

Strengthening early childhood education and care in a “childcare desert”^[1]

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AVAILABILITY

Access online^[2]

Access full article [PDF]^[3]

Abstract

High-quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is an important component of thriving communities. It is central to the socio-emotional and intellectual growth of young children, to the ability of parents to go to work, and to the ability of employers to find and retain workers. Despite this centrality, there is a profound shortage of ECEC in many communities, which has only been made worse by COVID-19. This study took place in rural Kentucky pre-pandemic, where approximately half of all residents lived in “childcare deserts”—a situation facing a growing number of communities. This research demonstrates that while financial factors affect the undersupply of childcare in a single community, there are also additional, more opaque, and under-theorized factors at play. Specifically, we argue that misconceptions around families’ ability and willingness to pay for ECEC, what families prioritize in an ECEC setting, and ambiguous terminology result in misunderstandings and miscommunication that, in turn, affect perceived solutions to the problem of the childcare desert. In short, when different stakeholders use different language and assumptions to describe their goals and ideas about ECEC, it is hard to reach community consensus about how to add the high-quality options that families desire and value. Drawing upon survey and interview data collected from parents and childcare providers, as well as local newspaper articles and during community forums, we uncover barriers that may hinder efforts to strengthen ECEC options; notably, many barriers are surmountable. Ultimately, this research points to concrete steps that communities can take to help bolster ECEC and, thus, communities at large.

Region: United States^[4]

Tags: child care desert^[5]

accessibility^[6]

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