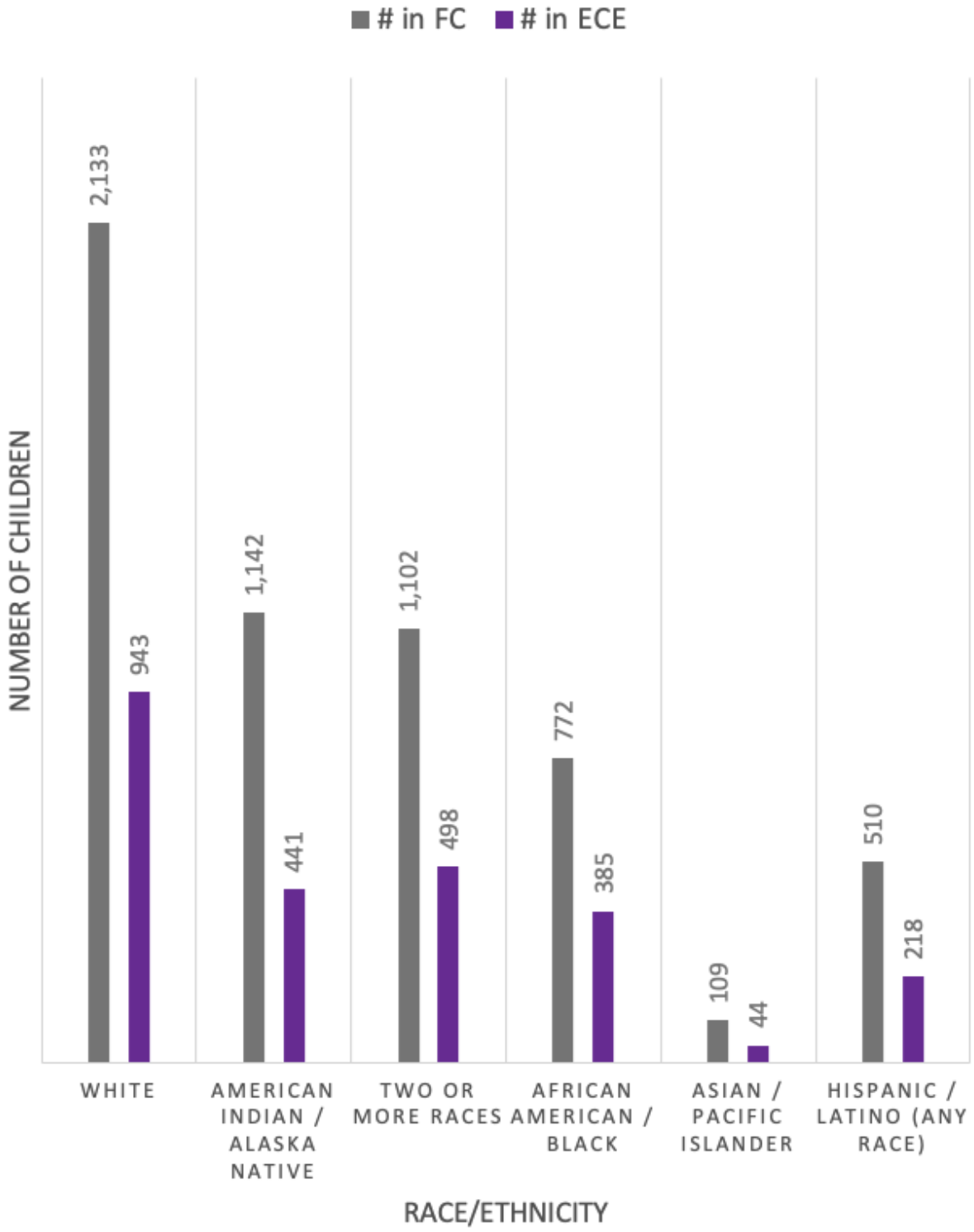
10% and **5%** of the general child population, respectively, but **15% and 19% of the foster care population**, respectively (Williams, 2020).

Figure 2. *ECE Participation for Young Children in Foster Care by Race and by Ethnicity (percent) during AY 2019.*



Note. ECE enrollment data include Early Childhood Screening and Early Learning Scholarships, which are programs that do not provide educational programming or child care services.

Figure 3. *ECE Participation for Young Children in Foster Care by Race and by Ethnicity (count) during AY 2019.*



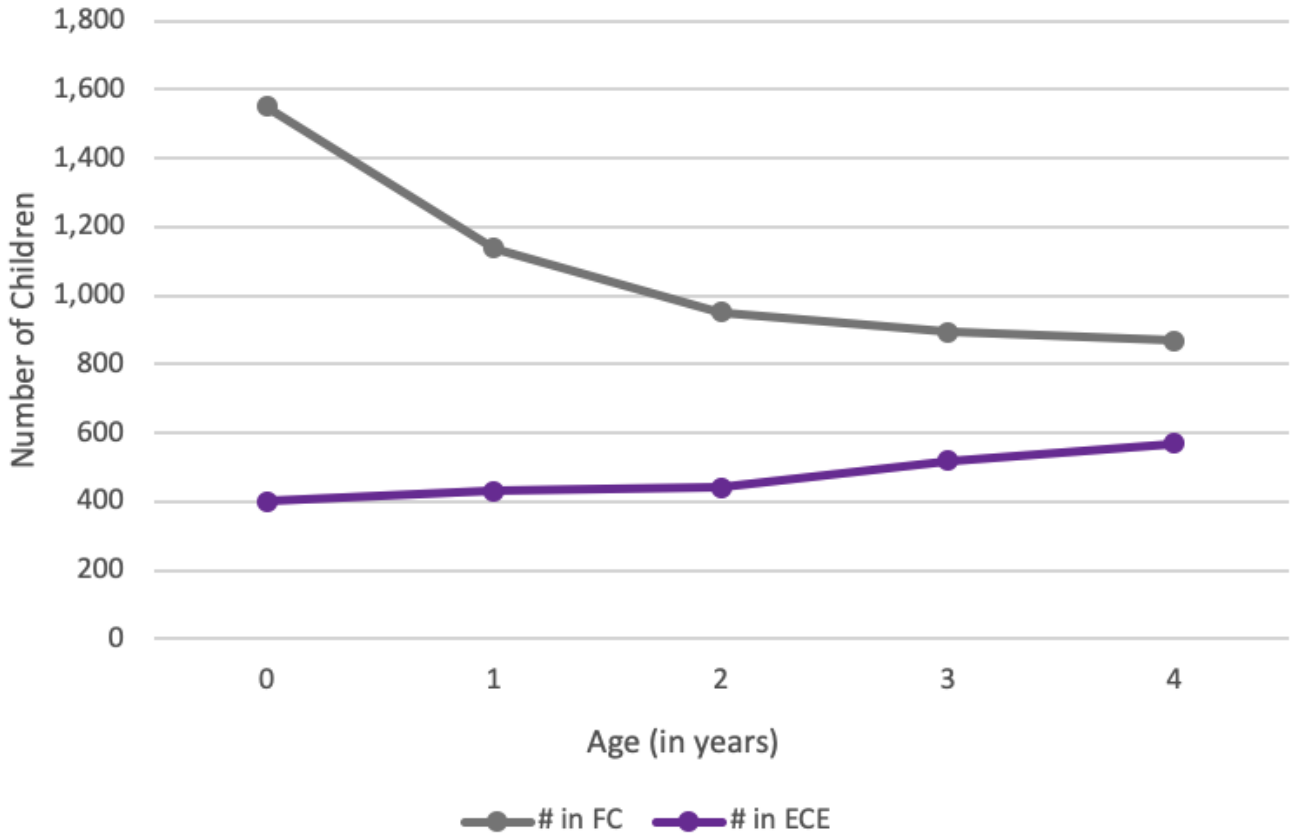
Note. ECE enrollment data include Early Childhood Screening and Early Learning Scholarships, which are programs that do not provide educational programming or child care services.

ECE Participation for Young Children in Foster Care by Age

Examining publicly funded ECE participation data by age reveals a potential gap in services, particularly for children aged 0-2. **Children under one year of age** are consistently the **largest group entering the foster care system** in Minnesota, making up **15.9% of entries in 2020** (US Children's Bureau, 2020). This concentration of infants (age <1) in foster care can be seen in Figure 4, where the number of children in foster care declines by ascending age group (indicated in gray). Despite this, of the 1,551 infants in foster care, **infants** were the age group with the **lowest rate of ECE participation**: Just **401 (25.9%)** infants were involved in ECE programming in AY 2019. Children aged 0-2 are eligible for **ECFE programs and Early Learning Scholarships**, which can be used at eligible ECE centers. These programs can support families with infant children in foster care by promoting community and parenting practices, providing relief from child care responsibilities, and allowing caregivers to continue or pursue employment, to the betterment of their families.

Given that there are more ECE programs that serve children at ages 3 and 4, it is not surprising that we see **more children in foster care enrolled in ECE programming as they approach 3-4 years of age** (indicated in purple). Of the seven programs included in ECLDS analyzed in this report, four (57%) are intended to serve only 3- and/or 4-year-olds. Included in this group is the **Early Childhood Screening** program, which begins at 3 years old and although it is not an educational program in itself, can often serve as a tool to **raise awareness of ECE programs and resources for families.**

Figure 4. *ECE Participation for Young Children in Foster Care by Age during AY 2019.*



Note. ECE enrollment data include Early Childhood Screening and Early Learning Scholarships, which are programs that do not provide educational programming or child care services.

ECE Participation for Young Children in Foster Care by County and Region

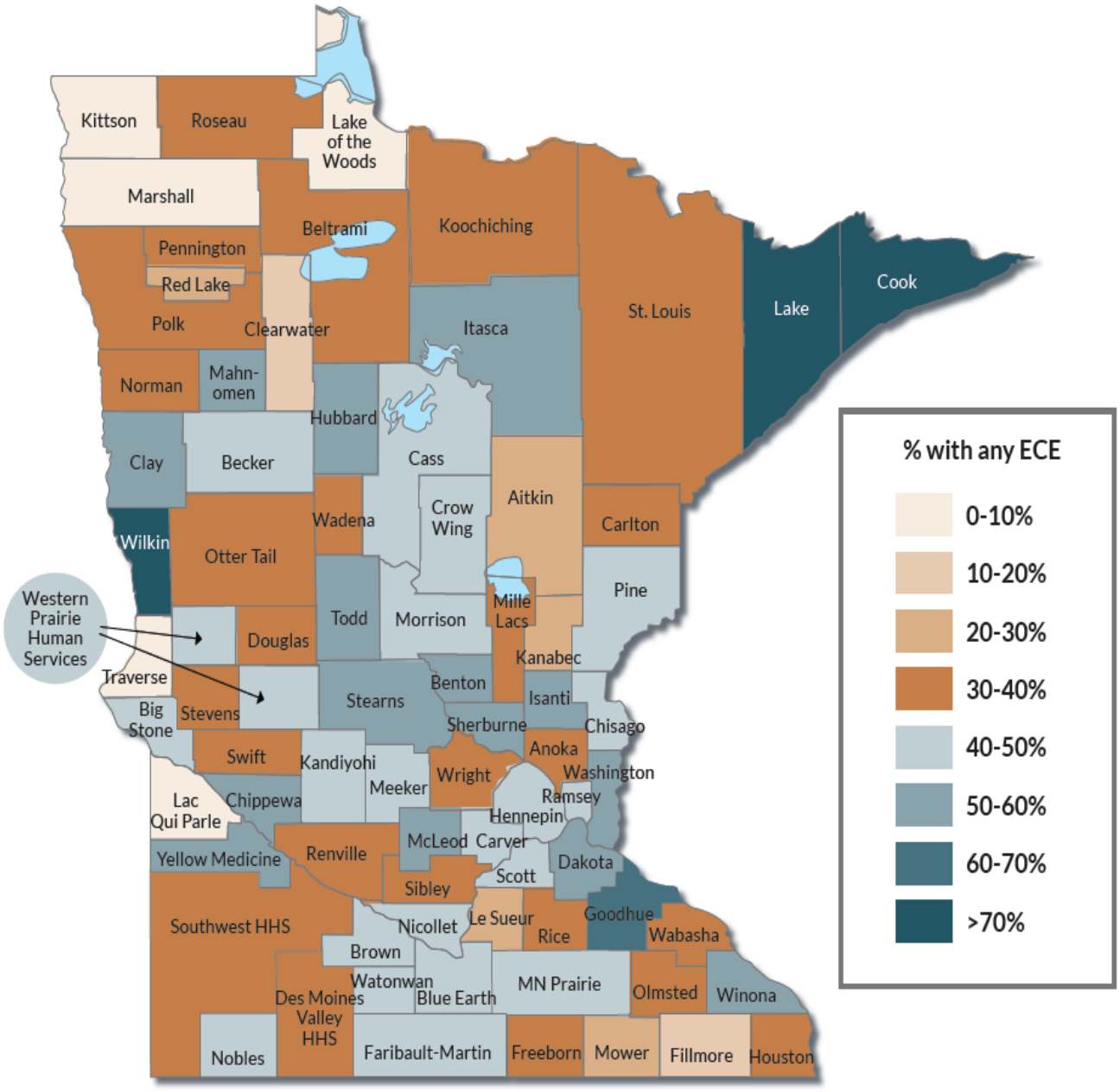
Examining ECE participation rates by county (n=78, as some public human service agencies serve multiple counties) and by MACSSA region (n=11) presents a few difficulties. Some counties, and therefore some regions, have lower numbers of children in foster care, which can greatly **impact the meaningfulness of the ECE participation rate.** Particularly at the county level, some of the lowest (min=0%) and highest (max=75%) rates of ECE participation coincide with a small number of young children in foster care in that county (Figure 5). For example, the **five counties with a 0% ECE participation rate** had **less than six** young children in foster care; Two of these counties had only one young child in foster care. The same can be said for the highest rates of participation by county: Of the **three counties with participation rates over 70%**, one had only **seven** young children in foster care and the other two had just **four** young children in foster care. Thus, it is important to consider counts of children in foster care as well as ECE participation rates at the county level.

Of the **19 counties** with ECE participation rates **between 50-70%** (max=61.5%), the range in number of young children in foster care in each county varied widely, from **2 to 202 children.**

The counties with ECE participation rates **between 50-70%** and numbers of young children in foster care **over 100** were **Dakota County** (52%, n=105 out of 202 young children in foster care) and **Stearns County** (51.2%, n=66 out of 129 young children in foster care). Dakota County is in MACSSA Region 11 and Stearns County is in MACSSA Region 7. The remaining **51 counties** had participation rates **under 50%** (min=16.7%, max=49.1%).

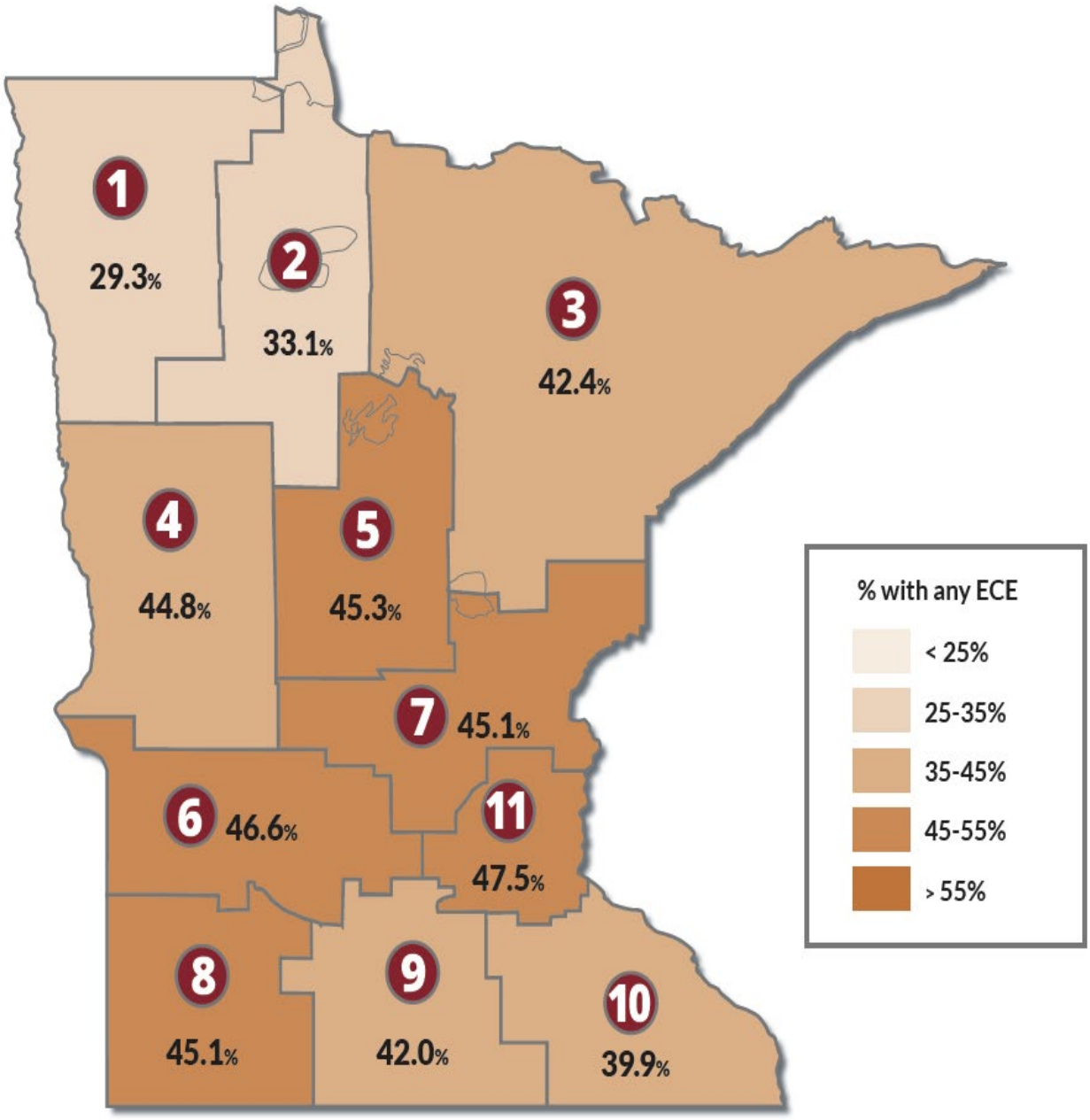
Regionally, we see that **none of the 11 MACSSA regions had an ECE participation rate over 50%** for young children in foster care (Figure 6, see *Appendix E: Data Tables* for county data by MACSSA regions). **Region 11** had the **highest rate of ECE participation** for young children in foster care at **47.5%** (n=1,027 out of 2,161 young children in foster care in the region), while **Region 1** had the **lowest participation rate at 29.3%** (n=22 out of 75 young children in foster care in the region). Despite limitations to what can be understood about these data given the variability in number of young children in foster care across counties, which also impacts regional averages, findings estimate that **all 11 MACSSA regions** and the **majority of Minnesota counties** have a **less than 50% rate** of ECE participation for young children in foster care.

Figure 5. *ECE Participation Rates for Young Children in Foster Care by County during AY 2019.*



Note. ECE enrollment data include Early Childhood Screening and Early Learning Scholarships, which are programs that do not provide educational programming or child care services. Western Prairie Human Services serves Pope and Grant Counties. Des Moines Valley Health and Human Services (Des Moines Valley HHS) serves the counties of Cottonwood and Jackson. Southwest Health and Human Services (Southwest HHS) serves the counties of Lincoln, Lyon, Murray, Pipestone, Redwood, and Rock. Minnesota Prairie Council Alliance (MN Prairie) serves the counties of Dodge, Steele, and Waseca. Data used in this map fall in the 0-75% range. There were no county percentages above 75% in the data set.

Figure 6. *ECE Participation Rates for Young Children in Foster Care by MACSSA Region during AY 2019.*



Note. ECE enrollment data include Early Childhood Screening and Early Learning Scholarships, which are programs that do not provide educational programming or child care services. Minnesota Prairie Council Alliance (MN Prairie) includes counties from both Regions 9 and 10 and is included under both regions. Data used in this map fall in the 25-50% range. There were no regional percentages below 25% or above 50% in the data set.

ECE Participation Rates for the General Child Population Compared to Young Children in Foster Care

This section provides population-level comparisons of ECE participation rates by the general child population and young children in foster care in Minnesota, disaggregated by ECE program, including Head Start and Early Head Start. Population-level comparisons were conducted using publicly available state population estimates by age from the US Census Bureau[29] (denominator) and population-level participation rates by program, provided by MDE staff (numerator). Head Start (HS) and Early Head Start (EHS) data for the general child population used in this analysis are from state fiscal year 2018-2019. Head Start data for young children in foster care also include counts for the Migrant and Seasonal Head Start (MSHS)[30] program, so comparisons between the general child population and the foster care population for Head Start may not be exact. The total number of children in foster care in ECE and the subsequent participation rate could not be calculated to include Head Start and Early Head Start, as these data were not available in ECLDS and duplicate counts could not be accounted for in this population-level calculation. This section therefore uses the total count and rate of ECE participation for young children in foster care determined in the ECLDS data (under TOTAL: # FC in ECE, % FC in ECE). As with the previous findings shared in this section, analysis was conducted at the population level for children aged 0-4, although some programs may have eligibility criteria for children older than 4 years of age.

Table 4. *ECE Participation for Young Children in Foster Care Compared to the General Child Population, by Program during AY 2019.*

ECE Program	Age Eligibility	General Child Population (GCP)	# GCP in ECE	% GCP in ECE	Foster Care (FC) Population	# FC in ECE	% FC in ECE
ECSE Part B	3-4	144,711	17,008	11.8%	1,763	422	23.9%
ECSE Part C	0-2	206,911	12,143	5.9%	3,641	657	18.0%
ECFE	0-4	351,622	17,701	5.0%	5,404	109	2.0%
School Readiness	3-4	144,711	20,382	14.1%	1,763	175	9.9%
VPK / SRP	4	72,717	7,350	10.1%	864	98	11.3%
EHS	0-3	278,905	3,522	1.3%	4,535	324	7.1%

[29] Population estimates used in this analysis were from the US Census Bureau estimates updated July 2019. US Census Bureau data for Minnesota are publicly accessible through the US Census Bureau website, here: https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/popest/2010s-state-detail.html

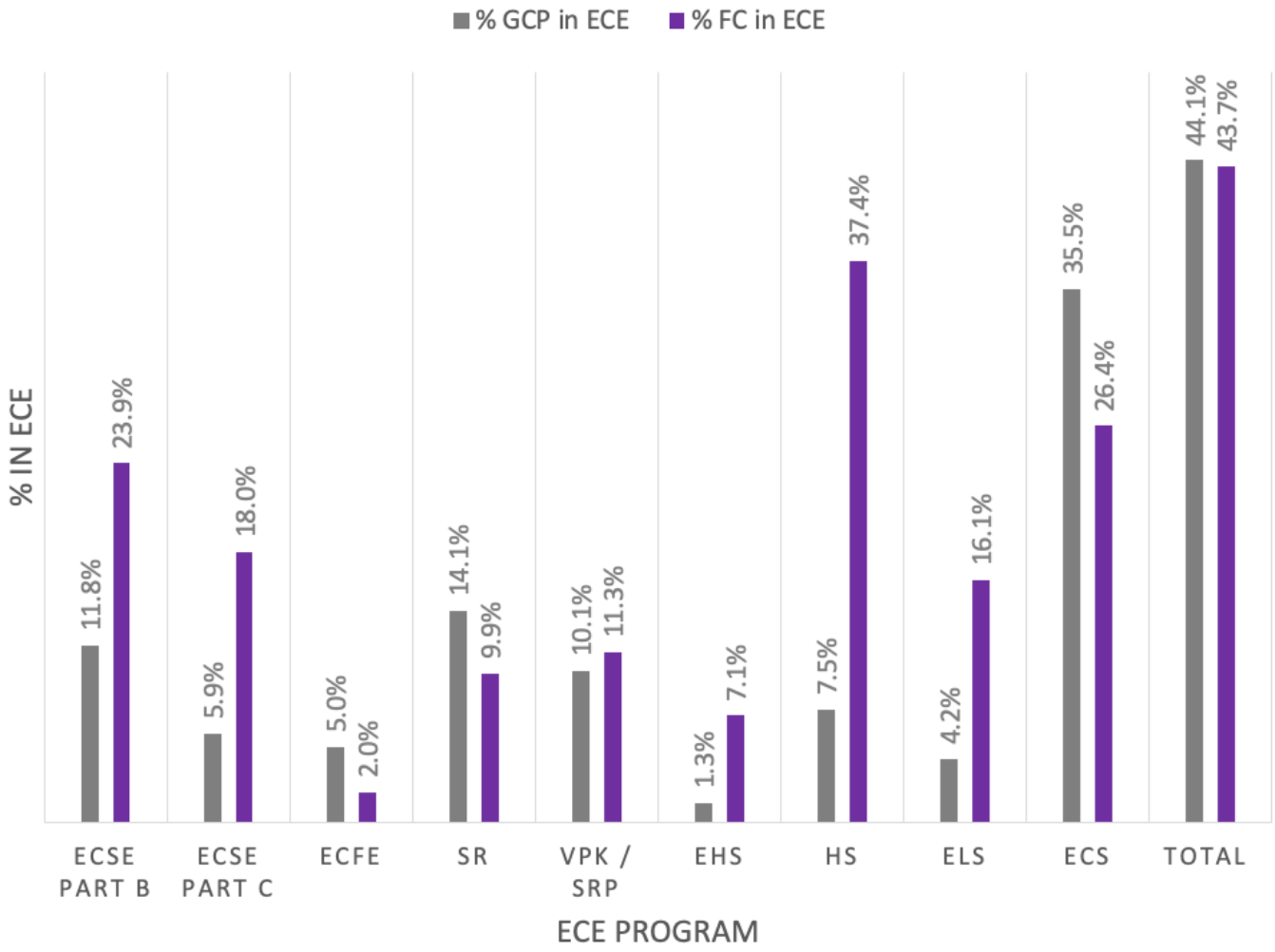
[30] Migrant and Seasonal Head Start is a 0-5 grant and does not report separately for Early Head Start and Head Start like other Head Start grantees. Program information and eligibility criteria for the Migrant and Seasonal Head Start program is available here: https://mnheadstart.org/eligiblity/

HS	3-4	144,711	10,803	7.5%	1,763	659	37.4%*
Early Learning Scholarships	0-4	351,622	14,825	4.2%	5,404	868	16.1%
Early Childhood Screening	3-4	144,711	55,390	35.5%	1,763	466	26.4%
TOTAL	0-4	351,622	155,124	44.1%	5,404	*2,362*	*43.7%*

Note. Total ECE participation includes enrollment in at least one ECE program, including Early Childhood Screening and Early Learning Scholarships. Age eligibility displayed in Table 4 are from 0-4 in alignment with the data analyzed in ECLDS for this report. Some programs listed in this table serve children older than age 4. **This data point was previously reported as 12.2% with a denominator of 5,404, which would have included all children aged 0-4 in foster care during AY 2019. This has been corrected in Table 4 and Figure 7 to reflect the count and percentage for only children in foster care aged 3-4, who would be eligible for Head Start (as opposed to Early Head Start, which is for children aged 0-3).*

When examining participation rates across individual programs (Table 4, Figure 7), the **general child population** had **higher rates of participation** for **ECFE** (5% to 2%), **School Readiness** (14.1% to 9.9%), and **Early Childhood Screening** (35.5% to 26.4%). As indicated in the qualitative findings of this report and existing literature, a higher enrollment in ECFE for the general child population may be due to the often complex schedules and competing demands of families providing foster care compared to other families. The lower rates of Early Childhood Screening for young children in foster care highlights an opportunity for additional outreach to families providing foster care. There were much **higher rates of children in foster care** in **ECSE Part B** and **Part C** compared to the general child population, which may be a reflection of the impact that foster care placement, and separation from families of origin, have on children. It is worth noting that children who are receiving Early Childhood Special Education services often do not receive an Early Childhood Screening because they are already receiving services, making the screening duplicative. Therefore, the higher rates of ECSE participation for children in foster care may explain the somewhat lower rates of Early Childhood Screening for young children in foster care. Children in foster care also had higher rates of Early Learning Scholarship receipt, an indication that the **categorical eligibility of young children in foster care** for Early Learning Scholarships may be facilitating access to this benefit. Children in foster care are also categorically eligible for Head Start and Early Head Start programs. Children in foster care had higher rates of participation for both of these programs compared to the general child population (Figure 7).

Figure 7. *ECE Participation for Young Children in Foster Care Compared to the General Child Population, by Program, during AY 2019.*



Note. Total ECE participation includes enrollment in at least one ECE program, including Early Childhood Screening and Early Learning Scholarships.

Comparing the rates of ECE participation for young children in foster care to the general child population reveals broadly that **less than 50% of the overall child population participated in ECE**, regardless of whether the child was in foster care. In fact, young children in foster care had **on average had comparable rates of ECE participation** to the general child population in Minnesota (**43.7%** for young children in foster care compared to **44.1%** for the general child population). Qualitative interviews included in this study emphasized that **accessing ECE programs is difficult for all Minnesota families**, and these data support that reality. The Child Care Assistance Program is one publicly funded program that facilitates access to child care for families in Minnesota, but CCAP data are not included in this report as children in foster care are ineligible. Additionally, many Minnesota children in ECE programs are in private pay programs as opposed to the publicly funded programs analyzed here. By examining pathways to increase access and availability of ECE programs for young children in foster care – who may

face more access barriers than other children and families – policymakers can use the findings from this study to explore avenues that could increase ECE access for all young children in Minnesota.

Key Takeaways:

ECE Participation Rates for Young Children in Foster Care

- Most young children in foster care were not enrolled in ECE programs in AY 2019. This was seen across a majority of counties as well as MACSSA regions.
    - African American/Black children had the highest rates – and American Indian/Alaska Native children had the lowest rates – of ECE participation among young children in foster care.
    - Although children less than one year of age were the largest age group in foster care in Minnesota, they had the lowest rate of ECE participation. This is partially due to the small number of publicly funded early childhood programs in ECLDS that serve infants.
- Participation rates for young children in foster care were comparable to participation rates of the general child population in Minnesota.
    - While these data indicate there may be shared experiences across families in Minnesota, given the limitations to the data and subsequent analysis noted above, we need the insights of people with lived experience in this area: foster and biological families, child welfare workers, and ECE providers.
    - For some of the programs with higher rates of participation among young children in foster care (e.g., Early Learning Scholarships), it could be that the categorical eligibility of children in foster care may be facilitating access to those benefits for families providing foster care.
- Data limitations ultimately impact what we are able to understand about ECE participation for young children in foster care. The way in which data were able to be analyzed for this report may be obscuring some patterns.
    - Increasing data integration across systems and expanding uniform data collection practices in a way that can accurately track the services received by individual children can expand our understanding of ECE participation counts, rates, and outcomes for young children in foster care. Utilizing other data sources available in Minnesota coupled with a longitudinal design may also help to identify patterns that may be obscured by the cohort-based analysis presented in this report.

VI. Preliminary Qualitative Findings and Considerations

This section presents the preliminary findings from qualitative interviews with key stakeholders from the Minnesota Departments of Human Services and Education and the community. Data shared in this report have been de-identified to protect interviewee confidentiality. Interviewee quotes were edited for clarity.

A. Description of Qualitative Methods

Participant Recruitment

From September 2022 to October 2022, the University of Minnesota research team conducted a total of 18 interviews with 19 professionals from the Minnesota Department of Human Services, the Minnesota Department of Education, and relevant community organizations. The University research team, in consultation with the Minnesota Departments of Human Services and Education, identified stakeholders based on their direct experience with any, or all, of the following areas: administrative data systems, ECE programs and policies, foster care services and policies. In addition to the 15 administrators initially identified for inclusion in the study, at the close of each interview, the University research team used the snowball method of recruitment and asked for recommendations of other relevant professionals to interview, resulting in three additional interviews. Stakeholders were invited via email from a member of the research team to participate in the study. The research team did not offer participants any compensation for their involvement in the study. All qualitative data utilized in this project came directly from interviews with professionals working within child- and family-serving systems. This study was determined exempt from Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight by the University of Minnesota IRB (STUDY00016937).

Data Collection and Analysis

In each interview, researchers asked questions about the following: interviewees' professional background, current role and job functions as they relate to ECE participation/foster care; interviewees' understanding of barriers and facilitators to participation in ECE for young children in foster care in Minnesota with respect to broad-level policy and practice contexts; interviewees' understanding of strengths and challenges of working with state administrative data systems relating to these topics and this population; and interviewees' considerations for steps the state should take to better understand barriers and facilitators to, and encourage, participation in ECE for young children in foster care and/or improve current administrative data systems. The research team used the qualitative data analysis software NVivo to complete analysis of the de-identified interview transcripts. The data analysis process was iterative with the researchers moving through several cycles of coding transcripts based on a collaboratively designed codebook; meeting to discuss potential new codes or clarifications to existing codes; revising the codebook; and then coding additional transcripts. Two research team members

(one from CASCW and one from CEED) analyzed and coded each transcript. *For a copy of the interview protocols used for this study, contact Amy Dorman at dorm0039@umn.edu.*

About the Qualitative Data

In the design of this study, the researchers intentionally decided to invite stakeholders with different areas of expertise and experience to participate in the interviews to capture a broad-level (e.g., data systems, policy, and practice) context to better understand ECE participation for young children in foster care. Although each interviewee was given an opportunity to respond to the same set of interview questions, some participants may not have provided information about one area of the interview protocol or another because they did not have knowledge or experience in that area. For example, some interviewees did not have experience with administrative data systems and some interviewees did not have direct knowledge of ECE programs and/or foster care at the local level. The variance in the interviewees' level of expertise and experience in the areas examined in the study is an important consideration when interpreting the results. For example, if five of the 18 interviewees noted that transportation was a barrier for foster families to access ECE programs, it would be inaccurate to conclude that the stakeholders in the other 13 interviewees thought transportation was not a barrier. Based on the study design and the process researchers used to analyze the interview data, it is not possible to differentiate between an interviewee who thought transportation was not a barrier and an interviewee who did not mention transportation as a barrier, for whatever reason. In the next phase of the study, researchers will explore the barriers and facilitators to participation in ECE for children in foster care in more depth by conducting focus groups with families and workers involved in the ECE and foster care systems.

This study focuses on county-based foster care placements, which include indigenous children and may include children who were originally placed with counties that are now within a tribal system or whose case has been transferred for tribal oversight. It is necessary to conduct culturally-sensitive research with tribal communities as partners and central stakeholders; the final report will include recommendations for the state to fund and conduct additional community-engaged studies, in partnership with indigenous researchers, to better understand the intersection of foster care placement and participation in Tribal Early Childhood programs, such as the Tribal Early Learning Initiative and Tribal Home Visiting, and to explore strategies to reduce barriers and improve access to early care and education programs for young American Indian children in foster care.

B. Qualitative Findings

Qualitative findings are organized into four sections: working with administrative data systems; challenges coordinating ECE access across location-based systems; barriers to ECE participation for families with young children in foster care; and facilitating factors and opportunities to build upon existing efforts. Data from the joint interview with two professionals is expressed in this report as one "interviewee." The qualitative analysis found no disagreement expressed

between the two interviewees during the data collection process; thus these two interviewees will be counted as one point of data collection, or one "interviewee," for clarity. This clarification brings the total number of interviewees in alignment with the total number of interviews (n=18).

Working with Administrative Data Systems

Findings in this section are based on data from 10 of the 18 total interviews (56%) conducted for this interim report. These 10 interviewees shared specific insight into the administrative data systems and data collection processes used to better understand participation rates of young children in foster care within Minnesota's ECE system.

Challenges in Using Existing Administrative Data Systems

Five of the 10 interviewees (50%) described changes needed to improve existing administrative data systems**.** Identified changes include the need to **integrate and maintain integration** across data systems at the state and local levels and to **fund staff training and time** to be able to use these data accurately. This is consistent with previous research about the barriers to ECE participation for children in foster care, which identified **issues with integrating data systems** and the need for improvements to better understand gaps and needs around ECE participation for young children in foster care. The quantitative findings in this report illustrate the significant challenges present in using ECLDS to quantitatively describe recent ECE participation rates for young children in foster care as a whole, as well as by race, ethnicity, age, and county. *The limitations of ECLDS for this purpose are described fully in Appendix D: Quantitative Methodology (Extended).*

Although there has been some **progress toward integrating data systems** across agencies since 2019 through the Preschool Development Grant, interviewees described **ongoing gaps in data integration** that continue to present barriers to children and their families. For example, current limitations on how a child's foster care status can be shared across agencies and data systems impact how quickly that child can engage in ECE programs. And, when workers do not have information about a family's language and culture, they are unable to help the family access ECE programming that addresses those family characteristics.

Insufficient data integration presents **barriers at both the state and local levels.** One interviewee provided examples of barriers that result from a lack of integration between the data systems for the Child Care Assistance Program and Early Learning Scholarships. Families providing foster care are not eligible to receive CCAP benefits, but some kinship families caring for children in foster care may be eligible for CCAP.

> *We don't have data integration between our Child Care Assistance Program Data System. . . and our Early Learning Scholarships data, so that serves as a barrier both at the local level for providers who have to request funding or reimbursement for children in their care from two different payment systems, but also creates barriers for us [at the state level] in being*

able to actually look at what children are receiving CCAP and Early Learning Scholarships and how we can better align those services or funding streams.

Interviewees also described changes needed to **improve the use of data systems,** including **training staff** on how to correctly use integrated data, and prioritizing and **funding positions** responsible for accessing and analyzing data.

There's also a challenge of misinterpretation, or less than knowledgeable use of the data and a potential risk of bad decision-making because data wasn't used correctly. ... And a challenge of having enough – and the right – analysis of the data to draw conclusions from.

Interviewees explained that the quality of the data in administrative systems is diminished when local staff are not provided user-friendly software, sufficient training, and/or paid time for data entry. These challenges are compounded when **data systems are out-of-date**.

We don't have modern data systems, which would make it easier for people to enter data. It gives a better front-end experience. Modern data systems also have a better back-end user experience, which makes it easier for us to integrate and share data and report on [that data], and we just cannot get investment to build or purchase modern data systems.

Challenges with Accessing Real-Time Data

Five of the 10 interviewees (50%) highlighted the need for **real-time data** at the local level that are not currently available in existing data systems.

A number of our early learning programs have kids in foster care either as part of their priority group or they're categorically eligible, but verifying the status of the child in foster care is complicated at the local level, so case workers may have to produce paperwork. Anything that adds burden on caseworkers for kids in foster care is problematic.

Nine of the 10 interviewees (90%) noted that certain **data were not being collected** systematically in one or more data systems, including race/ethnicity and other demographic information, whether children are in foster care, family-level risk factors, and other longitudinal data across ECE programs that could provide outcome data for each individual child. Data gaps **limit our understanding** of ECE participation for young children in foster care**,** and thus can **limit outreach efforts** and potentially hinder families who are prioritized for ECE programs from receiving these care benefits.

With our current data system structure, we don't have the story before they become enrolled in their resident district. We have some of the information in our referral system, but we only have the data that's referred through our referral and intake system. We don't have data that is referred directly to the school district, so that's missing data.

Integrated data systems that provide local staff with real-time data can also support and enhance **collaboration across sectors in local communities**, which previous research has

identified as an important factor in improving access to ECE services for children in foster care.

Although the Early Childhood Longitudinal Data System (ECLDS) includes some data on young children who participate in **Head Start programs**, local decisions about whether to submit data for ECLDS and, if so, which data to submit, **limit the thoroughness of the data** that are provided**.** Because Head Start is a federal-to-local program, the state currently lacks authority to systematically collect data from local programs.

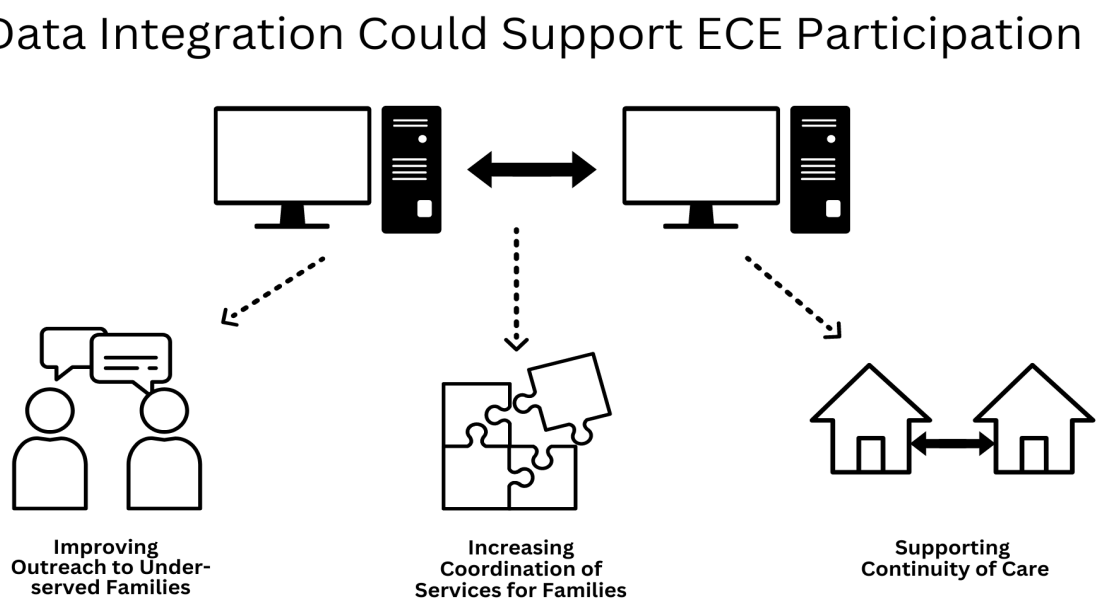
Interviewees also emphasized that the existing administrative data systems do not provide **sufficient longitudinal data** across ECE programs that could provide outcome data for each individual child. Program and child outcome data are important because they allow administrators, teachers, and other stakeholders to understand the program's impact on children's developmental and academic growth. One interviewee explained by saying,

> *I think it's just the opportunity to be able to over time understand which interventions end up supporting the child's optimal growth and development. It's whether or not the experience they receive is meeting their needs. That's some of the richness that over time we'll be able to get from longitudinal data.*

Increase and Improve Data Collection and Integration to Help Local and State Authorities Better Serve Families

Ten of the 18 total interviewees (56%) emphasized that **better data collection** and **integration** helps local and state authorities serve families by identifying where programs intersect in families' lives and addressing gaps accordingly (Figure 8). These interviewees identified that better data collection and integration could help **improve outreach efforts** to families, **increase coordination of services**, and **contribute to continuity of care** for young children in foster care.

Figure 8. *Data Integration Could Support ECE Participation*



Building connections across administrative data systems can also help children and families access ECE services by increasing the **coordination of those services,** a primary goal of the Preschool Development Grant. Interviewees discussed how the **continuity of care** for young children can be strengthened when improvements are made to data collection and integration processes across data systems at both the state and local levels.

> *If we think about the system as a whole, it would be useful for us to be able to track the journey that a child takes in our system and what they're connected to or not connected to. That would be helpful information in terms of ensuring that families and children are supported in all the ways that they can be supported, but they're not missing services somewhere and that they're not be[ing] redundantly served. That's an advantage that could come into play if we were able to build a system that demonstrated what children were actively enrolled in or what families were actively involved in.*

Key Takeaways:
Working with Administrative Data Systems

- It is necessary to increase and improve data collection and integration to help local and state authorities better understand how to reach, serve, and support families in accessing ECE and maintaining continuity of care:
    - Increased data integration is needed across systems to improve the use of real-time data for purposes of outreach to families and coordination of services for families.
    - Additional data collection, including child-specific longitudinal data, is needed to increase our understanding of ECE participation for children in foster care as well as the outcomes of ECE participation for individual children.
    - Increases in staff training are needed to ensure the accurate interpretation of administrative data.

Challenges Coordinating ECE Access across Location-based Systems

All 18 (100%) interviewees identified the differences across ECE and foster care systems in Minnesota, often based on location, as a factor that can impact ECE participation for young children in foster care. In line with existing literature, interviewees identified differences across **agencies and disciplines** (e.g., child welfare and early care and education), **regions** (e.g., Greater Minnesota and the Twin Cities Metro), **counties, school districts,** and **individual ECE programs** as potential challenges to ECE participation.

Different Challenges for Greater Minnesota and the Twin Cities Metro

Six of the 18 interviewees (33%) explicitly mentioned differences across ECE and foster care systems between **Greater Minnesota** and the **Twin Cities Metro** as an important consideration when examining ECE participation for young children in foster care. From program availability, geographic distance, and costs, families in Greater Minnesota and the Twin Cities Metro may experience different barriers. This becomes particularly complex when a child moves from the Twin Cities Metro to a foster family placement in Greater Minnesota, creating challenges to maintaining continuous program access for that child. **Ten of the 18 (56%)** interviewees identified differences across systems and/or locations as a challenge to **continuity of care**, which can be impacted when the child moves from one Minnesota region to another.

> *There is a scarcity of foster homes in some of our areas of the state. It's easier to go from Hennepin County to Ramsey County. It's not that far. But if you're thinking more rural and that region of our state, whereas the nearest foster home could be six, seven, eight hours away, how does a family stay involved? There are some pretty significant geographical impacts in a family's ability to maintain involvement in the educational process.*

> *If you're in very rural outstate Minnesota, there may not be options. Maybe there's one provider or no providers, and if there's one provider, they're full. Whether a kinship [family] or someone else, they can't [transport the child to the ECE program] because of a work commitment or whatever the reason is. Then the child loses access.*

> *We have [Head Start and Early Head Start] programs in every county in Minnesota, but it's county-based. So, if a child moves out of the area where they're getting services, those services have to restart. They have to be re-engaged.*

Differences across Counties and Programs

Beyond regional differences, the challenges of Minnesota's **county-administered system** were highlighted by interviewees, including **variance in funding**, inconsistent **information-sharing practices**, and contrasts in **availability of ECE programming**. Given what can be vast differences from county to county, interviewees noted **barriers to equitable access to ECE** based on the resources available in and/or prioritized by some counties compared to others. One interviewee expressed how **county property taxes** influence the resources available to children based on county, and how a state-level investment in child welfare systems broadly may be needed to reduce inequities across counties.

> *It's county property dollars that are determinative around the level of support that's accessed within each county of origin, and that's a system that is unfair. That leaves the state in a challenging place of having authority, but little actual practical support.*

Another interviewee highlighted how differences in the ways counties operate can impact the **information shared** by counties to school districts (and ECE programs run by school districts) that may allow for better outreach to families with young children in foster care.

Every county operates a little bit differently, even though they're also doing the same according to statute. That has often been a struggle that has been articulated by school districts: There isn't a uniform way of managing that communication [around children in foster care] and clarity in guardianship [for those children].

Interviewees also emphasized that **differences in how Head Start programs are operated** and what each program offers can make it difficult for child welfare staff and families to connect with their local Head Start program.

If you know about the way one Head Start program in Minnesota does something, then you know one of 34 ways that a Head Start Program operates in Minnesota… You layer on top of that the number of school districts that each of these programs works with, there are so many relationships that each Head Start grantee has to have and nurture. Sometimes we're talking about upwards of 30-plus school districts.

Investing in ECE Availability, Quality, and Connection to Families

Investment limitations at the state level trickle down to impact processes, programs, and families. **Twelve of the 18 (67%)** interviewees explicitly identified that investment was needed to **increase ECE program availability**, **quality, and accessibility** (including through funding options for families). Considering the unique needs of children in foster care, program availability and quality were often mentioned by interviewees in connection to the **need for more, and specialized, ECE program staff**.

Even if [families] are on the priority list because their children are in foster care, they may not be able to find a program that actually has seats available. There are major problems with child care access, child care shortages, and an overburdened workforce right now.

There's a significant child care crisis right now in Minnesota – not enough seats for all the children that need it. Then when you add the urgency of foster care, that compounds [the issue]. Some of it has to do with a shortage of qualified staff to work in these settings. Even if there physically might be space, there may not be staffing to fill a classroom.

Twelve out of 18 (67%) interviewees noted, in alignment with previous studies, that investment was needed to **increase training** for ECE program staff and child welfare workers**,** particularly around how ECE can support young children in foster care and their families. Interviewees noted that it was important to **invest specifically in training for ECE program staff** to equip them to better engage and partner with families providing foster care, and to provide trauma-informed care for young children in foster care.

Whether it's the child care workers or the [ECE] providers, it's important that they have some level of training: What does it mean for a child to be in foster care? How do we best work with children in foster care? The trauma-informed approach and training is critical to this workforce so that they're prepared to serve all the children that come in their doors, and in particular, children who've experienced adversity like children in foster care.

We want teachers to have the skills to understand children in the context of their lives. How you lace together supports and instructional trajectories for kids really is dependent on that child in the context of their lives.

On the child welfare side, interviewees noted that the **breadth of information child welfare workers are expected to know** and understand, particularly for newer workers, was a challenge.

With the high turnover nationwide ongoing for decades in the field of child protection, a lot of workers are pretty new to the field constantly, and it does in some ways feel like [ECE information and referrals] are extra. It feels like an add-on versus all the millions of requirements that [workers] are trying to meet.

It's important to work with social workers to help them understand why early care and education is so important. A lot of people still don't understand how important those first years are [for child development].

There are always opportunities to have workers understand the power of their role. How can they use their role to connect [families to] opportunities, resources, services, and supports? It doesn't mean they have to know every single detail, [but instead that] part of their role is to truly help to make those connections.

Key Takeaways:

Challenges Coordinating ECE Access across Location-based Systems

- Barriers to ECE participation look different across locations because counties, districts, and programs often operate differently and/or have different levels of resources.
- Differences across counties and programs lead to inconsistencies, impacting equitable access to ECE and continuity of care.
- State-level investments trickle down to impact processes, programs, and families. Strategic and sustainable investments by the state could help improve:
    - Program availability, quality, and accessibility.
    - Staff training and knowledge, which can connect more children to ECE and provide higher quality services to children in foster care.

Barriers to ECE Participation for Families with Young Children in Foster Care

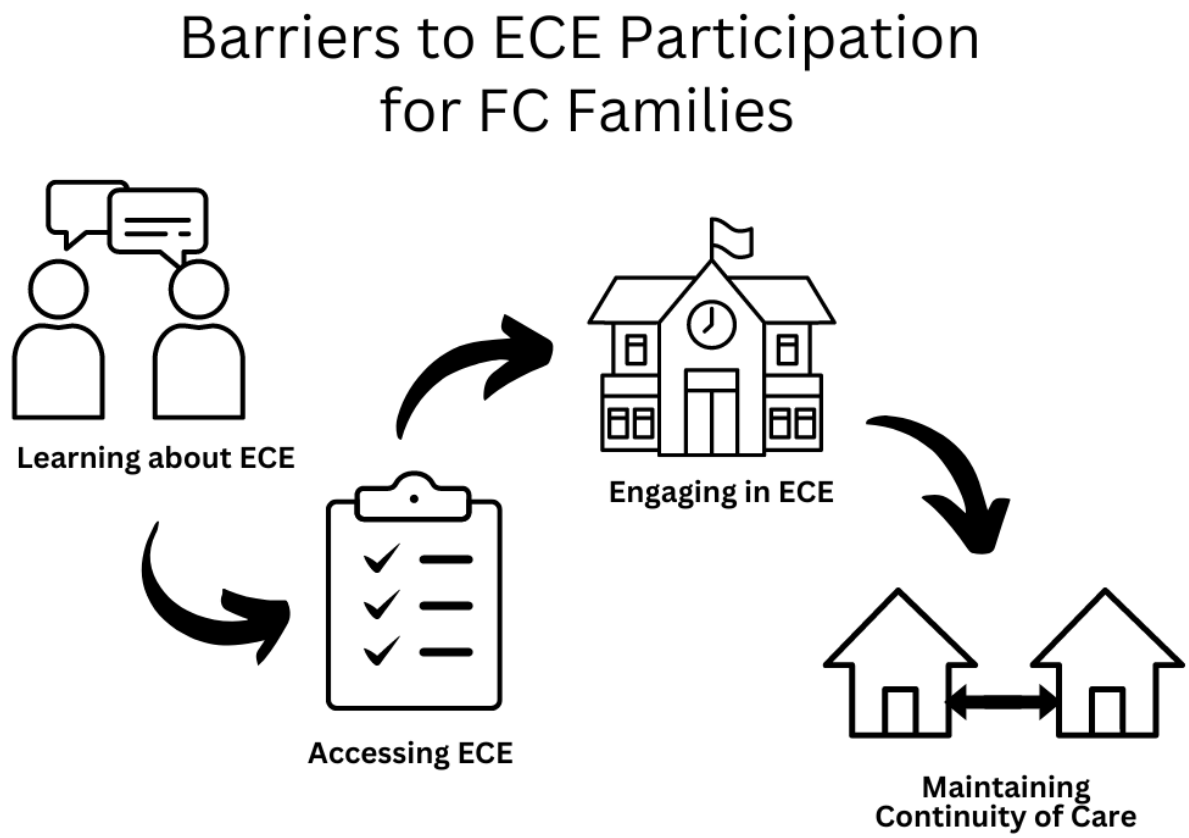
One day of disruption in a young child's life, one day of missing child care for an unexpected reason, even the most stable child who has not experienced trauma, can cause disruption.

For most young children who are in the foster system, for many of their few days that they've been alive, there has been some type of disruption to their routine, to their services. That obviously causes barriers for [ECE] providers and families to access [ECE] services.

All 18 (100%) **interviewees** highlighted that **challenges to ECE participation may vary** or be exacerbated by differences across families with children in foster care. Specifically, **13 of the 18 (72%) interviewees** identified different challenges for families with **additional and intersecting needs** (e.g., special needs, trauma, cultural background), **11 of the 18 (61%)** identified different challenges experienced by **kinship compared to non-relative families providing foster care**, and **7 of the 18 (39%)** identified different challenges for families with **multiple children** and/or **children of different ages**.

For foster care families in general, interviewees identified several family-level barriers to ECE participation, including **barriers to learning about, accessing,** and **engaging in ECE,** as well as **maintaining continuity of care** (Figure 9)**.**

Figure 9. *Barriers to ECE Participation for Foster Care (FC) Families*



Barriers to Learning About ECE

Although many children in foster care are categorically eligible to receive funding and participate in ECE programming, it was made clear by interviewees that *"it's hard for foster*

parents to even know about [ECE] programs." In fact, **13 of the 18 (72%) interviewees** identified **barriers to learning about ECE**, including **lack of knowledge on ECE** programming, eligibility, and funding, as well as **lack of awareness around the positive impact** of participating in ECE programs for children and families.

"Navigating and understanding possible benefits...is a pretty big problem in Minnesota" and thus even families that know about ECE programming may **struggle to find accurate information on eligibility** for ECE funding.

> *I think sometimes people think that 100% poverty is the only way that you qualify for Head Start, but it's not true. But being in foster care, being a child or family who's experiencing homelessness, and receiving some type of public assistance [are qualifiers]. People don't realize that eligibility is beyond income.*

Interviewees also discussed the importance of family-level awareness on the **positive impact of ECE participation** for children and families, including **messaging around ECE's potential to support the well-being of the child** (e.g., social emotional learning) and **caregivers** (e.g., respite from caregiving responsibilities, additional income through employment). These findings align with evidence from other studies suggesting that foster parents may hold different beliefs about the value of ECE, and prioritize attachment and emotional stability over formal education.

> *The other big thing is really the awareness of the significance of [ECE], and the impact – the 'why,' right? Do our folks in the [foster care] system know that [these programs are] for them?*

Increasing family-level awareness and knowledge is the first step to increasing participation in ECE. Awareness efforts can be amplified through an increased investment in **early childhood screening**, particularly for 3-year-olds**.** Given the quantitative finding that the general child population had higher rates of screening than young children in foster care, there is a clear opportunity to increase outreach to families providing foster care. Screening connects families to other free ECE programs and services, and thus an increase in the number of young children in foster care screened could increase the number of these children participating in ECE programs at a younger age. Screening processes should be **culturally and linguistically sensitive** to the families they aim to target: *"there could be language issues: If districts are supposed to provide the outreach and screeners who are bilingual, or hire interpreters… but it's possible that there isn't enough funding to do that."*

Barriers to Accessing ECE

Even for families with knowledge of ECE programs, "*the barriers that one needs to go through to actually enroll in a program are pretty hefty.*" **Seventeen of the 18 (94%) interviewees** mentioned additional **barriers to accessing ECE** services, including challenges **navigating ECE applications, high program cost,** and **low program availability.**

Interviewees emphasized how navigating **confusing and/or inaccessible application** processes**,** including understanding who is required to fill out the application (e.g., biological parent, foster parent)**,** can be challenging and hinder ECE access. To increase accessibility, one interviewee discussed *"figuring out what relationship allows a qualified foster care family to access state resources more directly"* and "*expanding the definition [on ECE applications] of who is family, who is caregiver, so that while a child is in out-of-home placement, there are more resources directly available to the family providing the foster care."* Another interviewee shared:

> *What we heard from families was, 'I have to tell my story over and over. I have to fill out 15 different applications and submit my birth certificate to eight different places.' [Families may] think that [the program] is only for biological parents or that the program doesn't fit their needs. One concern of mine is how well are the [programs] designed to meet the needs of families and special circumstances? And then, how well are they articulated or marketed to those families with programming that is tailored to special populations?*

Navigating the ECE system may be particularly difficult for **families from diverse backgrounds** when information is not **culturally sensitive** and navigation tools are not available in **appropriate languages**.

> *If you're searching the Parent Aware website, it's very hard to navigate…And even if you pick a language…Maybe one person in that center will speak some Spanish, and they'll click 'yes' to Spanish. It doesn't mean it's spoken there or that your child's provider will [speak Spanish], or that you'll be able to converse with them.*

Interviewees also discussed difficulties with **program availability** and **cost** as primary family-level barriers to ECE access**.**

> *If you're a foster parent and you don't live in a county that will pay for your child care costs, then those costs have to come out of the foster care payment that you're provided... If you can't afford to have a child in foster care be in a child care setting, then [you're] not going to go to a child care setting.*

Lastly, there may be increased barriers to accessing **specialized programming** for children in foster care with **unique needs**. For instance, even if a family has funding and access to ECE programs, there may not be any ECE programs in a child's service area that have the resources to care for a child with **special needs** (e.g., specialized medical care, trauma-informed care). As emphasized in previous research, barriers may also be heightened for **children from diverse cultural backgrounds** as *"a lot of school districts have been challenged on meeting the needs of children that speak other languages and children that are from BIPOC communities."*

Barriers to Engaging in ECE

Consistent with the literature on barriers to ECE participation, **12 out of 18 (67%) interviewees** noted that even for families with knowledge of and access to programming, there are

additional **barriers to actually engaging in ECE**, including **challenges with scheduling, competing demands,** and **transportation.** For example, transitioning into structured ECE programming may be challenging for a foster child who has multiple needs that need to be addressed through multiple appointments with different providers.

> *Kids with trauma, including separation from being in foster care, need even more control of their lives than typical for children their age... So [as a foster parent], when you're weighing all of that on top of the visitation and private services and even getting into the doctor and sometimes having higher medical needs and needing to go from multiple appointments, [ECE participation] just doesn't fit well.*

Interviewees also underlined that foster parents may have **competing demands (e.g., employment)** that create barriers to engaging in ECE. Given that some ECE programs (e.g., Head Start) do not provide full-day or full-week care, parents may struggle to integrate ECE programming into their work schedules and/or secure additional child care. Further obstacles may exist for **kinship caregivers** who were perhaps not expecting to serve as caregivers for a relative child, compared to non-relative foster care providers.

> *I think of it from relative care providers' [perspective] who are not signing up to provide foster care, and then just happened to have a relative child enter care and then they become the care providers. So, they have existing families, their own kids they take care of. They might have shift work, whatever their job schedules might be, where they can't attend, for example, [Early Childhood Family Education] courses, because [the classes are] typically during the day, which is not convenient for parents that have to work during the day.*

As identified by interviewees and existing literature, **transportation constraints** also exist for many families providing foster care who require support safely transporting their children to and from available ECE programming. These constraints may be particularly salient for **kinship families and families with younger children**.

> *If you want a child to be with kin, and the kin doesn't live within that service area, what do you do? You really need the child to go to live with their kinfolk, because that is less traumatic when you're placing the child. So then if you want to keep this child in their educational setting, then the child is going to need transportation. But what's reasonable transportation back to that educational setting, especially when you have young children? What's really in the best interest of the kiddo? … And particularly with younger children, a lot of times it's the family that is going to have to be transporting. Or you need a very specialized [transportation] service provider.*

Barriers to Maintaining Continuity of Care

Lastly, and in alignment with prior research, **barriers maintaining continuity of care** were identified in **11 of the 18 (61%) interviewees**. Children in foster care who are **moving into care across county lines and/or school districts** risk losing ECE access based on **program availability**

and location, including transportation, as discussed above. Disruptions to care can also occur during reunification or adoption, when a **child is no longer in foster care and priority funding is eliminated for that child**.

> *The other issue is if you don't have continuity of care, even if you do access those programs while in foster care. So, if you have a family where the child is removed, placed in foster care, they get access to early childhood educational programs or child care… And when they exit foster care either to be reunified or placed in a permanent family home, there isn't a guarantee that that programming will remain… And so the continuity of care gets disrupted… I think if anything could be focused on, it needs to be that kids need to have access before foster care, during foster care and after foster care, and allow for that continuum to be in place. There shouldn't be a disruption at any of those points.*

Key Takeaways:
Barriers to ECE Participation for Families with Young Children in Foster Care

- Families experience barriers to ECE participation across different points in the process:
  - Barriers to learning about ECE
  - Barriers to accessing ECE
  - Barriers to engaging in ECE
  - Barriers to maintaining continuity of care
- When addressing barriers, it is important to consider and collect data on how barriers vary across different families with children in foster care (e.g., kinship compared to non-relative families providing foster care; by race/ethnicity, county of residence)

Facilitating Factors and Opportunities to Build Upon Existing Efforts

Prioritization by individuals, programs, agencies, and the state helps create momentum for positive change. **Sixteen of the 18 (89%) interviewees** emphasized the importance of **current and future prioritization** for increasing participation in ECE for young children in foster care.

> *I think right now it's coming down to the individual social worker or caseworker who makes it a priority. Within the county system I think it comes down to individual people being committed to it… A lot of the early [care and education] providers are highly motivated and understand [the importance of] working with these families and children. I think that system is pretty prepared and willing to work with these kids.*

> *It was refreshing to see stakeholder groups [at the Minnesota Department of Education] so invested in getting foster care children into early care and education at higher rates and getting them into high-quality settings so that is the rule, not the exception. Hearing about the work they were doing with DHS and some of the intersectionality and breaking of the*

silos… to hear [about] this buy-in and recognition of the importance of early care and education for children in foster care was wonderful.

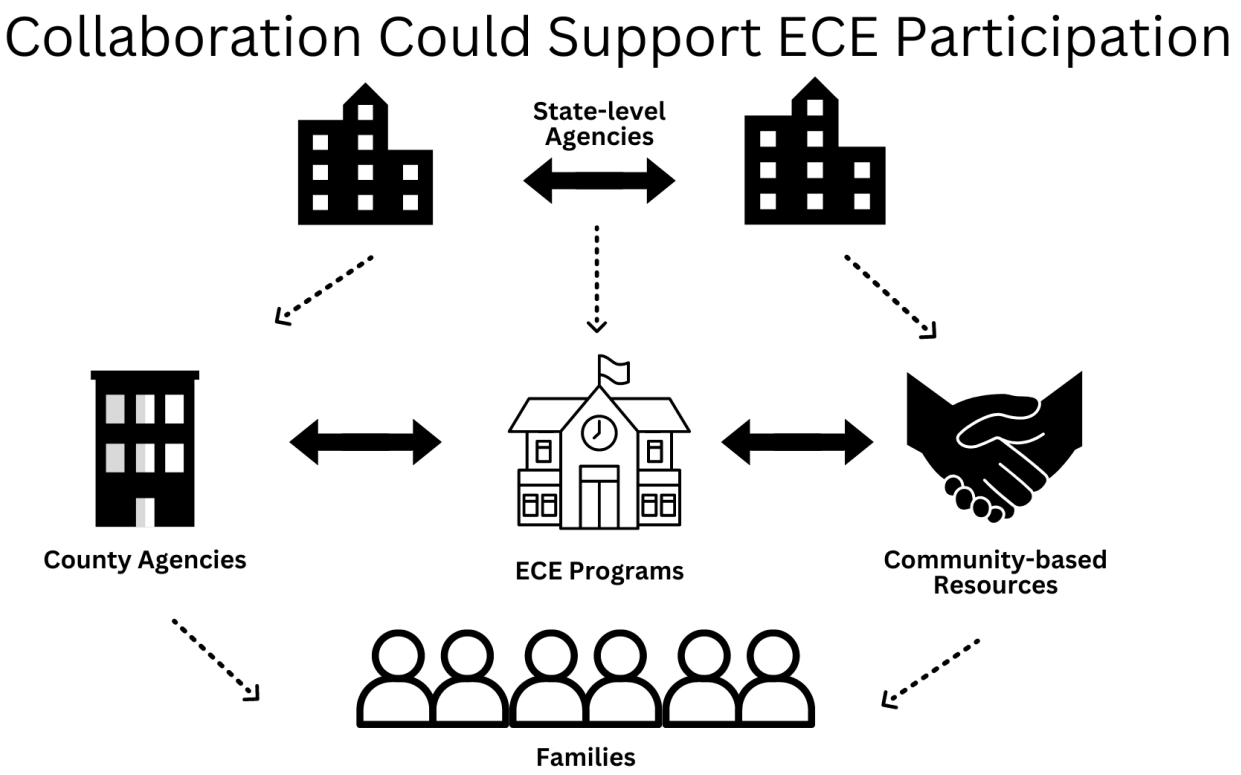
Interviewees noted there are opportunities to **build upon current efforts,** including eligibility and service coordination activities in Minnesota supported by the **Preschool Development Grant,** and to ensure that prioritization efforts are **well-funded and sustainable** long-term.

One of the barriers is [the need for] funding at the state level to be able to do more collaboration with foster care programs as well as [ECE] programs to improve our systems. That's a system-level change.

We often don't make progress because we give an issue attention, think that something has happened, and then it goes back to the status quo after a few years. How is [ECE participation for young children in foster care] being sustained in Minnesota as far as it being a topic that needs to be addressed?

Interviewees emphasized that **collaboration is key to success** in a siloed, county-administered system: **Fifteen of the 18 (83%) interviewees** expressed the importance of **current and future collaboration** and **relationship-building** across systems and/or locations.

***Figure 10**. Collaboration Between Agencies at the State and Local Levels could Support ECE Participation*



Collaboration across several systems was mentioned, including: between **state-level agencie**s, such as MDE and DHS; between **state-level agencies and county-level agencies**; between

counties, local ECE programs, and local community-based resources; and between these **local level organizations and families** (Figure 10).

There's been a partnership established between the Department of Education and the Department of Human Services to support this work. That partnership is a significant piece of building [these efforts] and thinking about how to continue to build.

What we've been doing, and we'll continue to do, is having opportunities to talk to the people at the county level that work with foster care, helping them connect to their local Head Start program to let them build those relationships at the local level.

One of the indicators we hear about that makes coordination work best on a local level is when there's an ability to draw on pre-existing relationships and trust in the other partners.

It's critical to build capacity from all parties [child welfare workers and ECE program staff] that are involved in the work of supporting children to understand what each other's roles and responsibilities are.

Key Takeaways:

Facilitating Factors and Opportunities to Build Upon Existing Efforts

- Prioritization by individuals, programs, agencies, and the state helps create momentum for positive change.
- Collaboration is key to success in a siloed, county-administered system.
- There are opportunities to:
    - Build upon current efforts, including eligibility and service coordination activities in Minnesota supported by the Preschool Development Grant.
    - Ensure that prioritization efforts are well-funded and sustainable long-term.

VII. Description of Remaining Qualitative Data Activities

The remaining qualitative data activities for this study will center the voices, experiences, and recommendations of families of origin, families providing foster care, child welfare workers, and ECE providers.

The University of Minnesota research team, in consultation with the Minnesota Departments of Human Services and Education will identify key regions across the state of Minnesota to serve as the focus of this second stage of the study. Key regions will be identified by their utilization (or lack thereof) of ECE programs by young children in Minnesota's foster care system. Beginning in early 2023, the University of Minnesota research team will partner with child welfare and ECE administrators in the identified regions to recruit child welfare workers, ECE providers, and foster and biological families of young children (0-5 years of age) in foster care to participate in a 90-minute focus group to better understand barriers and facilitators to ECE participation for this population. Each participant will participate in one role- and region-specific focus group (e.g., families providing foster care in a specific county or region).

Focus groups will be conducted in person at a local, neutral location (e.g., a private room in a local library) or via the video call software Zoom. At the end of each focus group, we will allocate time for participants to fill out a brief survey to capture participant demographic characteristics. Identifiable information (e.g., name, job title and workplace) will not be collected as part of the survey. At the end of the focus group and as part of the consent process, participants will also be asked whether they can be contacted for a brief 30-minute virtual interview after the focus group, if further clarification is needed. Foster and biological families will be offered compensation for their participation in the study.

The University of Minnesota research team anticipates approximately 100-200 participants will be recruited and consented to participate in the focus groups across the identified regions in the state of Minnesota. Our aim is that the participant population will consist of approximately equivalent numbers of foster and biological family participants and child welfare workers and ECE provider participants.

Aggregate findings from this study will be shared in a final report to the Minnesota Legislature in June 2023.

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Appendix A: Description of ECE Programs

This section was provided by MDE and DHS staff. The descriptions include the eligibility requirements for each program, including age requirements and if foster care involvement is a relevant eligibility factor. Because the School Readiness Plus program serves a relatively small number of children statewide (approximately 500 four-year-old students per year on average), and is very similar to the Voluntary Prekindergarten program, these programs were combined for analytic purposes and in their description.

1. Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE)

Infant and Toddler Intervention services and Preschool Special Education services are federal programs under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). In Minnesota, Early Intervention services and Preschool Special Education services are provided through local school districts and cooperatives. These services are free to eligible children and families regardless of income or immigration status.

Early Intervention services are provided in the child's home or community settings by local districts or cooperatives. The families/caregivers of children found eligible are central to the planning and delivery of services as well as for determining the outcomes. Children are eligible for early intervention services through Part C IDEA if they are under the age of three, and have: 1) Demonstrated a developmental delay of 1.5 SD in at least one area of development (physical, communication, cognitive, social or functional), have a diagnosed condition that is known to have a high correlation with delays in development, or based on informed clinical opinion. They do not need to demonstrate an educational need.

Preschool Special Educations services are most commonly provided within district programs but may also be provided in community care settings as well as the child's home. School districts or cooperatives provide instructional and therapy services according to the educational needs of the child that has been found eligible for services. Children receiving early childhood special education programming and services (ages 3 through 6) receive services under PART B/619 of IDEA. They have qualified for a categorical disability based on eligibility criteria or they have met criteria for developmental delay. Developmental delay criteria for children age 3 to age 7 must show a delay of at least 1.5 SD in at least 2 areas of development. Children receiving services and supports under IDEA Part B must demonstrate an educational need.

Link: https://education.mn.gov/MDE/fam/ECSE/

2. Voluntary Prekindergarten and School Readiness Plus (VPK/SRP)

Voluntary Prekindergarten (VPK) and School Readiness Plus (SRP) are publicly funded prekindergarten programs designed to prepare eligible 4-year-old children for success as they enter kindergarten the following year. Programs use play-based learning, coordinated transitions to kindergarten and family-centered program planning to create high-quality early learning opportunities that meet the needs of each child. Programs offer free transportation.

Link: https://education.mn.gov/MDE/fam/elsprog/vpk/

3. School Readiness

School Readiness is a preschool program designed to help prepare 3- and 4-year-olds to enter kindergarten. All Minnesota school districts provide a School Readiness program. Programming and services vary between districts, with class options for different days of the week and half-day or full-day options. Some School Readiness programs also offer services like home visiting or wrap-around care.

4. Early Childhood Screening

Early Childhood Screening supports children's learning and promotes health and development. Screening is a way for schools to meet with parents/guardians and children in order to listen to their successes and concerns. Screening in districts and some charter schools is offered between the ages of 3 and the start of kindergarten or first grade (through age 7). Screening is required within the first 90 days of attendance for many prekindergarten programs and within the first 30 days of kindergarten or first grade. Parents/guardians may conscientiously object to screening. Screening may link families to free early learning opportunities and resources such as Head Start, Early Childhood Family Education, prekindergarten programs, Early Childhood Special Education, Early Learning Scholarships, home visiting programs, or other resources.

Link: https://education.mn.gov/MDE/dse/early/elprog/scr/

5. Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE)

Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE) is a program for families and children. ECFE is based on the idea that families provide their children's first and most significant learning environment and parents/caregivers are children's first and most enduring teachers. ECFE works to support parents/caregivers and to strengthen and empower families. The goal is to enhance the ability of all parents/caregivers and other family members to provide the best possible environment for their child's learning and development.

ECFE is a program offered through school districts and is available to all Minnesota families with children ages birth to kindergarten entrance. Some ECFE programs also serve pregnant mothers and families with children up to third grade. Each ECFE program offers different programming and services, which are designed based on the needs identified in communities.

Link: https://education.mn.gov/MDE/fam/elsprog/ECFE/

6. Early Learning Scholarships

Early Learning Scholarships support access to high-quality child care and early education as one way to close the opportunity gaps faced by many children in households with low incomes. Families with children at or below 185% of federal poverty guidelines, or participating in one of eight public programs, one of which is foster care, are eligible. Children must be three or four years of age by September 1 of a school year, though eligibility is birth through age four for children in the following four prioritized categories: children of a teen parent pursuing a high school diploma or GED, children in foster care, children in need of child protection, or a child in a family who is or has been experiencing homelessness in the past 24 months. A scholarship must be used at a Parent Aware-Rated program. Parent Aware is a rating tool to help parents select high-quality child care and early education programs.

Link: https://education.mn.gov/MDE/fam/elsprog/elschol/

7. Head Start (HS)

Head Start services and programs help to prepare low-income families and preschool children (ages 3-5) for their transition to public school kindergarten. Head Start programs promote children's development through services that support early learning, health, and family well-being. The program helps children with early learning, health, nutrition and social services while being responsive to each family's ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds.

8. Early Head Start (EHS)

Early Head Start helps families with infants, toddlers (ages 0-3) and expectant families prepare for success. Programs promote children's development through services that support early learning, health, and family well-being. The program helps children with physical, cognitive, social and emotional development while being responsive to each family's ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds.

9. Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP)

The Child Care Assistance Program provides financial assistance to help families with low incomes pay for child care so that parents may pursue employment or education leading to employment, and so that children are well cared for and can thrive as learners. Minnesota counties and two tribal nations provide child care assistance services to 23,024 children and 11,359 families during an average month.

Families at or below 67% of the state's annual median income and receiving cash assistance (or who have received cash assistance in the past 12 months) are eligible. All other families must be at or below 47% of the state's annual median income to be eligible. Parents must participate in authorized activities, such as work, school or looking for a job, and cooperate with child support for all children with an absent parent. Child care assistance serves children age 12 or younger, or age 14 or younger if the child has special needs. Children in foster care are not eligible.

Families can choose any legal child care provider registered to receive child care assistance in the county or tribal nation (for White Earth and Red Lake Nations) where the family lives. This includes licensed and certified child care centers, licensed family child care providers, and legal nonlicensed providers (commonly known as family, friend, or neighbor).

Link: https://mn.gov/dhs/child-care/

Appendix B: Description of Administrative Data Systems

This section includes a brief description of the administrative data systems mentioned in this report that are related to early childhood education and children in foster care.

Managed by the Minnesota Department of Education:

1. Early Childhood Longitudinal Data System (ECLDS)

The ECLDS is designed for educators, local planners, early childhood program administrators, and other early care and education professionals in Minnesota. Its purpose is to provide integrated data, gathered from across multiple sources, on young children served in publicly funded programs. The information is intended to help with community needs assessments and in monitoring child status over time at multiple geographic levels. The content of each set of charts and graphs are informed by research on child development and the longstanding questions from Minnesota policymakers and administrators.

Link: https://eclds.mn.gov/#about

2. Early Learning Scholarships Administrative System (ELSA)

The Early Learning Scholarship Administration System (ELSA) is a secure system that was created to support implementation and oversight of the Early Learning Scholarships Program. Grantees of the state who are administrators of scholarships, MDE staff with direct program involvement, and resident school district staff with a State Student Identification Number (SSID) Maintainer role in a partner system work within ELSA.

Link: https://education.mn.gov/MDE/dse/datasub/ELSA/index.html

Managed by the Minnesota Department of Human Services:

3. Social Service Information System (SSIS)

The Social Service Information System (SSIS) is a data entry and case management system used by over 10,000 state and county workers in a variety of different human service program areas.

Link: https://mnchildwelfaretraining.com/more/ssis-training-unit/

Appendix C: Qualitative Methodology (Extended)

Data Sources

From September 2022 to October 2022, the University of Minnesota research team conducted a total of 18 interviews with 19 professionals from the Minnesota Department of Human Services, the Minnesota Department of Education, and relevant community organizations. The University of Minnesota research team, in consultation with the Minnesota Departments of Human Services and Education, identified stakeholders based on their direct experience with any, or all, of the following areas: administrative data systems, ECE programs and policies, foster care services and policies. In addition to the 15 staff initially identified for inclusion in the study, at the close of each interview we used the snowball method of recruitment and asked for recommendations of other professionals to interview. As a result of this process, we invited three additional professionals to participate in an interview. All 19 of the total stakeholders who were invited to participate in an interview agreed to be involved. One stakeholder invited a team member to join their interview because the team member had knowledge that was important for inclusion in the study. All qualitative data utilized in this project came directly from interviews with professionals working within child and family serving systems. No additional data and/or specimens were incorporated. This study was determined exempt from Institutional Review Board oversight by the University of Minnesota IRB (STUDY00016937).

This study focuses on county-based foster care placements, which include indigenous children and may include children who were originally placed with counties that are now within a tribal system or whose case has been transferred for tribal oversight. It is necessary to conduct culturally-sensitive research with tribal communities as partners and central stakeholders; the final report will include recommendations for the state to fund and conduct additional community-engaged studies, in partnership with indigenous researchers, to better understand the intersection of foster care placement and participation in Tribal Early Childhood programs, such as the Tribal Early Learning Initiative and Tribal Home Visiting, and to explore strategies to reduce barriers and improve access to early care and education programs for young American Indian children in foster care.

Participant Recruitment

The stakeholders were invited via email from a member of the research team to participate in the study. The email described the purpose of the study; how the study data would be used and who would have access to the data; the content and expected length of the interview (30-45 minutes); and then explained that the interview would be conducted via the video call software Zoom or by phone, based on interviewee preference and availability. The email also emphasized that stakeholder participation in the study was voluntary, and the identity of the study participants would remain confidential. An attachment to the email described the study in further detail. The research team did not offer participants any compensation for their involvement in the study.

Data Collection

Data Collection Procedures

Researchers used the video call software Zoom to conduct and record the interviews. Two research team members were present for each interview (one CASCW and one CEED); one researcher spoke with the interviewee, based on the interview protocol, and the second team member took running notes of the interview as a precaution in case the Zoom recording was accessible. To conduct the interviews, researchers used one of two interview protocols (one in-depth protocol for professionals with an extensive range of knowledge in the topic area; one shorter protocol tailored to more specialized professionals) that the research team designed specifically for this study. In each interview, researchers asked questions about the following: interviewees' professional background, current role and job functions as they relate to ECE participation/foster care; interviewees' understanding of barriers and facilitators to participation in ECE for young children in foster care in Minnesota with respect to broad-level policy and practice contexts; interviewees' understanding of strengths and challenges of working with state administrative data systems relating to these topics and this population; and interviewees' considerations for steps the state should take to better understand barriers and facilitators to, and encourage, participation in ECE for young children in foster care and/or improve the current administrative data systems. *For a copy of the interview protocols, contact Amy Dorman at dorm0039@umn.edu.*

Recording and Data Transformation

An mp3 audio file was extracted from each Zoom recording and sent out for professional and transcription. One team member reviewed each transcript for accuracy and to de-identify the transcript. Zoom video recordings were saved on a password protected digital drive accessible only by the research team. After transcripts were validated and de-identified, all Zoom video recordings were destroyed.

Data Analysis

Data-Analytic Strategies

The research team used the qualitative data analysis software NVivo to complete analysis of the interview transcripts. The data analysis process was iterative. Two research team members (one from CASCW and one from CEED) drafted an initial codebook based on initial analysis of the first two interview transcripts. Then, the initial codebook was reviewed, revised, and consensed by the full study research team. Revisions may have included the addition or deletion of a code, or clarification of a code's definition. Then, two research team members (one from CASCW and one from CEED) used the revised initial codebook to analyze each subsequent transcript using the preliminary codebook and adding to that codebook as needed. The three-member (two researchers from CEED, one from CASCW) coding team met regularly throughout the analysis process to clarify definitions of the codes and document areas that needed further exploration or discussion with the full research team. Midway through the

coding process, the full study research team convened again and made a final round of revisions to the codebook. The research team then used this new version of the codebook to complete the analysis of the transcripts.

After analyzing and coding the content of all 18 interviews, researchers developed an outline for presenting the qualitative findings. The outline was based on the purposes of the study, the content of the interview protocols, and the analysis of the qualitative interview data. The outline delineated three areas of findings: administrative data system findings, system-level and policy findings, and family-level findings. Then, within each area, the researchers used codes from the qualitative analysis to distinguish between barriers and facilitators to participation in ECE programs for young children in foster care, and opportunities and considerations to increase their participation in ECE programs. Through this process the researchers identified a set of key themes present in the qualitative interview data. After reviewing the interview excerpts coded to each theme for accuracy, researchers calculated the number and percentage of interviews in which each theme was present at least one time. If a theme occurred more than once within an interview, it was given the same weight in the calculations as an interview in which the theme occurred only once.

Methodological Integrity

After each researcher confirmed the accuracy of the codes they had assigned within each interview transcript, the researchers used the coding comparison query function in the NVivo software to calculate interrater reliability between the two researchers (one CEED, one CASCW) who had coded each transcript. Per methodological recommendations set forth by O'Connor and Joffe (2020), ≈10-20% of transcripts were used in the coding comparison query for each pair of research analysts. Interrater reliability was run at the character level, which is considered the most precise. Pair One had a Kappa coefficient of 0.68 (two of the 11 transcripts tested, or 18% of the shared transcript set), and Pair Two had a Kappa coefficient of 0.53 (two out of 7 transcripts tested, or 28% of the shared transcript set). The interrater reliability average between the two pairs of analysts was 0.61. NVivo notes[31] that Kappa coefficients of 0.4-0.75 are considered fair to good. This tool of interrater reliability was used to further discussion between researchers and to come to consensus where agreement was not found initially.

About the Qualitative Data

In the design of this study, the researchers intentionally decided to invite stakeholders with different areas of expertise and experience to participate in the interviews to capture a broad-level (e.g. data systems, policy, and practice) context to better understand ECE participation for young children in foster care. Although each interview participant was given an opportunity to respond to the same set of interview questions, some participants may not have provided information about one area of the interview protocol or another because they did not have

[31] For more on Kappa coefficients and NVivo's coding comparison query tool, visit NVivo's information page at https://help-nv11mac.qsrinternational.com/desktop/procedures/run_a_coding_comparison_query.htm.

knowledge or experience in that area. For example, some interviewees did not have experience with administrative data systems and some interviewees did not have direct knowledge of ECE programs and/or foster care at the local level. The variance in the interviewees' level of expertise and experience in the areas examined in the study is an important consideration when interpreting the results. For example, if five of the 18 interviewees noted that transportation was a barrier for families with children in foster care to access ECE programs, it would be inaccurate to conclude that the stakeholders in the other 13 interviewees thought transportation was not a barrier. Based on the study design and the process researchers used to analyze the interview data, it is not possible to differentiate between an interviewee who thought transportation was not a barrier and an interviewee who did not mention transportation as a barrier, for whatever reason.

Appendix D: Quantitative Methodology (Extended)

The following description of the quantitative methodology was submitted by staff members from DHS and MDE who received the data from the ECLDS committee and cleaned the data for analysis by the University of Minnesota research team.

For this study of early care and education (ECE) participation of young children in foster care, a request was made to the ECLDS Research and Data Committee to use the data contained in ECLDS on foster care and relevant early learning programs, including Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) services, Voluntary Prekindergarten (VPK), School Readiness Plus (SRP), School Readiness, Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE), Early Childhood Screening, and Early Learning Scholarships. Head Start data are not included in ECLDS, but federal reporting requires Head Start and Early Head Start to report on the number of enrolled children who were in foster care during the academic year. These data were used to estimate participation rates. This request was recommended by the Research and Data Committee and forwarded to the ECLDS Governance Body. The Governing Body is comprised of leadership from participating state agencies and affiliated organizations, and exists to articulate the parameters for ECLDS and approve recommendations from the Research and Data Committee. The ECLDS Governing Body approved the request.

Data files were created from ECLDS database in October 2022 by Minnesota Information Technology Services (MN.IT) using a matching process based on name and birthdate; match rates were requested by MDE but were not accessed by MDE staff prior to the publication of this report. Data were requested for cohorts of children who experienced foster care in academic years 2019, 2020, and 2021 and were five years old or younger at the time of the reporting. For all identified children in foster care, data were provided on program participation in any of the seven early learning programs available in ECLDS for each academic year, including enrollment dates. Birth date, race (using census categories) and Hispanic ethnicity, and county of foster care placement data were also provided.

Prior to analysis, DHS staff and MDE staff discussed logic to determine participation and/or enrollment in programs and reviewed data files and methods to ensure correct usage of available program data.

ECLDS Coding Methodology and Variable Definitions

Table 5. *Program determination based on ECLDS data and fieldnames*

Program	Source	Ages	Criteria
ECSE	K12_ENROLL	<1, 1, 2, 3, 4	GRADE = 'EC'
ECSE – Part B	K12_ENROLL	3, 4	Part B: GRADE = 'EC' and SPECIALEDINSTRUCTIONALSETTING in ('11','12','13','14','15','16','17')

Program	Source	Ages	Criteria
ECSE – Part C	K12_ENROLL	<1, 1, 2	Part C: GRADE = 'EC' and SPECIALEDINSTRUCTIONALSETTING in ('30','31','32','33','34','39','41','42','43','44','45')
VPK / SR+	K12_ENROLL	4	GRADE like 'P%' and GRADE <> 'PS' (VPK) or GRADE like 'R%' (SR+)
School Readiness	EESTUDENT	3, 4	STUDENTPROGRAMNAME in ('SR', 'SR/ABE', 'Other School Readiness')
Early Childhood Screening	K12_ENROLL	3, 4	GRADE = 'PS'
ECFE	EESTUDENT	<1, 1, 2, 3, 4	STUDENTPROGRAMNAME in ('ECFE', 'ECFE/ABE')
Early Learning Scholarships	ELSA	<1, 1, 2, 3, 4	AWARDAMOUNT > 0

Note. Age calculated on September 1st of academic year, regardless of out-of-home care status

Table 6. *Dates for program and foster care timing comparisons*

Program	Source	Program date used
OHC	CW	Earliest episode start date for episodes that touched the AY
ECSE	K12_ENROLL	DATEOFENTRY
VPK/SR+	K12_ENROLL	DATEOFENTRY
School Readiness	EESTUDENT	STUDENTREGISTRATIONDATE
Early Childhood Screening	K12_ENROLL	DATEOFENTRY
ECFE	EESTUDENT	STUDENTREGISTRATIONDATE
Early Learning Scholarships	ELSA	AWARDSTARTDATE

Appendix E: Data Tables

For the purpose of this report, “Any ECE Program” means any early childhood program that is included in the ECLDS data system for which children in foster care are eligible (ESCE Parts B and C, Early Childhood Screening, Early Learning Scholarships, ECFE, VPK/SRP, School Readiness). Early Childhood Screening and Early Learning Scholarships do not provide educational programming or child care services.

Description of data elements as shown in data tables	
Column name	**Column description**
# in FC	The number of children in foster care (FC). All data are limited to those children who were under 5 as of September 1st of the corresponding academic year. Each program has specific age requirements that may be more defined, and those requirements will be reflected in the age breakdown on each tab.
# in ECE	A subset of "# in FC"; the number of children who were enrolled in the given early care and education (ECE) program.
% in ECE	A rate calculated by dividing "# in ECE" by "# in FC"; the rate shows the estimate of the number of eligible children in FC who were also participants in the given ECE program in the particular academic year.

Table 7. *Any ECE Program AY 2019, by MACSSA Region*

		#in foster care	#w/any ECE	% w/any ECE
Region 1	Kittson	1	0	0.0%
	Marshall	6	0	0.0%
	Norman	3	1	33.3%
	Pennington	19	6	31.6%
	Polk	34	11	32.4%
	Red Lake	4	1	25.0%
	Roseau	8	3	37.5%
Region 2	Beltrami	330	103	31.2%
	Clearwater	11	2	18.2%
	Hubbard	28	15	53.6%
	Lake of the Woods	1	0	0.0%
	Mahnomen	11	6	54.5%
Region 3	Aitkin	10	3	30.0%
	Carlton	42	15	35.7%
	Cook	4	3	75.0%
	Itasca	88	48	54.5%
	Koochiching	19	7	36.8%
	Lake	7	5	71.4%
	St. Louis	415	166	40.0%
Region 4	Becker	70	33	47.1%
	Clay	54	31	57.4%
	Douglas	21	7	33.3%
	Otter Tail	78	30	38.5%
	Stevens	10	4	40.0%
	Traverse	3	0	0.0%
	Western Prairie Human Services	21	9	42.9%
	Wilkin	4	3	75.0%
Region 5	Cass	26	13	50.0%
	Crow Wing	108	47	43.5%
	Morrison	45	20	44.4%
	Todd	31	18	58.1%
	Wadena	26	9	34.6%
Region 6	Big Stone	2	1	50.0%
	Chippewa	10	6	60.0%
	Kandiyohi	46	20	43.5%
	Lac qui Parle	2	0	0.0%
	McLeod	39	23	59.0%
	Meeker	17	8	47.1%
	Renville	11	4	36.4%
	Swift	27	9	33.3%
	Yellow Medicine	9	5	55.6%
Region 7	Benton	41	21	51.2%
	Chisago	58	27	46.6%
	Isanti	28	15	53.6%
	Kanabec	11	3	27.3%
	Mille Lacs	98	39	39.8%
	Pine	43	18	41.9%
	Sherburne	53	26	49.1%
	Stearns	129	66	51.2%
	Wright	78	28	35.9%
Region 8	Des Moines Valley HHS	29	11	37.9%
	Nobles	12	5	41.7%
	Southwest HHS	81	27	33.3%
Region 9	Blue Earth	75	35	46.7%
	Brown	20	10	50.0%
	Faribault-Martin	46	21	45.7%
	Freeborn	56	19	33.9%
	Le Sueur	12	3	25.0%
	MN Prairie	70	29	41.4%
	Nicollet	24	10	41.7%
	Sibley	14	5	35.7%
	Watonwan	16	8	50.0%
Region 10	Fillmore	6	1	16.7%
	Goodhue	26	16	61.5%
	Houston	24	8	33.3%
	MN Prairie	70	29	41.4%
	Mower	37	8	21.6%
	Olmsted	63	23	36.5%
	Rice	75	29	38.7%
	Wabasha	12	4	33.3%
	Winona	55	29	52.7%
Region 11	Anoka	176	69	39.2%
	Carver	36	16	44.4%
	Dakota	202	105	52.0%
	Hennepin	1,083	523	48.3%
	Ramsey	530	249	47.0%
	Scott	71	30	42.3%
	Washington	63	35	55.6%

Note: Western Prairie Human Services serves Pope and Grant Counties. Des Moines Valley Health and Human Services (Des Moines Valley HHS) serves the counties of Cottonwood and Jackson. Southwest Health and Human Services (Southwest HHS) serves the counties of Lincoln, Lyon, Murray, Pipestone, Redwood, and Rock. Minnesota Prairie Council Alliance (MN Prairie) serves the counties of Dodge, Steele, and Waseca and includes counties from both Regions 9 and 10, and is included under both regions.

Table 8. *Participation in any ECE program by Race, Ethnicity, Age and County during AY 2019*

	# in FC	# in ECE	% in ECE
Total	**5,404**	**2,362**	**43.7%**
Race			
African American / Black	772	385	49.9%
American Indian / Alaska Native	1,142	441	38.6%
Asian / Pacific Islander	109	44	40.4%
Two or more races	1102	498	45.2%
Unknown / declined	146	51	34.9%
White	2,133	943	44.2%
Ethnicity			
Hispanic / Latino	510	218	42.7%
Non Hispanic / Unknown	4,894	2,144	43.8%
Age			
0	1,551	401	25.9%
1	1,139	431	37.8%
2	951	441	46.4%
3	894	519	58.1%
4	869	570	65.6%
County			
Aitkin	10	3	30.0%
Anoka	176	69	39.2%
Becker	70	33	47.1%
Beltrami	330	103	31.2%
Benton	41	21	51.2%
Big Stone	2	1	50.0%
Blue Earth	75	35	46.7%
Brown	20	10	50.0%
Carlton	42	15	35.7%
Carver	36	16	44.4%
Cass	26	13	50.0%
Chippewa	10	6	60.0%
Chisago	58	27	46.6%
Clay	54	31	57.4%
Clearwater	11	2	18.2%
Cook	4	3	75.0%
Crow Wing	108	47	43.5%
Dakota	202	105	52.0%
Des Moines Valley HHS	29	11	37.9%

Douglas	21	7	33.3%
Faribault-Martin	46	21	45.7%
Fillmore	6	1	16.7%
Freeborn	56	19	33.9%
Goodhue	26	16	61.5%
Hennepin	1,083	523	48.3%
Houston	24	8	33.3%
Hubbard	28	15	53.6%
Isanti	28	15	53.6%
Itasca	88	48	54.5%
Kanabec	11	3	27.3%
Kandiyohi	46	20	43.5%
Kittson	1	0	0.0%
Koochiching	19	7	36.8%
Lac qui Parle	2	0	0.0%
Lake	7	5	71.4%
Lake of the Woods	1	0	0.0%
Le Sueur	12	3	25.0%
Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe	85	33	38.8%
Mahnomen	11	6	54.5%
Marshall	6	0	0.0%
McLeod	39	23	59.0%
Meeker	17	8	47.1%
Mille Lacs	98	39	39.8%
MN Prairie	70	29	41.4%
Morrison	45	20	44.4%
Mower	37	8	21.6%
Nicollet	24	10	41.7%
Nobles	12	5	41.7%
Norman	3	1	33.3%
Olmsted	63	23	36.5%
Otter Tail	78	30	38.5%
Pennington	19	6	31.6%
Pine	43	18	41.9%
Polk	34	11	32.4%
Ramsey	530	249	47.0%
Red Lake	4	1	25.0%
Renville	11	4	36.4%
Rice	75	29	38.7%

Roseau	8	3	37.5%
Scott	71	30	42.3%
Sherburne	53	26	49.1%
Sibley	14	5	35.7%
Southwest HHS	81	27	33.3%
St. Louis	415	166	40.0%
Stearns	129	66	51.2%
Stevens	10	4	40.0%
Swift	27	9	33.3%
Todd	31	18	58.1%
Traverse	3	0	0.0%
Wabasha	12	4	33.3%
Wadena	26	9	34.6%
Washington	63	35	55.6%
Watonwan	16	8	50.0%
Western Prairie Human Services	21	9	42.9%
White Earth Band of Ojibwe	165	63	38.2%
Wilkin	4	3	75.0%
Winona	55	29	52.7%
Wright	78	28	35.9%
Yellow Medicine	9	5	55.6%

Note. ECE enrollment data include Early Childhood Screening and Early Learning Scholarships, which are programs that do not provide educational programming or child care services.

Table 9. *Participation in ECSE by Race, Ethnicity, Age and County during AY 2019*

	# in FC	# in ECE	% in ECE

Total	**5,404**	**1,379**	**25.5%**
Race			
African American / Black	772	192	24.9%
American Indian / Alaska Native	1,142	280	24.5%
Asian / Pacific Islander	109	23	21.1%
Two or more races	1102	292	26.5%
Unknown / declined	146	26	17.8%
White	2,133	566	26.5%
Ethnicity			
Hispanic / Latino (any race)	510	126	24.7%
Non Hispanic / Unknown	4,894	1,253	25.6%
Age			
0	1,551	281	18.1%
1	1,139	311	27.3%
2	951	293	30.8%
3	894	230	25.7%
4	869	264	30.4%
County			
Aitkin	10	2	20.0%
Anoka	176	41	23.3%
Becker	70	28	40.0%
Beltrami	330	57	17.3%
Benton	41	12	29.3%
Big Stone	2	1	50.0%
Blue Earth	75	29	38.7%
Brown	20	6	30.0%
Carlton	42	14	33.3%
Carver	36	4	11.1%
Cass	26	11	42.3%
Chippewa	10	4	40.0%
Chisago	58	16	27.6%
Clay	54	28	51.9%
Clearwater	11	1	9.1%
Cook	4	3	75.0%
Crow Wing	108	40	37.0%
Dakota	202	57	28.2%
Des Moines Valley HHS	29	7	24.1%

Douglas	21	6	28.6%
Faribault-Martin	46	13	28.3%
Fillmore	6	1	16.7%
Freeborn	56	12	21.4%
Goodhue	26	10	38.5%
Hennepin	1,083	227	21.0%
Houston	24	7	29.2%
Hubbard	28	5	17.9%
Isanti	28	7	25.0%
Itasca	88	33	37.5%
Kanabec	11	2	18.2%
Kandiyohi	46	11	23.9%
Kittson	1	0	0.0%
Koochiching	19	4	21.1%
Lac qui Parle	2	0	0.0%
Lake	7	2	28.6%
Lake of the Woods	1	0	0.0%
Le Sueur	12	3	25.0%
Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe	85	23	27.1%
Mahnomen	11	2	18.2%
Marshall	6	0	0.0%
McLeod	39	10	25.6%
Meeker	17	7	41.2%
Mille Lacs	98	30	30.6%
MN Prairie	70	24	34.3%
Morrison	45	11	24.4%
Mower	37	7	18.9%
Nicollet	24	8	33.3%
Nobles	12	3	25.0%
Norman	3	1	33.3%
Olmsted	63	16	25.4%
Otter Tail	78	19	24.4%
Pennington	19	3	15.8%
Pine	43	12	27.9%
Polk	34	7	20.6%
Ramsey	530	137	25.8%
Red Lake	4	1	25.0%
Renville	11	2	18.2%

Rice	75	21	28.0%
Roseau	8	2	25.0%
Scott	71	13	18.3%
Sherburne	53	13	24.5%
Sibley	14	2	14.3%
Southwest HHS	81	15	18.5%
St. Louis	415	116	28.0%
Stearns	129	38	29.5%
Stevens	10	2	20.0%
Swift	27	6	22.2%
Todd	31	14	45.2%
Traverse	3	0	0.0%
Wabasha	12	2	16.7%
Wadena	26	8	30.8%
Washington	63	25	39.7%
Watonwan	16	5	31.3%
Western Prairie Human Services	21	6	28.6%
White Earth Band of Ojibwe	165	31	18.8%
Wilkin	4	1	25.0%
Winona	55	14	25.5%
Wright	78	16	20.5%
Yellow Medicine	9	2	22.2%

Table 10. *Participation in ECSE Part B by Race, Ethnicity, Age and County during AY 2019*

	# in FC	# in ECE	% in ECE

Total	**1,763**	**422**	**23.9%**
Race			
African American / Black	254	51	20.1%
American Indian / Alaska Native	383	95	24.8%
Asian / Pacific Islander	35	4	11.4%
Two or more races	323	72	22.3%
Unknown / declined	41	5	12.2%
White	727	195	26.8%
Ethnicity			
Hispanic / Latino (any race)	183	38	20.8%
Non Hispanic / Unknown	1,580	384	24.3%
Age			
0	--	--	--
1	--	--	--
2	--	--	--
3	894	190	21.3%
4	869	232	26.7%
County			
Aitkin	3	1	33.3%
Anoka	56	7	12.5%
Becker	19	10	52.6%
Beltrami	122	22	18.0%
Benton	15	4	26.7%
Big Stone	1	1	100.0%
Blue Earth	17	6	35.3%
Brown	7	1	14.3%
Carlton	10	1	10.0%
Carver	16	2	12.5%
Cass	5	3	60.0%
Chippewa	4	1	25.0%
Chisago	23	9	39.1%
Clay	18	13	72.2%
Clearwater	2	0	0.0%
Cook	2	1	50.0%
Crow Wing	34	14	41.2%
Dakota	51	18	35.3%
Des Moines Valley HHS	12	5	41.7%

Douglas	6	0	0.0%
Faribault-Martin	20	8	40.0%
Fillmore	2	1	50.0%
Freeborn	17	3	17.6%
Goodhue	6	2	33.3%
Hennepin	331	51	15.4%
Houston	8	1	12.5%
Hubbard	17	1	5.9%
Isanti	14	3	21.4%
Itasca	36	5	13.9%
Kanabec	3	1	33.3%
Kandiyohi	13	3	23.1%
Koochiching	10	2	20.0%
Lake	4	0	0.0%
Lake of the Woods	1	0	0.0%
Le Sueur	4	1	25.0%
Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe	35	12	34.3%
Mahnomen	2	0	0.0%
Marshall	1	0	0.0%
McLeod	17	5	29.4%
Meeker	3	2	66.7%
Mille Lacs	31	10	32.3%
MN Prairie	25	7	28.0%
Morrison	18	7	38.9%
Mower	4	0	0.0%
Nicollet	6	1	16.7%
Nobles	3	2	66.7%
Olmsted	20	7	35.0%
Otter Tail	33	8	24.2%
Pennington	5	2	40.0%
Pine	12	4	33.3%
Polk	11	3	27.3%
Ramsey	158	31	19.6%
Red Lake	3	0	0.0%
Renville	4	1	25.0%
Rice	20	5	25.0%
Roseau	3	1	33.3%
Scott	26	5	19.2%

Sherburne	19	6	31.6%
Sibley	7	1	14.3%
Southwest HHS	31	6	19.4%
St. Louis	139	33	23.7%
Stearns	43	11	25.6%
Stevens	3	1	33.3%
Swift	10	3	30.0%
Todd	11	5	45.5%
Traverse	1	0	0.0%
Wabasha	5	1	20.0%
Wadena	6	5	83.3%
Washington	18	8	44.4%
Watonwan	7	3	42.9%
Western Prairie Human Services	9	3	33.3%
White Earth Band of Ojibwe	58	15	25.9%
Wilkin	2	0	0.0%
Winona	17	3	17.6%
Wright	23	2	8.7%
Yellow Medicine	5	2	40.0%

Table 11. *Participation in ECSE Part C by Race, Ethnicity, Age and County during AY 2019*

	# in FC	# in ECE	% in ECE

Total	**3,641**	**657**	**18.0%**
Race			
African American / Black	518	104	20.1%
American Indian / Alaska Native	759	142	18.7%
Asian / Pacific Islander	74	11	14.9%
Two or more races	779	129	16.6%
Unknown / declined	105	14	13.3%
White	1,406	257	18.3%
Ethnicity			
Hispanic / Latino (any race)	327	59	18.0%
Non Hispanic / Unknown	3,314	598	18.0%
Age			
0	1,551	190	12.3%
1	1,139	252	22.1%
2	951	215	22.6%
3	--	--	--
4	--	--	--
County			
Aitkin	7	1	14.3%
Anoka	120	27	22.5%
Becker	51	16	31.4%
Beltrami	208	30	14.4%
Benton	26	5	19.2%
Big Stone	1	0	0.0%
Blue Earth	58	19	32.8%
Brown	13	5	38.5%
Carlton	32	9	28.1%
Carver	20	2	10.0%
Cass	21	6	28.6%
Chippewa	6	2	33.3%
Chisago	35	5	14.3%
Clay	36	10	27.8%
Clearwater	9	1	11.1%
Cook	2	1	50.0%
Crow Wing	74	19	25.7%
Dakota	151	24	15.9%
Des Moines Valley HHS	17	0	0.0%

Douglas	15	3	20.0%
Faribault-Martin	26	2	7.7%
Fillmore	4	0	0.0%
Freeborn	39	3	7.7%
Goodhue	20	8	40.0%
Hennepin	752	123	16.4%
Houston	16	4	25.0%
Hubbard	11	1	9.1%
Isanti	14	2	14.3%
Itasca	52	13	25.0%
Kanabec	8	1	12.5%
Kandiyohi	33	7	21.2%
Kittson	1	0	0.0%
Koochiching	9	1	11.1%
Lac qui Parle	2	0	0.0%
Lake	3	2	66.7%
Le Sueur	8	0	0.0%
Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe	50	11	22.0%
Mahnomen	9	2	22.2%
Marshall	5	0	0.0%
McLeod	22	2	9.1%
Meeker	14	3	21.4%
Mille Lacs	67	17	25.4%
MN Prairie	45	13	28.9%
Morrison	27	3	11.1%
Mower	33	6	18.2%
Nicollet	18	6	33.3%
Nobles	9	1	11.1%
Norman	3	1	33.3%
Olmsted	43	8	18.6%
Otter Tail	45	7	15.6%
Pennington	14	0	0.0%
Pine	31	8	25.8%
Polk	23	3	13.0%
Ramsey	372	75	20.2%
Red Lake	1	0	0.0%
Renville	7	0	0.0%
Rice	55	10	18.2%

Roseau	5	0	0.0%
Scott	45	2	4.4%
Sherburne	34	3	8.8%
Sibley	7	0	0.0%
Southwest HHS	50	6	12.0%
St. Louis	276	49	17.8%
Stearns	86	19	22.1%
Stevens	7	1	14.3%
Swift	17	1	5.9%
Todd	20	5	25.0%
Traverse	2	0	0.0%
Wabasha	7	1	14.3%
Wadena	20	3	15.0%
Washington	45	7	15.6%
Watonwan	9	0	0.0%
Western Prairie Human Services	12	2	16.7%
White Earth Band of Ojibwe	107	11	10.3%
Wilkin	2	1	50.0%
Winona	38	9	23.7%
Wright	55	9	16.4%
Yellow Medicine	4	0	0.0%

Table 12. *Participation in VPK or SRP by Race, Ethnicity, Age and County during AY 2019*

	# in FC	# in ECE	% in ECE
Total	**869**	**98**	**11.3%**
Race			
African American / Black	126	12	9.5%
American Indian / Alaska Native	188	23	12.2%
Asian / Pacific Islander	17	2	11.8%
Two or more races	170	21	12.4%
Unknown / declined	15	1	6.7%
White	353	39	11.0%
Ethnicity			
Hispanic / Latino (any race)	94	16	17.0%
Non Hispanic / Unknown	775	82	10.6%
Age			

0	--	--	--
1	--	--	--
2	--	--	--
3	--	--	--
4	869	98	11.3%
County			
Aitkin	1	0	0.0%
Anoka	19	1	5.3%
Becker	6	0	0.0%
Beltrami	55	3	5.5%
Benton	12	2	16.7%
Big Stone	1	0	0.0%
Blue Earth	9	0	0.0%
Brown	3	0	0.0%
Carlton	6	0	0.0%
Carver	10	1	10.0%
Cass	1	0	0.0%
Chippewa	1	0	0.0%
Chisago	11	0	0.0%
Clay	10	1	10.0%
Clearwater	1	0	0.0%
Crow Wing	15	0	0.0%
Dakota	26	5	19.2%
Des Moines Valley HHS	5	0	0.0%
Douglas	5	0	0.0%
Faribault-Martin	8	2	25.0%
Freeborn	8	3	37.5%
Goodhue	3	0	0.0%
Hennepin	167	20	12.0%
Houston	6	1	16.7%
Hubbard	8	2	25.0%
Isanti	7	0	0.0%
Itasca	18	4	22.2%
Kanabec	3	0	0.0%
Kandiyohi	4	1	25.0%
Koochiching	8	1	12.5%
Lake	1	0	0.0%
Le Sueur	2	0	0.0%

Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe	22	4	18.2%
Mahnomen	1	1	100.0%
McLeod	8	0	0.0%
Meeker	2	0	0.0%
Mille Lacs	24	2	8.3%
MN Prairie	14	3	21.4%
Morrison	9	1	11.1%
Mower	2	0	0.0%
Nicollet	2	0	0.0%
Nobles	3	1	33.3%
Olmsted	9	0	0.0%
Otter Tail	17	1	5.9%
Pennington	3	0	0.0%
Pine	8	2	25.0%
Polk	7	1	14.3%
Ramsey	70	14	20.0%
Red Lake	3	0	0.0%
Renville	2	0	0.0%
Rice	10	0	0.0%
Roseau	2	0	0.0%
Scott	13	0	0.0%
Sherburne	10	1	10.0%
Sibley	3	1	33.3%
Southwest HHS	13	1	7.7%
St. Louis	67	7	10.4%
Stearns	21	1	4.8%
Stevens	3	0	0.0%
Swift	6	1	16.7%
Todd	6	0	0.0%
Traverse	1	0	0.0%
Wabasha	3	0	0.0%
Wadena	3	0	0.0%
Washington	8	1	12.5%
Watonwan	3	2	66.7%
Western Prairie Human Services	4	0	0.0%
White Earth Band of Ojibwe	25	6	24.0%
Wilkin	1	0	0.0%

Winona	9	0	0.0%
Wright	9	0	0.0%
Yellow Medicine	3	0	0.0%

Table 13. *Participation in School Readiness by Race, Ethnicity, Age and County during AY 2019*

	# in FC	# in ECE	% in ECE

Total	**1,763**	**175**	**9.9%**
Race			
African American / Black	254	18	7.1%
American Indian / Alaska Native	383	29	7.6%
Asian / Pacific Islander	35	4	11.4%
Two or more races	323	32	9.9%
Unknown / declined	41	4	9.8%
White	727	88	12.1%
Ethnicity			
Hispanic / Latino (any race)	183	17	9.3%
Non Hispanic / Unknown	1,580	158	10.0%
Age			
0	--	--	--
1	--	--	--
2	--	--	--
3	894	60	6.7%
4	869	115	13.2%
County			
Aitkin	3	0	0.0%
Anoka	56	2	3.6%
Becker	19	3	15.8%
Beltrami	122	3	2.5%
Benton	15	2	13.3%
Big Stone	1	0	0.0%
Blue Earth	17	3	17.6%
Brown	7	1	14.3%
Carlton	10	1	10.0%
Carver	16	1	6.3%
Cass	5	0	0.0%
Chippewa	4	3	75.0%
Chisago	23	8	34.8%
Clay	18	1	5.6%
Clearwater	2	0	0.0%
Cook	2	0	0.0%
Crow Wing	34	1	2.9%
Dakota	51	6	11.8%
Des Moines Valley HHS	12	0	0.0%

Douglas	6	0	0.0%
Faribault-Martin	20	3	15.0%
Fillmore	2	0	0.0%
Freeborn	17	4	23.5%
Goodhue	6	1	16.7%
Hennepin	331	39	11.8%
Houston	8	0	0.0%
Hubbard	17	2	11.8%
Isanti	14	0	0.0%
Itasca	36	7	19.4%
Kanabec	3	1	33.3%
Kandiyohi	13	3	23.1%
Koochiching	10	0	0.0%
Lake	4	0	0.0%
Lake of the Woods	1	0	0.0%
Le Sueur	4	0	0.0%
Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe	35	1	2.9%
Mahnomen	2	0	0.0%
Marshall	1	0	0.0%
McLeod	17	1	5.9%
Meeker	3	1	33.3%
Mille Lacs	31	1	3.2%
MN Prairie	25	2	8.0%
Morrison	18	0	0.0%
Mower	4	0	0.0%
Nicollet	6	0	0.0%
Nobles	3	2	66.7%
Olmsted	20	4	20.0%
Otter Tail	33	7	21.2%
Pennington	5	1	20.0%
Pine	12	0	0.0%
Polk	11	0	0.0%
Ramsey	158	6	3.8%
Red Lake	3	0	0.0%
Renville	4	0	0.0%
Rice	20	6	30.0%
Roseau	3	0	0.0%
Scott	26	1	3.8%

Sherburne	19	4	21.1%
Sibley	7	0	0.0%
Southwest HHS	31	5	16.1%
St. Louis	139	9	6.5%
Stearns	43	6	14.0%
Stevens	3	1	33.3%
Swift	10	0	0.0%
Todd	11	4	36.4%
Traverse	1	0	0.0%
Wabasha	5	0	0.0%
Wadena	6	4	66.7%
Washington	18	1	5.6%
Watonwan	7	3	42.9%
Western Prairie Human Services	9	1	11.1%
White Earth Band of Ojibwe	58	6	10.3%
Wilkin	2	0	0.0%
Winona	17	0	0.0%
Wright	23	2	8.7%
Yellow Medicine	5	1	20.0%

Table 14. *Participation in Early Childhood Screening by Race, Ethnicity, Age and County during AY 2019*

	# in FC	# in ECE	% in ECE

Total	**1,763**	**466**	**26.4%**
Race			
African American / Black	254	68	26.8%
American Indian / Alaska Native	383	71	18.5%
Asian / Pacific Islander	35	19	54.3%
Two or more races	323	89	27.6%
Unknown / declined	41	11	26.8%
White	727	208	28.6%
Ethnicity			
Hispanic / Latino (any race)	183	52	28.4%
Non Hispanic / Unknown	1,580	414	26.2%
Age			
0	--	--	--
1	--	--	--
2	--	--	--
3	894	272	30.4%
4	869	194	22.3%
County			
Aitkin	3	0	0.0%
Anoka	56	14	25.0%
Becker	19	4	21.1%
Beltrami	122	22	18.0%
Benton	15	2	13.3%
Big Stone	1	0	0.0%
Blue Earth	17	5	29.4%
Brown	7	3	42.9%
Carlton	10	1	10.0%
Carver	16	10	62.5%
Cass	5	0	0.0%
Chippewa	4	1	25.0%
Chisago	23	8	34.8%
Clay	18	5	27.8%
Clearwater	2	0	0.0%
Cook	2	0	0.0%
Crow Wing	34	6	17.6%
Dakota	51	23	45.1%
Des Moines Valley HHS	12	3	25.0%

Douglas	6	0	0.0%
Faribault-Martin	20	6	30.0%
Fillmore	2	0	0.0%
Freeborn	17	6	35.3%
Goodhue	6	1	16.7%
Hennepin	331	96	29.0%
Houston	8	0	0.0%
Hubbard	17	4	23.5%
Isanti	14	3	21.4%
Itasca	36	9	25.0%
Kanabec	3	1	33.3%
Kandiyohi	13	6	46.2%
Koochiching	10	1	10.0%
Lake	4	0	0.0%
Lake of the Woods	1	0	0.0%
Le Sueur	4	1	25.0%
Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe	35	6	17.1%
Mahnomen	2	1	50.0%
Marshall	1	0	0.0%
McLeod	17	5	29.4%
Meeker	3	2	66.7%
Mille Lacs	31	3	9.7%
MN Prairie	25	5	20.0%
Morrison	18	3	16.7%
Mower	4	0	0.0%
Nicollet	6	3	50.0%
Nobles	3	2	66.7%
Olmsted	20	5	25.0%
Otter Tail	33	9	27.3%
Pennington	5	2	40.0%
Pine	12	3	25.0%
Polk	11	3	27.3%
Ramsey	158	54	34.2%
Red Lake	3	0	0.0%
Renville	4	1	25.0%
Rice	20	3	15.0%
Roseau	3	1	33.3%
Scott	26	7	26.9%

Sherburne	19	4	21.1%
Sibley	7	2	28.6%
Southwest HHS	31	9	29.0%
St. Louis	139	44	31.7%
Stearns	43	10	23.3%
Stevens	3	0	0.0%
Swift	10	3	30.0%
Todd	11	3	27.3%
Traverse	1	0	0.0%
Wabasha	5	2	40.0%
Wadena	6	1	16.7%
Washington	18	4	22.2%
Watonwan	7	1	14.3%
Western Prairie Human Services	9	5	55.6%
White Earth Band of Ojibwe	58	6	10.3%
Wilkin	2	1	50.0%
Winona	17	4	23.5%
Wright	23	8	34.8%
Yellow Medicine	5	0	0.0%

Table 15. *Participation in ECFE by Race, Ethnicity, Age and County during AY 2019*

	# in FC	# in ECE	% in ECE

Total	**5,404**	**109**	**2.0%**
Race			
African American / Black	772	12	1.6%
American Indian / Alaska Native	1,142	11	1.0%
Asian / Pacific Islander	109	0	0.0%
Two or more races	1102	19	1.7%
Unknown / declined	146	5	3.4%
White	2,133	62	2.9%
Ethnicity			
Hispanic / Latino (any race)	510	8	1.6%
Non Hispanic / Unknown	4,894	101	2.1%
Age			
0	1,551	27	1.7%
1	1,139	33	2.9%
2	951	30	3.2%
3	894	13	1.5%
4	869	6	0.7%
County			
Aitkin	10	0	0.0%
Anoka	176	20	11.4%
Becker	70	1	1.4%
Beltrami	330	5	1.5%
Benton	41	0	0.0%
Big Stone	2	0	0.0%
Blue Earth	75	2	2.7%
Brown	20	0	0.0%
Carlton	42	0	0.0%
Carver	36	0	0.0%
Cass	26	0	0.0%
Chippewa	10	0	0.0%
Chisago	58	2	3.4%
Clay	54	0	0.0%
Clearwater	11	0	0.0%
Cook	4	0	0.0%
Crow Wing	108	0	0.0%
Dakota	202	2	1.0%
Des Moines Valley HHS	29	0	0.0%

Douglas	21	0	0.0%
Faribault-Martin	46	1	2.2%
Fillmore	6	0	0.0%
Freeborn	56	0	0.0%
Goodhue	26	2	7.7%
Hennepin	1,083	12	1.1%
Houston	24	0	0.0%
Hubbard	28	0	0.0%
Isanti	28	0	0.0%
Itasca	88	0	0.0%
Kanabec	11	0	0.0%
Kandiyohi	46	0	0.0%
Kittson	1	0	0.0%
Koochiching	19	0	0.0%
Lac qui Parle	2	0	0.0%
Lake	7	0	0.0%
Lake of the Woods	1	0	0.0%
Le Sueur	12	0	0.0%
Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe	85	1	1.2%
Mahnomen	11	0	0.0%
Marshall	6	0	0.0%
McLeod	39	1	2.6%
Meeker	17	0	0.0%
Mille Lacs	98	2	2.0%
MN Prairie	70	0	0.0%
Morrison	45	0	0.0%
Mower	37	0	0.0%
Nicollet	24	0	0.0%
Nobles	12	0	0.0%
Norman	3	0	0.0%
Olmsted	63	2	3.2%
Otter Tail	78	1	1.3%
Pennington	19	0	0.0%
Pine	43	1	2.3%
Polk	34	0	0.0%
Ramsey	530	13	2.5%
Red Lake	4	0	0.0%
Renville	11	0	0.0%

Rice	75	7	9.3%
Roseau	8	0	0.0%
Scott	71	1	1.4%
Sherburne	53	2	3.8%
Sibley	14	0	0.0%
Southwest HHS	81	0	0.0%
St. Louis	415	7	1.7%
Stearns	129	3	2.3%
Stevens	10	1	10.0%
Swift	27	1	3.7%
Todd	31	1	3.2%
Traverse	3	0	0.0%
Wabasha	12	0	0.0%
Wadena	26	0	0.0%
Washington	63	1	1.6%
Watonwan	16	0	0.0%
Western Prairie Human Services	21	0	0.0%
White Earth Band of Ojibwe	165	1	0.6%
Wilkin	4	0	0.0%
Winona	55	15	27.3%
Wright	78	1	1.3%
Yellow Medicine	9	0	0.0%

Table 16. *Participation in Early Learning Scholarships by Race, Ethnicity, Age and County during AY 2019*

	# in FC	# in ECE	% in ECE

Total	**5,404**	**868**	**16.1%**
Race			
African American / Black	772	193	25.0%
American Indian / Alaska Native	1,142	141	12.3%
Asian / Pacific Islander	109	17	15.6%
Two or more races	1102	198	18.0%
Unknown / declined	146	18	12.3%
White	2,133	301	14.1%
Ethnicity			
Hispanic / Latino (any race)	510	73	14.3%
Non Hispanic / Unknown	4,894	795	16.2%
Age			
0	1,551	132	8.5%
1	1,139	153	13.4%
2	951	147	15.5%
3	894	189	21.1%
4	869	247	28.4%
County			
Aitkin	10	2	20.0%
Anoka	176	17	9.7%
Becker	70	10	14.3%
Beltrami	330	28	8.5%
Benton	41	12	29.3%
Big Stone	2	0	0.0%
Blue Earth	75	3	4.0%
Brown	20	4	20.0%
Carlton	42	1	2.4%
Carver	36	7	19.4%
Cass	26	3	11.5%
Chippewa	10	0	0.0%
Chisago	58	7	12.1%
Clay	54	11	20.4%
Clearwater	11	2	18.2%
Cook	4	3	75.0%
Crow Wing	108	4	3.7%
Dakota	202	46	22.8%
Des Moines Valley HHS	29	3	10.3%

Douglas	21	1	4.8%
Faribault-Martin	46	2	4.3%
Fillmore	6	0	0.0%
Freeborn	56	1	1.8%
Goodhue	26	8	30.8%
Hennepin	1,083	306	28.3%
Houston	24	1	4.2%
Hubbard	28	6	21.4%
Isanti	28	7	25.0%
Itasca	88	6	6.8%
Kanabec	11	1	9.1%
Kandiyohi	46	4	8.7%
Kittson	1	0	0.0%
Koochiching	19	2	10.5%
Lac qui Parle	2	0	0.0%
Lake	7	4	57.1%
Lake of the Woods	1	0	0.0%
Le Sueur	12	0	0.0%
Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe	85	13	15.3%
Mahnomen	11	2	18.2%
Marshall	6	0	0.0%
McLeod	39	11	28.2%
Meeker	17	2	11.8%
Mille Lacs	98	11	11.2%
MN Prairie	70	1	1.4%
Morrison	45	7	15.6%
Mower	37	1	2.7%
Nicollet	24	1	4.2%
Nobles	12	3	25.0%
Norman	3	0	0.0%
Olmsted	63	6	9.5%
Otter Tail	78	7	9.0%
Pennington	19	3	15.8%
Pine	43	6	14.0%
Polk	34	1	2.9%
Ramsey	530	99	18.7%
Red Lake	4	0	0.0%
Renville	11	1	9.1%

Rice	75	4	5.3%
Roseau	8	0	0.0%
Scott	71	19	26.8%
Sherburne	53	13	24.5%
Sibley	14	1	7.1%
Southwest HHS	81	8	9.9%
St. Louis	415	27	6.5%
Stearns	129	33	25.6%
Stevens	10	0	0.0%
Swift	27	3	11.1%
Todd	31	3	9.7%
Traverse	3	0	0.0%
Wabasha	12	1	8.3%
Wadena	26	3	11.5%
Washington	63	16	25.4%
Watonwan	16	1	6.3%
Western Prairie Human Services	21	1	4.8%
White Earth Band of Ojibwe	165	32	19.4%
Wilkin	4	2	50.0%
Winona	55	6	10.9%
Wright	78	5	6.4%
Yellow Medicine	9	3	33.3%

Table 17. *Participation in any ECE Program by Race, Ethnicity, Age and County during AY 2020*

	# in FC	# in ECE	% in ECE

Total	**4,683**	**2,108**	**45.0%**
Race			
African American / Black	662	315	47.6%
American Indian / Alaska Native	945	357	37.8%
Asian / Pacific Islander	74	28	37.8%
Two or more races	1076	535	49.7%
Unknown / declined	115	47	40.9%
White	1,811	826	45.6%
Ethnicity			
Hispanic / Latino (any race)	437	168	38.4%
Non Hispanic / Unknown	4,246	1940	45.7%
Age			
0	1,344	342	25.4%
1	954	376	39.4%
2	930	454	48.8%
3	753	444	59.0%
4	702	492	70.1%
County			
Aitkin	10	6	60.0%
Anoka	160	69	43.1%
Becker	67	32	47.8%
Beltrami	273	78	28.6%
Benton	32	16	50.0%
Big Stone	4	0	0.0%
Blue Earth	84	43	51.2%
Brown	27	9	33.3%
Carlton	32	11	34.4%
Carver	42	19	45.2%
Cass	30	9	30.0%
Chippewa	18	10	55.6%
Chisago	31	15	48.4%
Clay	73	45	61.6%
Clearwater	10	4	40.0%
Cook	1	1	100.0%
Crow Wing	71	33	46.5%
Dakota	155	90	58.1%
Des Moines Valley HHS	25	7	28.0%

Douglas	19	7	36.8%
Faribault-Martin	41	10	24.4%
Fillmore	5	1	20.0%
Freeborn	46	14	30.4%
Goodhue	23	10	43.5%
Hennepin	985	471	47.8%
Houston	14	8	57.1%
Hubbard	29	15	51.7%
Isanti	27	10	37.0%
Itasca	65	33	50.8%
Kanabec	7	5	71.4%
Kandiyohi	70	29	41.4%
Koochiching	18	7	38.9%
Lac qui Parle	2	2	100.0%
Lake	6	4	66.7%
Lake of the Woods	3	2	66.7%
Le Sueur	17	4	23.5%
Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe	57	24	42.1%
Mahnomen	9	2	22.2%
Marshall	1	1	100.0%
McLeod	42	21	50.0%
Meeker	20	14	70.0%
Mille Lacs	66	29	43.9%
MN Prairie	47	19	40.4%
Morrison	34	18	52.9%
Mower	37	6	16.2%
Nicollet	14	5	35.7%
Nobles	13	1	7.7%
Norman	6	3	50.0%
Olmsted	68	30	44.1%
Otter Tail	69	30	43.5%
Pennington	11	2	18.2%
Pine	33	14	42.4%
Polk	32	11	34.4%
Ramsey	444	234	52.7%
Renville	13	7	53.8%
Rice	78	30	38.5%
Roseau	11	3	27.3%

Scott	45	26	57.8%
Sherburne	47	27	57.4%
Sibley	5	3	60.0%
Southwest HHS	70	36	51.4%
St. Louis	342	156	45.6%
Stearns	114	49	43.0%
Stevens	6	3	50.0%
Swift	21	11	52.4%
Todd	18	7	38.9%
Traverse	4	0	0.0%
Wabasha	10	3	30.0%
Wadena	26	8	30.8%
Washington	81	42	51.9%
Watonwan	15	6	40.0%
Western Prairie Human Services	23	9	39.1%
White Earth Band of Ojibwe	109	44	40.4%
Wilkin	12	3	25.0%
Winona	45	16	35.6%
Wright	54	22	40.7%
Yellow Medicine	9	4	44.4%

Note. ECE enrollment data include Early Childhood Screening and Early Learning Scholarships, which are programs that do not provide educational programming or child care services.

Table 18. *Participation in any ECE Program by Race, Ethnicity, Age and County during AY 2021*

	# in FC	# in ECE	% in ECE

Total	**4,224**	**1,856**	**43.9%**
Race			
African American / Black	541	257	47.5%
American Indian / Alaska Native	878	325	37.0%
Asian / Pacific Islander	58	26	44.8%
Two or more races	1054	543	51.5%
Unknown / declined	84	27	32.1%
White	1,609	678	42.1%
Ethnicity			
Hispanic / Latino (any race)	391	168	43.0%
Non Hispanic / Unknown	3,833	1,688	44.0%
Age			
0	1,206	325	26.9%
1	839	309	36.8%
2	810	363	44.8%
3	738	412	55.8%
4	631	447	70.8%
County			
Aitkin	11	5	45.5%
Anoka	158	68	43.0%
Becker	57	37	64.9%
Beltrami	208	69	33.2%
Benton	33	12	36.4%
Big Stone	4	1	25.0%
Blue Earth	61	25	41.0%
Brown	28	12	42.9%
Carlton	32	15	46.9%
Carver	33	15	45.5%
Cass	29	9	31.0%
Chippewa	22	7	31.8%
Chisago	29	16	55.2%
Clay	72	33	45.8%
Clearwater	11	7	63.6%
Cook	1	0	0.0%
Crow Wing	75	34	45.3%
Dakota	93	41	44.1%
Des Moines Valley HHS	17	3	17.6%

Douglas	28	10	35.7%
Faribault-Martin	46	18	39.1%
Fillmore	6	2	33.3%
Freeborn	57	17	29.8%
Goodhue	24	11	45.8%
Hennepin	834	444	53.2%
Houston	6	2	33.3%
Hubbard	31	21	67.7%
Isanti	22	10	45.5%
Itasca	38	18	47.4%
Kanabec	8	2	25.0%
Kandiyohi	77	37	48.1%
Koochiching	22	8	36.4%
Lac qui Parle	3	3	100.0%
Lake	6	3	50.0%
Lake of the Woods	4	2	50.0%
Le Sueur	15	9	60.0%
Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe	48	12	25.0%
Mahnomen	7	4	57.1%
Marshall	1	0	0.0%
McLeod	29	16	55.2%
Meeker	19	15	78.9%
Mille Lacs	70	36	51.4%
MN Prairie	48	14	29.2%
Morrison	22	15	68.2%
Mower	37	11	29.7%
Nicollet	18	10	55.6%
Nobles	14	2	14.3%
Norman	1	1	100.0%
Olmsted	64	23	35.9%
Otter Tail	54	18	33.3%
Pennington	13	6	46.2%
Pine	32	12	37.5%
Polk	26	12	46.2%
Ramsey	357	174	48.7%
Red Lake	4	1	25.0%
Red Lake Nation	108	27	25.0%
Renville	18	8	44.4%

Rice	51	16	31.4%
Roseau	10	5	50.0%
Scott	30	17	56.7%
Sherburne	30	17	56.7%
Sibley	6	3	50.0%
Southwest HHS	84	29	34.5%
St. Louis	332	144	43.4%
Stearns	135	48	35.6%
Stevens	10	3	30.0%
Swift	13	7	53.8%
Todd	19	6	31.6%
Traverse	6	0	0.0%
Wabasha	14	6	42.9%
Wadena	43	14	32.6%
Washington	66	28	42.4%
Watonwan	14	1	7.1%
Western Prairie Human Services	20	9	45.0%
White Earth Band of Ojibwe	100	35	35.0%
Wilkin	7	2	28.6%
Winona	44	12	27.3%
Wright	61	25	41.0%
Yellow Medicine	14	8	57.1%

Note. ECE enrollment data include Early Childhood Screening and Early Learning Scholarships, which are programs that do not provide educational programming or child care services.

For AY 2020 and 2021 tables by program, contact Amy Dorman at dorm0039@umn.edu.