

# Key Findings from Mississippi’s Child Care Provider Input Sessions

## A Learning Brief by Prenatal to Five Fiscal Strategies

*This learning brief uplifts key findings from Mississippi’s child care provider input sessions conducted by Prenatal to Five Fiscal Strategies in partnership with the Mississippi Department of Human Services, Division of Early Child Care and Development and the Systems Change Lab at the Social Science Research Center at Mississippi State University, in early 2024. The input sessions played a critical role in shaping the state’s child care cost model. The findings presented in this brief shed light on participants’ perspectives and challenges, offering a vital view into the daily realities of the Mississippi child care workforce.*

### Introduction

#### About the Mississippi Department of Human Services and Division of Early Childhood Care and Development

The Mississippi Department of Human Services (MDHS) and the Division of Early Childhood Care and Development (DECCD) are critical in supporting Mississippi’s child care providers. As one of the largest state agencies in Mississippi, MDHS serves individuals across the entire age spectrum from early childhood to older adults.<sup>i</sup> MDHS offers Mississippians tangible resources to create lasting hope for the future. MDHS empowers Mississippi families to become self-sufficient through the necessary resources and support, while responsibly managing public funds. Meanwhile, DECCD administers programs that support child care programs across the state for the benefit of everyone involved including, families, employers, providers, and the children they serve.<sup>ii</sup>

#### Impetus and Purpose of the Input Sessions

States conduct Market Rate Surveys and narrow cost analyses, as part of their administration of federal child care funding, to ensure child care systems are equitable, sustainable, and responsive

### KEY FINDINGS AT A GLANCE

#### Quality Characteristics

Participants identified the following program quality characteristics as essential elements for their programs:

- Learning experiences that promote language, reading, and math.
- Responsive teacher-child interactions
- Developmentally appropriate materials and care settings
- Low teacher-child interactions
- Strong program leadership

#### Costs Associated with Quality

**Characteristics** included training expenses, purchasing classroom materials, hiring additional staff, increasing teacher wages, and paying high operational costs.

#### Challenges

- Participants shared key challenges they faced at the time of the input sessions; these included:
- Difficulty finding and retaining staff.
- Not having enough funding to pay competitive salaries and benefits.
- Not having enough resources to meet the needs of children and families.

#### Strategies to Alleviate Challenges

In the face of these challenges, providers have adapted and shared the following strategies used to mitigate these barriers.

- Hiring community members, including parents and grandparents of the children they serve.
- Prioritizing higher wages to retain and attract staff.
- Recognizing staff by offering incentives, bonuses, and hosting appreciation events.

to the needs of families and providers. Market Rate Surveys help states understand the current prices families pay for child care used for setting subsidy payment rates. Meanwhile, the narrow cost analysis goes a step further by examining the actual costs providers face to operate child care program, such as staffing, wages, supplies, and facilities. Together, these tools help states comply with federal requirements outlined in the Child Care and Development Block Grant, while also ensuring reimbursement rates support providers in offering accessible, quality care for children.

As part of this work, DECCD partnered with Prenatal to Five Fiscal Strategies (P5FS) to carry out their narrow cost analysis. This process involved creating a child care cost model for Mississippi. The child care cost model methodology involved key research activities, including adding cost questions to the Market Rate Survey and conducting in-depth provider input sessions in partnership with the Systems Change Lab at the Social Science Research Center at Mississippi State University. The purpose of conducting provider input sessions was to gather additional data to complement the Market Rate Survey and to create opportunities for providers to share and discuss their experiences related to program costs, program operations, perceptions of quality child care, as well as their challenges and needs.

### Key Terms

**Market Rate Survey** – a study of the prices and fees child care providers charge privately paying parents, used to establish recommendations for child care subsidy reimbursement rates.

**Narrow Cost Analysis** – a study of what it costs providers to deliver child care at two or more levels of quality **through** developing cost models, limited cost surveys, or a cost model informed by a cost survey.

**Child Care Cost Model** (also known as Cost Estimation Model, Fiscal Model, Revenue and Expense Model) – a customized, functional, and dynamic tool, like an Excel workbook or an online calculator, designed to determine the true cost of child care based on program characteristics like group size and ratio, ages of children served, geographic region, and wages and benefits.

### Input Session Approach and Methodology

P5FS designed input sessions that were highly participatory and uplifted the knowledge, expertise, and experiences of child care providers. To ensure providers had ample opportunities to share their perspectives, the input sessions were facilitated virtually and held at various times and days of the week, including evenings and weekends, to accommodate different provider schedules. Additionally, participants received a \$25 gift card for participating in the input sessions. Regarding recruitment, program administrators/directors and family child care providers/owners were prioritized since they are most likely to know and share detailed experiences related to the financial and programmatic details of their organization or business. Between January and March 2024, 11 input sessions were held engaging a total of 71 child care providers. With permission from participants, the input sessions were recorded and analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. This involved carefully examining and coding each participant response, which was then integrated into the broader themes discussed in this learning brief.

## A Brief Overview of the Child Care Landscape in Mississippi

### Quick Facts About Child Care and Early Learning in Mississippi

- Mississippi is home to almost 210,000 children ages birth to five. Most of these children (70%) have parents in the workforce.<sup>iii</sup>
- Thirty percent (30%) of children ages birth to five live in low-income working families, an increase of 5% from the previous year.<sup>iv</sup>
- The average annual price for infant care in Mississippi is approximately \$7,680.<sup>v</sup>
- On average, child care providers in Mississippi earn an annual salary of \$21,400, which makes it difficult to attract and retain providers in this field.<sup>vi</sup>
- Approximately 21% of eligible children aged five and under received child care subsidies in Mississippi in 2021.<sup>vii</sup>

Mississippi’s mixed delivery system, overseen by the MDHS and the DECCD, includes various state and federal child care and early learning programs (see Table 1) designed to address the needs of families and children.<sup>viii</sup> Each program has specific eligibility criteria and distinct ways of providing services; however, with the current funding levels, these programs only serve a small portion of eligible families.<sup>ix</sup> This challenge highlights a significant gap in access to quality care for many children in the state, particularly for children from low-income communities.<sup>x</sup> Additionally, data from 2022 reveals various challenges in evaluating the quality and capacity of child care in the state, primarily due to the absence of an integrated data system. Data also indicates child care providers struggle to earn a [living wage](#). The poverty rate for all early educators in the state is 25.1%, exceeding the rate of other workers in the state, which is at 12.4%.<sup>xi</sup> On average, child care providers in Mississippi earn an annual salary of \$21,400, or \$10.29 per hour, which makes it difficult to attract and retain providers in this field.

Table 1: Mississippi’s Child Care and Early Learning Programs (2022)

Child Care and Early Learning Programs	Number of Eligible Children 0 – 5	Number of Eligible Children Served 0 – 5
<b>Child Care Subsidy<sup>1</sup></b>	66,790	13,786 (21%)
<b>Head Start</b>	30,953	13,836 (45%)
<b>Early Head Start</b>	30,953	3,318 (11%)
<b>State Funded Pre-K</b>	-	5,329
<b>Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV)</b>	-	721
<b>IDEA Part C (Early Intervention)</b>	-	1,668
<b>IDEA Part B, Sec. 619 (Preschool Special Education)</b>	-	3,973

Source: [2024 State Fact Sheet, Child Care & Early Learning in Mississippi, First Five Years Fund](#)

Note: The en dash indicates that the data are not available or were not provided by the data source.

<sup>1</sup> While child care subsidy serves eligible children birth through age 12, the data included in children served for this report prioritizes children birth through five.

To address these and other key challenges related to child care and early learning, Mississippi was awarded the [Preschool Development Grant Birth to Five Renewal](#) to improve access to high-quality early child care and education programs. Through this grant, the state aims to create a new Quality Support System with input from families and providers focused on strengthening family and provider input to ensure Mississippi’s early care and education system is more responsive to all children and families’ needs. It will also fund a new grant opportunity to address child care deserts, create strategies to increase compensation, and develop new pathways for recruitment into the early care and education workforce.

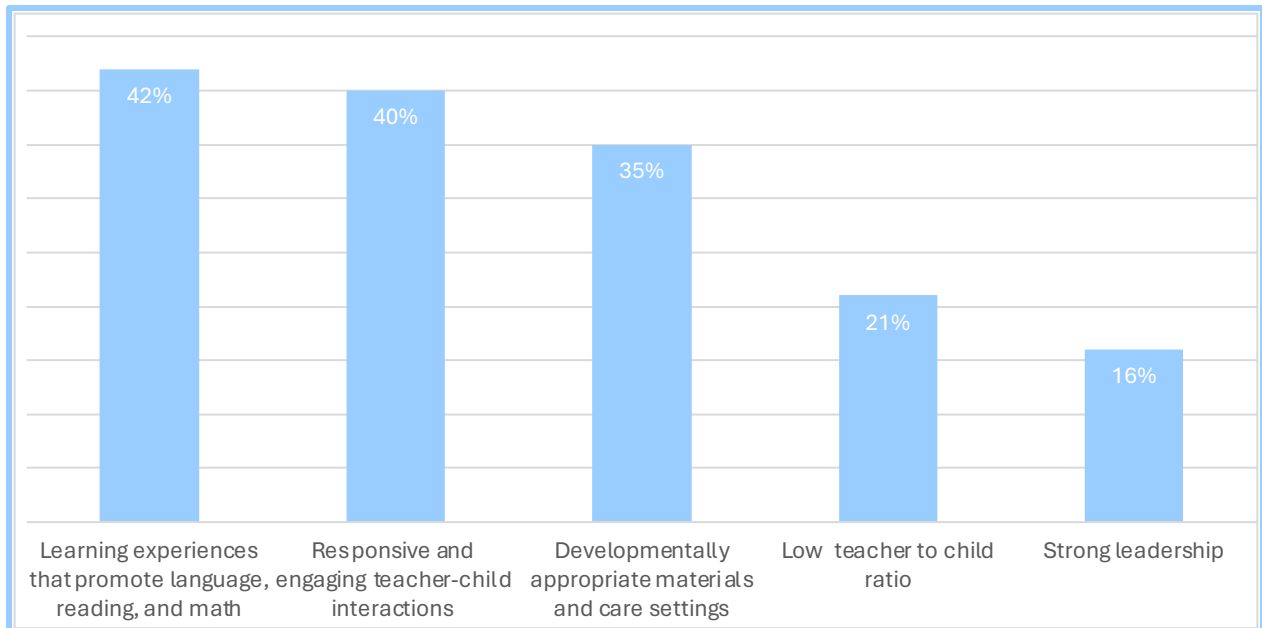
## Key Findings from Provider Input Sessions

### Quality Characteristics

Top program quality characteristics identified by input session participants include learning experiences that enhance language, reading, and math along with responsive teacher-child interactions, developmentally appropriate settings and materials, low teacher-child ratios, and strong program leadership.

During the input sessions, participants were asked to identify the most important program quality characteristics from their perspectives and experiences. As displayed in Figure 1, participants elevated the development of foundational skills in language, reading, and math as essential, along with engaging teacher-child interactions. Participants also emphasized the importance of offering developmentally appropriate settings and materials, maintaining low teacher-child ratios, and having strong leadership as key program quality characteristics they strive to promote and sustain.

Figure 1: Top program quality characteristics reported by providers



**Learning experiences that promote language, reading, and math.** Approximately 42% of participants uplifted learning experiences as a critical program quality characteristic. Participants explained that offering high-quality learning experiences establishes a fundamental groundwork for future educational experiences, equips children with the tools to be successful in elementary school, and fosters healthy brain development. Several participants also shared their deliberate

approach of incorporating a curriculum designed to encourage children to practice name writing, recognize sight words, and develop foundational math skills. Participants emphasized the importance of these learning experiences sharing:

*“We are the kids’ first teachers, and it’s important to instill [learning] at an early age. Before [the kids in my program] go to preschool they learn to write their first name and learn ten sight words.”*

*“[Learning experiences are] important because children will transition to kindergarten, and they need to know the basic elements.”*

**Responsive and engaging teacher-child interactions.** Forty percent (40%) of participants identified responsive and engaging teacher-child interactions as a key component of program quality. They emphasized the crucial role of high-quality teacher interactions in fostering children’s trust in their education, promoting safety, relaxation, and preparing children for effective learning. In this regard, participants shared:

*“Responsive interactions are important because they help the children be relaxed in a learning environment. If you get on their level, it is more conducive to learning.”*

*“Engaging interactions are important because once we learn how to interact with our children and families, we can better provide for both...the communication has to be there. First with the family so they feel comfortable bringing their babies and their children knowing they are leaving them in a safe space.”*

**Developmentally appropriate settings and materials.** Over one-third of participants (35%) indicated that offering developmentally appropriate settings and materials is a top element of program quality. They underscored the importance of utilizing developmentally appropriate materials and configuring classroom settings tailored to the children’s age, developmental, and learning needs so that the environment also facilitates learning. One participant shared:

*“Children learn through play. If they are learning rote objects and they have one to one corresponding. Something like that we help them see the counting and it makes it clearer for them.”*

**Low-child teacher ratios.** Nearly one-quarter of participants (21%) uplifted low child to teacher ratios as a critical aspect of program quality. They stressed the importance of maintaining lower ratios to foster effective learning experiences, facilitate high-quality interactions, enable one-on-one engagement with children, and provide the necessary support to children with special needs. According to participants, maintaining a low child to teacher ratios has become important since the COVID-19 pandemic, as more children in their programs require individualized support in developing social-emotional skills.

*“The value of [low child to teacher ratio] outweighs the costs... [if there are too many children] the children are not learning, the teachers are burned out, and then you start at net zero all over again because the teacher has not bonded with the children.”*

**Strong leadership.** Sixteen percent of participants elevated strong program leadership as a core component of program quality. They explained that having strong leadership is critical for the

success of a child care and early learning program as it establishes the foundation and tone of the program and shapes the learning environment and relationships with families. Additionally, given the myriad of challenges within the child care sector, having strong program leadership is vital to ensuring the sustainability and adaptability of a child care and early learning program. As one participant explained:

*“As an owner, strong leadership builds the foundation for it all. [Strong program leaders] help teachers properly speak to parents, they give the information to parents so they know exactly what to expect...you can fix a lot of things with [strong leadership], even things can be really negative, [strong leadership] can change things around.”*

## Costs Associated with Program Quality Characteristics

Costs associated with maintaining program quality elements include increasing teacher wages; recruiting, hiring, and onboarding staff; professional development expenses; purchasing materials; and paying for high operational costs. Participants explained that maintaining the program quality elements discussed above incurs various additional costs to ensure they maintain a high standard of care. Participants revealed that they have invested in trainings related to Conscious Discipline, high-quality interactions, and understanding the developmental stages of children. Additionally, acquiring developmentally appropriate materials such as books, curricula, and specialized indoor and outdoor equipment adds to the operational costs of their programs, particularly for home-based providers.

Participants shared that rising living costs have also increased operational costs particularly in payroll, liability insurance, and food program costs. Further, to effectively meet their children’s needs and to maintain low child to teacher ratios, many providers reported hiring additional staff, increasing teacher salaries, and implementing incentives such as providing teacher gift cards, gift baskets, and implementing flexible schedules to retain program staff. To that effect, a participant shared:

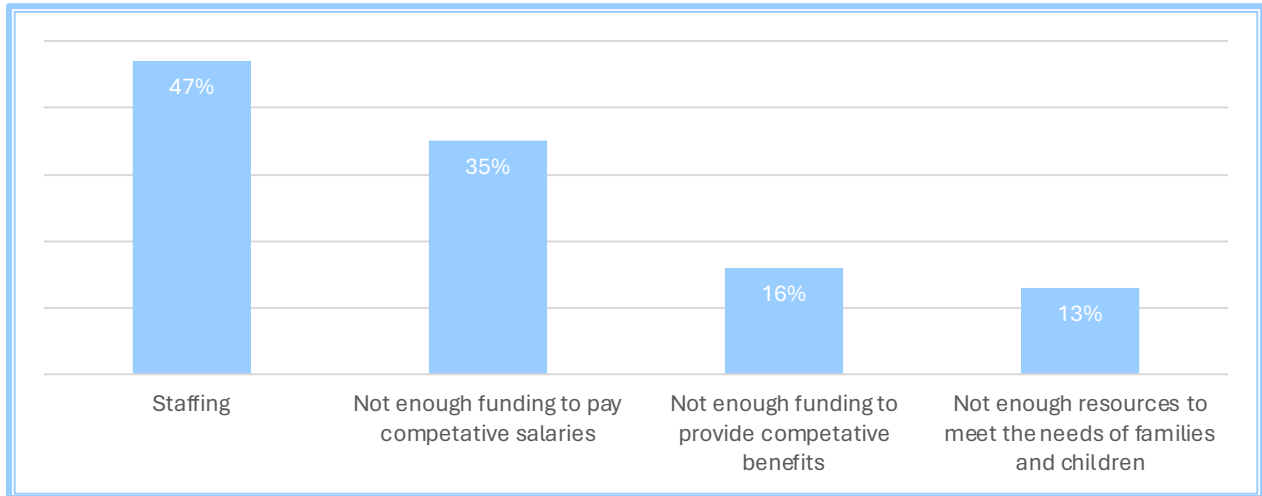
*“Most of my staff have been here for many years and do a great job, but they need more money and deserve it. I spend a lot of my personal money to do little happiness for them to boost their positivity.”*

## Child Care Provider Challenges

Participants were also invited to reflect on the primary challenges they were facing at the time of the input sessions. Top challenges identified by participants include staffing, not enough funding to pay competitive salaries, not enough funding to provide competitive benefits, and not enough resources to meet the needs of children and families.

As illustrated in Figure 2, providers primarily described challenges related to staffing issues and not having enough funding to provide competitive salaries and benefits. Providers also felt they lacked the resources to meet the dynamic needs of the children and families they serve. The details regarding these challenges are discussed.

Figure 2: Top challenges reported by providers



**Staffing.** Approximately 47% of participants were grappling with staffing-related challenges, which included a shortage of qualified candidates, high staff turnover, inadequate staffing to meet each child's needs, staff burnout, and a lack of interest or passion for the child care field. They shared the difficulty they face securing qualified teachers to staff their programs. According to participants, teacher candidates often lack adequate preparation and may have limited understanding of the demands associated with working in the child care setting. Additionally, some candidates hold unrealistic wage expectations, influenced by higher compensation offered in other sectors, particularly the service sector, for comparatively less demanding work.

*"It's hard to keep help because you can't pay them what they're worth. It's hard to find good teachers and when you find them, they may leave because of financial hardship because we don't have the funds. It's just hard".*

Moreover, the scarcity of qualified teacher candidates has made it difficult for providers to adequately staff their classrooms, prompting numerous owners and directors to step into the classroom. Additionally, participants stressed that the child care field demands a considerable amount of passion, dedication, and a commitment to supporting children and families. However, they have observed a lack of passion among teacher candidates, a situation exacerbated by the issue of low wages.

*"You cannot find many people that really want to work in child care anymore because if someone really wanted to work here, you could train them and get them qualified, but you first have to want to be there. We're all facing this type of problem."*

*"We are having issues with a lower ratio right now. It is 100% because of not being able to have a good pool of candidates. I have three classrooms with only one teacher without any prospect [of a qualified candidate], even if I get 140 people to apply for a job on Indeed. It just turns out to be no more than three or four coming in to interview."*

*"I am afraid to advertise because I don't have staff to cover."*



**Recruiting and retaining qualified staff** is one of the most pressing challenges facing child care providers. High turnover, largely driven by low wages and lack of benefits, significantly impacts the quality of care for children and the sustainability of child care businesses. Participants described the struggle to offer competitive compensation, which leaves them vulnerable to losing staff to higher paying programs like Head Start or public pre-K. This staffing crisis affects more than just day-to-day operations – it limits enrollment, reduces provider income, and increases workloads for owners and directors. Many participants (12%) reported being unable to open all their classrooms despite high demand and waitlists. These challenges make it harder for families to access affordable high-quality child care and maintain steady employment. Participants explain the personal toll of these challenges:

*“I am licensed to serve 100 students and I am experiencing low [enrollment] because of the inability to find and keep staff and the inability to pay a livable wage to the staff. All my teachers have a degree in [early childhood education], and I live with a nervousness them being recruited by Head Start and a Pre-K Collaborative because these places can start them at \$17 an hour.”*

*“Low child enrollment has been an issue for me. I don't get a salary because of the funds that I get, and I am spending back into the [child] care. I don't have benefits. I am not making enough money to even buy insurance right now.”*

*“We have too few staff to open all classrooms we have available while we have over 100 children on our waiting list.”*

*“I have a center that is qualified for 140 children and right now we are at about 112 because we cannot find adequate staffing to open up other rooms! I average 26 to 28 employees to run the [child] care center. That doesn't count the director and assistant director, but at the end of the year I have 75 W2s. It's a ton of turnover. So how do you have high-quality interactions with children and high-quality education when all you are doing is training people to take care of the kids and then they quit...Maintaining quality and experienced staff that's my main problem. We're not babysitters we are providers...”*

**Not enough funding to pay competitive salaries and benefits.** Roughly one-third of participants (35%) indicated that they cannot offer higher wages to their staff. They expressed that they compete with the retail sector, which provides higher wages for lower qualifications and workloads. Participants explained:

*“It's the cost of staffing that is the big problem. I can't afford to pay people what they are worth to begin with. I have people who are interested in working but as soon as I say you will start at \$8.50 an hour or \$10, they are like ‘no, thank you’.”*

*“Walmart pays \$15 an hour [and] here... the [subsidy] reimbursement rates are very low, so some centers only pay the minimum wage. At this point, I am paying \$10 an hour, and it is still not enough for qualified staff.”*

*“We can't find enough teachers to hire and train and keep them to meet the needs of the children which goes into what we are able to pay and the benefits. Having time to do [professional development] and continuing education money to pay for that which causes teacher burnout. The whole staff component is at the heart of everything. In order to get the great staff I have, I am having to pay them \$14 an hour,*



*but it's leaving me without a paycheck. Taxes, rent, food, are all causing everything to be hard to keep the doors open.”*

Additionally, 16% of participants indicated that due to low reimbursement rates and low profits, they are not able to provide competitive health and retirement benefits to their teachers and staff. According to participants, this prevents attracting potentially qualified teacher candidates and negatively impacts teacher and staff retention and their long-term commitment to the child care field.

*“We’ve had [staff] come in and we get them trained and they know what to do. Then they come in and say ‘Here’s my two-week notice. I found another job, and this is what they are paying me, and they are offering me benefits. If you offer me health insurance and retirement, I would be willing to stay.’ It’s hard to get people in and have them stay [in the field].”*

*“I wish that I could pay my teachers \$15 to \$20 an hour, but in the state of Mississippi due to that I’m in an economically low area, I can only charge so much a week, which mine is pretty high on this corner. It’s a \$135 a week for tuition. If you go a little bit further north of me, their fees are right at \$185 to \$200 a week, so that pay plays a big part on not being able to compete with salaries because we can only pay [with] what comes in through the door.”*

**Not enough resources to meet the needs of families and children.** Thirteen percent (13%) of participants, particularly those operating in rural areas, explained that there are limited social resources available to support the complex needs of families. Children with special needs are not receiving the support and resources they need to thrive in an early learning environment. Additionally, participants expressed that they have observed an increase in the number of children with special needs since the COVID-19 pandemic, further exacerbating this challenge. Participants shared:

*“There are not enough resources for children with autism. I can’t send them to another center and I can’t send them to a clinic because they have to travel two to three hours away. We just don’t have the resources to help families and it creates stress for families.”*

*“We are having one or two kids in the classroom that need that extra attention. Just getting the training to deal with the complex needs of these children... it is complicated...getting that quality teacher in the classroom to be there for them...”*

## Costs Associated with Program Challenges

Child care providers face numerous challenges that come with significant costs, both financial and operational. Recruiting and retaining qualified staff often requires programs to invest heavily in advertising, hiring, and training, while ongoing turnover disrupts continuity and increases these expenses over time. Low enrollment, often caused by staffing shortages, reduces revenue and creates financial strain, leaving providers unable to cover fixed costs or offer competitive wages. Serving children with challenging behaviors and disabilities adds further costs, as providers may need to hire specialized staff, access training, or purchase adaptive materials to meet the needs of all children effectively.

Additionally, addressing the diverse needs of children and families—such as providing culturally responsive care, offering flexible hours, or maintaining high-quality environments—demands resources that are often difficult to sustain with limited funding. These cumulative challenges not only threaten the financial stability of child care programs but also impact the accessibility and quality of care available to families.

### Strategies Providers Use to Navigate Challenges

In the face of the barriers described above, providers highlighted various strategies they engage to alleviate some of these challenges. For instance, some providers have opted to hire community members, including parents and grandparents, to support their center or home-based program. As one participant noted:

*“In this day and time, we’re having to cultivate a new generation of workers. We’re having to hire parents who are needing jobs. We’re having to hire grandparents who are needing jobs because, unfortunately, we do not have a pool of teachers that are majoring in early childhood and that are waiting to come to work because of the low pay.”*

Additionally, while many providers may not be able to offer substantial wage increases, they provide bonuses, incentives, and organize appreciation events for their staff to show recognition for their staff’s commitment and hard work. In this regard, another participant shared:

*“I do little things like gift baskets. I have partnered with community members to give [my staff] gifts during Christmas or Valentine’s Day ...just to let them know that I appreciate them and that I appreciate what they do because I am sure they could be making more money.”*

However, some participants did report prioritizing wage increases for staff, particularly for those with early childhood credentials and higher education degrees, recognizing that offering competitive salaries helps retain qualified staff within their programs. Lastly, participants indicated they have elevated their voices, needs, and perspectives to the state through input sessions and other engagement opportunities, asserting that it “has been fantastic being able to have that experience and community with the state.”

### Recommendations

Key recommendations to improve child care provider’s daily experiences and strengthen the Mississippi the child care sector were drawn from the input of participating early childhood professionals. Recommendations include:

**Continue to professionalize the child care sector.** Provider input session participants elevated a need for Mississippi to continue to professionalize the child care field and build respect for the industry. According to participants, one way this can be achieved is by shifting the perception of child care workers from “babysitters” to essential professionals who play a crucial role in supporting children’s development and providing vital support to working families in the state.

**Increase wages for the child care workforce.** Across the listening sessions, participants emphasized a need to increase compensation for the child care workforce, particularly for teachers and classroom staff. As noted earlier, many participants reported facing significant competition from the food and service sector, particularly in terms of compensation and benefits.

Participants asserted that if they were able to provide higher wages to their workers, they would be able to attract and retain qualified staff. Additionally, participants expressed stress and worry about their ability to offer higher wages for their employees.

**Create funding streams for workforce benefits.** Participants expressed that providing benefits to child care professionals is essential to ensure retention and commitment to the child care field, as well as to sustain the overall wellness of the child care sector. However, many participants, particularly home-based providers, struggle to provide health and retirement benefits to themselves and their employees due to high costs. Participants also expressed a need for dedicated funding and additional state support to offer competitive benefits to their staff.

**Build a system of concrete program operation supports for providers.** Participants also noted that building a network or system of support they could rely on, such as grocery delivery services, meal preparation services, and a substitute system would support their daily operations and reduce the number of hours they work, particularly for home-based owners/providers and smaller centers. Providers, particularly home-based owners/providers and center directors, agreed that they spend many hours preparing meals, shopping for materials, and fulfilling various roles because they have limited profit or funding to hire additional support. Participants felt having a network of services for the child care sector, including access to substitutes, would be highly beneficial.

## Looking Ahead

As we enter 2025, Mississippi will continue to focus on creating a robust Quality Support System, addressing child care deserts, increasing compensation for the child care workforce, and creating pathways for recruiting and retaining this essential workforce. Mississippi is also working to develop a wage scale based on national data and its own experience supporting child care providers. With support from Prenatal to Five Fiscal Strategies, the state will develop models for minimum wages to support and guide policy and decision-making regarding wage increases to attract and retain staff. P5FS will also assist the state in developing educational materials to uplift the importance of raising compensation, increasing child care subsidy reimbursement rates, and moving towards a cost-based approach to funding the child care sector, emphasizing this work's positive impact for working families across Mississippi.

### About Prenatal to Five Fiscal Strategies

Prenatal to Five Fiscal Strategies is a national nonprofit founded by Jeanna Capito and Simon Workman that seeks to address the broken fiscal and governance structures within the prenatal to five system with a comprehensive, cross-agency, cross-service approach. The initiative is founded on shared principles that center on the needs of children, families, providers, and the workforce. This approach fundamentally rethinks the current system to better tackle issues of equity in funding and access.

For more information about Prenatal to Five Fiscal Strategies, visit [www.prenatal5fiscal.org](http://www.prenatal5fiscal.org).

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