

Recommendation for Federal Funds Allocated to Child Care in Arkansas

AECA Public Policy Committee May, 2021

The [Arkansas Early Childhood Association](#) (AECA) is a non-profit organization, composed of early childhood professionals who share a common concern about the well-being of young children and their families. AECA has worked for more than 50 years to promote quality care and education for the children of Arkansas. The AECA Board of Directors respectfully submits the following recommendations to the Arkansas Department of Human Services/Division of Child Care and Early Childhood Education. These recommendations provide specific approaches to address the current needs of the ECE sector and the families counting on us. In Arkansas, 2 out of 3 children under age 5 live in homes where [both parents work](#). Many Arkansas children spend about [11,500 hours](#) of their lives in child care in the years before kindergarten. That's more time spent in an early care and education setting than they'll spend in school from kindergarten through 9th grade!

We have organized the recommendations to align with the categories within the Child Care Development Fund (CCDF) plan for Arkansas. We have used this frame to link with the planning process provided by the state, however, we are also aware that the state has been allocated [\\$464,955,451](#) through the ARP to be used 2021-2024. **It is our hope that recommendations here that align closely with the stabilization objectives of those funds would be considered.**

Using CCDF Funds to Ensure a Diverse, Well-Compensated Workforce As a state and a nation, we have worked decades to address the many complicated components that make up the ECE sector in our country, but we have failed to improve the most critical component to providing high quality, engaging, and nurturing experiences for children: the ECE workforce in child care centers and family child care homes. This is in large part due to the trilemma between cost, quality and compensation. Child care is placed in a free-market system but it does not work there because families are already paying a disproportionate amount of their income to child care. And yet this is too often not enough to cover compensation to attract and retain highly qualified staff and because of that our program quality can often be stagnant.

Using CCDF Funds to Ensure Stable, Regular, Affordable Child Care The key to a properly wired brain is the consistent presence of nurturing, responsive adults. What happens for children during the first years of life will either help or hinder crucial [executive function skills](#) for years to come. All children deserve a quality educational foundation that will prepare them to grow, learn, and succeed. Our early education professionals in centers and family child care homes, working in partnership with families, are in the best position to influence children's positive development and future success. Unfortunately, the day-to-day realities many early educators face make delivering on this potential nearly impossible to achieve. We can do more to ensure quality child care providers do participate in the subsidy program, and more to ensure families can access subsidies and enroll in the child care arrangement that meets their needs.

Child care challenges did not begin with the pandemic. Early childhood educators have been on the front lines during the pandemic, continuing to provide child care to essential workers who are unable to work from home. Although we are the workforce that supports all other sectors, we are struggling. The poverty rate of these essential workers in Arkansas is 18.1 percent, much higher than for Arkansas workers in general (11.2 percent) and 7.7 times as high

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for K-8 teachers (2.4 percent). According to findings from the [University of Arkansas Medical Sciences](#) (UAMS), 58% of Arkansas's Early Care and Education Workforce had trouble paying for basic needs such as medical bills, rent, utilities, and transportation in the last year.

Thank you for considering our comments on the CCDF State Plan and avenues to meaningfully invest new federal dollars.

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Section 7: Support Continuous Quality Improvement

We are so delighted to see the continued as well as new efforts in all available uses of CCDF quality improvement dollars in the State Plan draft.

QRIS Supports

Thank you for including financial support for furnishings and materials to move to higher levels of quality within Better Beginnings in the current draft.

AECA recommends:

- Invest in the full cost of implementing and sustaining the quality improvements specified in the rating system.
- Use resources to commission a study on child outcomes to inform the revised components of the QRIS, pre and post implementation.
- There may be upfront costs involved in further modifying a QRIS, but if the result is a more streamlined approach, there could be cost savings down the road that outweigh the costs of a revision.

[Streamline Quality Rating and Improvement System \(QRIS\) Rating Rubrics to Focus on Fewer but Most Relevant Aspects of Quality.](#)

AECA recommends revisiting Better Beginnings (QRIS) to highlight quality interactions emphasizing relevant sub-scales within the [Environment Rating Scale, Third Edition](#) (ERS-3) and/or CLASS.

Section 7.3.5: The early childhood educators themselves are the MOST important component in a high quality ECE program whether in a center or a family child care home, and to ensuring positive outcomes for children.

AECA recommends the use of American Rescue Plan Act dollars (ARP\$) to support existing programs to reach higher quality by implementing a retention bonus strategy.

- Use new federal funding ARP\$ for compensation strategies in the form of bonuses. A possible example to consider is the [Step Up to WAGE\\$](#) program. A demonstration program that can implement a short-to-long term early childhood stabilization strategy.
- Create a recommended [pay scale](#) that aligns wages to educational attainment and reflect pay parity to our colleagues in K-12. An excellent example of a plan can be found in [Rhode Island](#).
- Commission an updated ECE Workforce Study, similar to the one from 2017 on [Instructional Staff in Child Care & Early Childhood Education](#). Much has changed in the last four years and a workforce study would provide a better understanding of the ECE workforce post-pandemic. This will give a clear picture of wages and benefits, education levels, professional development needs, and common barriers and supports to their work. This data can be used to inform resources needed to move the field forward toward quality.

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Section 6: Recruit & Retain a Qualified and Effective Child Care Workforce

Section 6.3.1: AECA is especially grateful for the proposed expansion of the successful [Teacher Education and Compensation Helps](#) (T.E.A.C.H.) Early Childhood Scholarship program.

AECA is committed to strengthening the alignment to the scholarship program and the intent of the CCDF funds. We believe T.E.A.C.H. Employer-Sponsors should be in the process of working towards higher levels of quality. In addition, we want to make sure an adequate number of teacher scholarships are available to programs serving low-income children.

- To that end, we recommend the addition of a wait list priority system for employer-sponsors that would include some participation in Better Beginnings as well as having a current CCDF participant agreement on file. The scholarship then not only supports the ECE workforce but addresses the focus of equal access to quality for low-income children.
- We also recommend adding a loan repayment option to recognize members of the ECE workforce who began pursuing their formal education prior to the availability of the T.E.A.C.H. Scholarship program. The [State Teacher Education Program](#) (STEP) administered through the Arkansas Department of Higher Education (ADHE) provides an excellent model. STEP provides assistance for eligible teachers with repayment of outstanding federal student loans. Guidance used in [Pennsylvania](#) and the [National Association for the Education of Young Children](#) (NAEYC) can provide a useful tool for determining eligible degree programs.

Section 6.3.1: Social-Emotional (SE) Learning Supports for Children, Staff, and Families

It is of no surprise that the pandemic has had a devastating and pervasive impact on parents' ability to meet the very basic needs of their families, including paying for food, housing, and utilities. The [RAPID-EC](#) conducted national [surveys](#) and found that these material hardships were associated with higher caregivers' stress, which is related to distress among children. That distress is showing up in our ECE classrooms and our ECE workforce has experienced them as well. AECA is asking that Arkansas use existing and new resources to support the Social-Emotional needs of the adults in children's lives, including:

- Providing the necessary funding for a minimum of five social emotional learning coordinators to be housed throughout the state. These coordinators will provide support to licensed programs in each region in a timely manner through: site visits, foundation training, coaching, mentoring, technical assistance, resources, and partnering with Behavior Help, Project Play, and any other social emotional expert in the early childhood field. These coordinators will help eliminate the wait time since the "No Expulsion, Suspension" Policy went into place. They will also help relieve stress on the workforce by providing immediate face to face support.
- Increasing the current allocation for *Array partners. These services were important prior to the pandemic but those needs have been exacerbated during the past year. We hope this expansion will include, but not be limited to, expanding the pilot that broadens the options to building trauma-informed ECE. This might include the support of educators in

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screening for SE development, helping screen for family strengths and needs that particularly impact SE development in order to connect families to services, etc. AECA would like to recognize our state for the innovative strategies and coordinated efforts to support SEL in our state and for including those resources in the current draft of the plan.

- Expanding models that are currently a part of Array. Examples of models to be considered might include Managing Youth Trauma Effectively and REACHing Parents (pyramid model). Expansion would enable more families to benefit from these resources post-pandemic.

***Array** - represents a partnership between Arkansas State University Childhood Services (A-State) and the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences (UAMS) Department of Family and Preventive Medicine with collaborators from around the state, including the University of Arkansas Early Care and Education Programs (UA ECEP) and Curricula Concepts. Array was funded to organize and implement a continuum of collaborative services to improve the quality of social-emotional supports in early childhood education (ECE) programs in designated state regions. Array is designed to:

- Provide a point of entry to training and coaching resources in the social-emotional domain
- Coordinate across professional development providers and state partners to meet regional needs
- Identify the most pressing needs of early care and education programs and match training to that need
- Offer implementation support and coaching to enhance likelihood of sustainable change

Array partners work together in regional teams, in collaboration with the staff of funding partner DHS/DCCECE, to offer ECE providers in AR communities a full continuum of coordinated social-emotional training and supports to increase self-regulation and social-emotional skills in staff, children and families and reduce challenging behavior in the classroom. The Array team conceptualizes the journey toward becoming a trauma-informed ECE program as the 'capstone' of the social-emotional journey, built on a foundation of a healthy and stable workforce, strong developmentally appropriate practice and consistent implementation of social-emotional supports.

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Section 4: Ensure Equal Access to Child Care for Low-Income Children

Increase Access and Affordability for All Families

We need to create investments in ways that support stability and flexibility, and cultivate sufficient resources so that we can help families afford quality child care and ensure that early educators are well-compensated for the skilled, valuable, and essential work they do each day.

Subsidy - AECA would like to thank the DCCECE for the proposed increase in voucher reimbursement rates that more closely align with costs of providing quality child care. This is crucial for compensation for child care providers and for building equal access for families.

Section 4.1.6 a and b: AECA recommends the use of a subsidy agreement model for infants and toddlers as done through [Early Head Start Partnerships](#)

Section 4.4.1 b: AECA recommends paying subsidy based on enrollment rather than attendance. During the pandemic and using CARES Act funding, 43 states paid child care subsidies based on pre-pandemic enrollment instead of attendance. As CARES act funds ran out, only 13 were still paying by enrollment as of December 2020. That was before the approval of CRRSA and ARP, however. This is a critically important moment to decide on a path forward, including paying all subsidy providers by enrollment and not attendance. This will stabilize budgets for providers and contribute to continuous quality improvement, and encourage those currently not participating in the voucher program to get started. This is both a compensation strategy and a supply-building strategy, in which we encourage more child care providers to join and stay a part of the subsidy program. This policy change would need to apply to centers and to family child care homes.

Supply-Building Strategies: Support the Growth of FCCH and Facilities that provide Non-traditional hours and/or Infant/Toddler Care

Section 4.1.8 a, b, c, d and e: Start-up funding will help providers meet any of the supply-building needs outlined in the state plan: children in underserved areas; infants and toddlers; children with disabilities; children who receive care during non-traditional hours; and more. We encourage you to assess appropriate and equitable funding amounts for start-up grants to help new family child care programs and other new child care facilities enter the licensed system, maintain compliance, and meet enhanced needs for their practices for particular populations. Our members report this is particularly critical in our most rural areas and for non-traditional hours care.

AECA applauds the use of the Family Child Care Network as both a supply building strategy in section 4 and a quality improvement strategy under section 7 of the plan. CCDF funds can be used for accreditation support. We encourage this, especially through the existing work of the Family Child Care Network for family child care providers, and as a support to centers as well.

Related Policy and Practice

- Review of families being served. Have we prioritized those most in need of support? Examples: Students in high school or higher education, deployed military, children in foster care...

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- Look at the number of vouchers per program (range, medium, average per) to give a more realistic picture of how much added resources would *actually* be going to the typical program.