

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

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

Background

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

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

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

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

Findings

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

1. Child Care Accessibility

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

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

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

2. Child Development and Wellness

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

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

3. Parent-Teacher Relationship and Mutual Support

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

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

4. Recruitment and Retention of Staff

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

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

Next Steps

In the fall of 2023, CSC established a 16-member **Early Care and Education Resident Advisory Committee (RAC)**, made up of a group of parents, teachers and child care owners/directors who represent the county's geographic, racial/ethnic, and cultural diversity and previously engaged with CSC over the summer. The RAC is currently reviewing the engagement findings, community data, along with input from system partners and promising practices from the field to make recommendations for new services. In spring/summer 2024, the RAC will bring those recommendations back to the community and to CSC's Council for approval.

By fall/winter of 2024/25, CSC anticipates ending our Strong Minds program and replacing it with new services that reflect community input and RAC committee recommendations.

Questions?

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

