

THE CENTER FOR
STATE POLICY
ANALYSIS

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EXPANDING EARLY EDUCATION AND CHILD CARE OPPORTUNITIES



SouthCoast
**Community
Foundation**

INTRODUCTION

High-quality early education and child care enriches our children's lives and improves the long-term prospects of our entire region.

Decades of research have shown that engagement and play are vital for early brain development, and that good learning environments lead to lifelong improvements in educational achievement. At the same time, reliable access to early education and care programs gives parents more flexibility to pursue their own careers.

Here in the South Coast of Massachusetts, dedicated providers are already offering top-notch educational programs for our young kids, complete with wraparound services like transportation and extended hours.

But challenges abound — both for the providers and for the families that need support. Among other things:

- Not everyone has access to high-quality programs.
- The high cost of care is challenging for many families.
- Recruiting and retaining the best teachers and caregivers is complicated by low pay and emotionally demanding work.
- Quality of care is often difficult to assess.
- The pandemic has exacerbated these challenges, creating an explosion of immediate needs.

Simply put, the early education and child care system in the South Coast — and virtually everywhere across the United States — operates in a state of constant scarcity, with too few spots for kids, too few centers, too few workers, and too little government support.

To better understand — and strengthen — the early education and child care landscape across our region, we at the SouthCoast Community Foundation have partnered with the Center for State Policy Analysis at Tufts University on a rigorous assessment of the best available data, supplemented by interviews with local experts and thought-leaders.

What follows is a presentation of our key findings, with particular attention to issues of racial and economic justice, the landscape for individual cities and towns, and the impact wrought by COVID-19.

Our emphasis throughout is on how we can support our youngest residents and brighten our collective future.

As Community Foundation board member and NorthStar Learning Centers' Executive Director Maria A. Rosario put it: "If we don't start getting really serious about these early years, I don't know how we can fulfill the potential of our young people and address inequities in our communities."

SOUTH COAST IN CONTEXT

For many parents, finding high-quality early education and child care is a waiting game: waiting for admission slots to become available, waiting to qualify for state support, waiting until you can add the days or hours you really need.

Meg Rogers, a parent who works on child care issues at the United Way of Fall River, told us that she had to wait four months before a daycare slot opened for her child, and months more before she could get the hours that best suited her.

This situation is not unique to the South Coast, but our region falls short on a variety of key measures.

Take overall capacity, meaning the maximum number of kids we could currently care for through licensed centers, family care providers, and public school programs.

Across Massachusetts, there is nowhere near enough capacity to care for all kids; in fact there

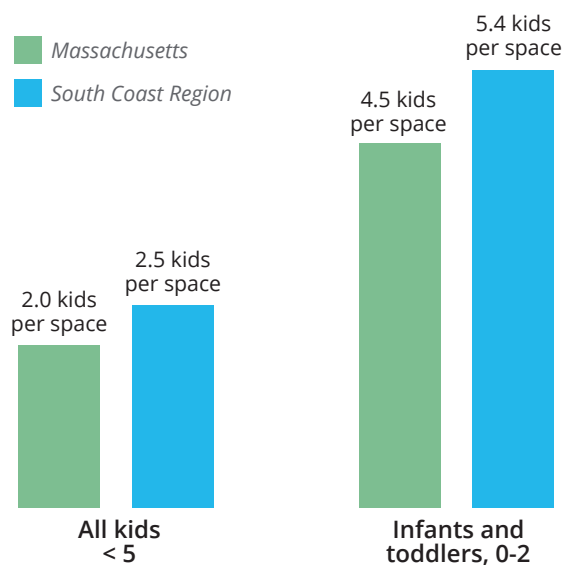
are roughly 2 kids for every seat or slot in the child care system. Capacity in the South Coast region* is even more limited, with 2.5 kids for every slot.

Looking more closely at different parts of the early education and child care system, you find the same relative shortfall. The South Coast has less center-based care, less family child care, and fewer slots for children under 3 than the rest of Massachusetts.

No single solution can address this challenge. Different families have different needs, so efforts to expand options for parents will require a variety of changes, potentially including more family child care providers, expanded centers, and more robust public pre-K.

But one constant refrain in the interviews we conducted was openness to cooperative change from all players in the early education and child care space, who welcomed diverse solutions and approaches.

MA & South Coast have more kids than the early education and child care system can accommodate



SOURCE: cSPA tabulation of data from Massachusetts Dept of Early Education and Care, Census Bureau

* Throughout this analysis, the phrases "South Coast" and "South Coast region" refer to the 41 cities and towns included in the South Coast Community Foundation's catchment area.

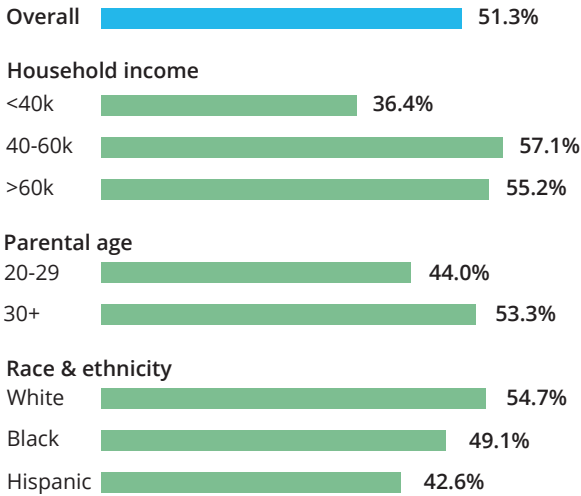
EQUITY IN EARLY EDUCATION AND CHILD CARE

High-quality early education and child care can be very expensive, with some estimates suggesting that the typical family in Massachusetts pays [more than \\$20,000](#) per year.

Partly because of the outsize costs, low-income families, younger parents, less-educated parents, and Hispanic households are all less likely to have their 3- and 4-year-old kids in early education programs (generally referred to as preschool for that age group.)

Access to early education varies by income, parental age, race

Share of 3- and 4-year olds in preschool in South Coast region



SOURCE: cSPA tabulation of data from IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota

However, these demographic gaps are not as stark as they might be, thanks to existing supports like the state voucher system, which helps lower-income families cover the cost of care.

For instance, while Black families in the South Coast region earn [substantially less](#) than non-Hispanic white families, they still enjoy relatively steady access to early education; 49 percent of 3- and 4-year-olds in Black families are in preschool programs compared to 55 percent of whites.

“The voucher program is definitely working,” according to Kathy Treglia, Community Liaison for Little People’s College. One sure sign is that families with incomes between \$40,000 and \$60,000 — right around the maximum threshold for voucher eligibility — have the highest rates of access to early education.

Still, Treglia added that there’s lots of room for improvement: “If all our kids are going to be prepared for kindergarten, the scale of the vouch-

ers needs to be more generous and cover more working- and middle-class parents.”

CITIES AND TOWNS

In wealthier towns across the South Coast region, kids are slightly more likely to have access to child care and preschool, but thanks to state vouchers and other public supports (like housing assistance) many families in poorer cities and towns still find ways to get their kids into early education and care programs.

“Many providers in our region take subsidies in one form or another, and that’s particularly true in the cities,” said Pam Kuechler, Executive Director at PACE.

The result is a map of access and availability that doesn’t always follow the contours of economic inequality:

The number of 3- and 4-year-olds attending preschool in Fall River is similar to Dartmouth, East Bridgewater, and Mattapoisett; likewise, access in Fairhaven matches the very wealthiest towns like Mansfield and Rehoboth.

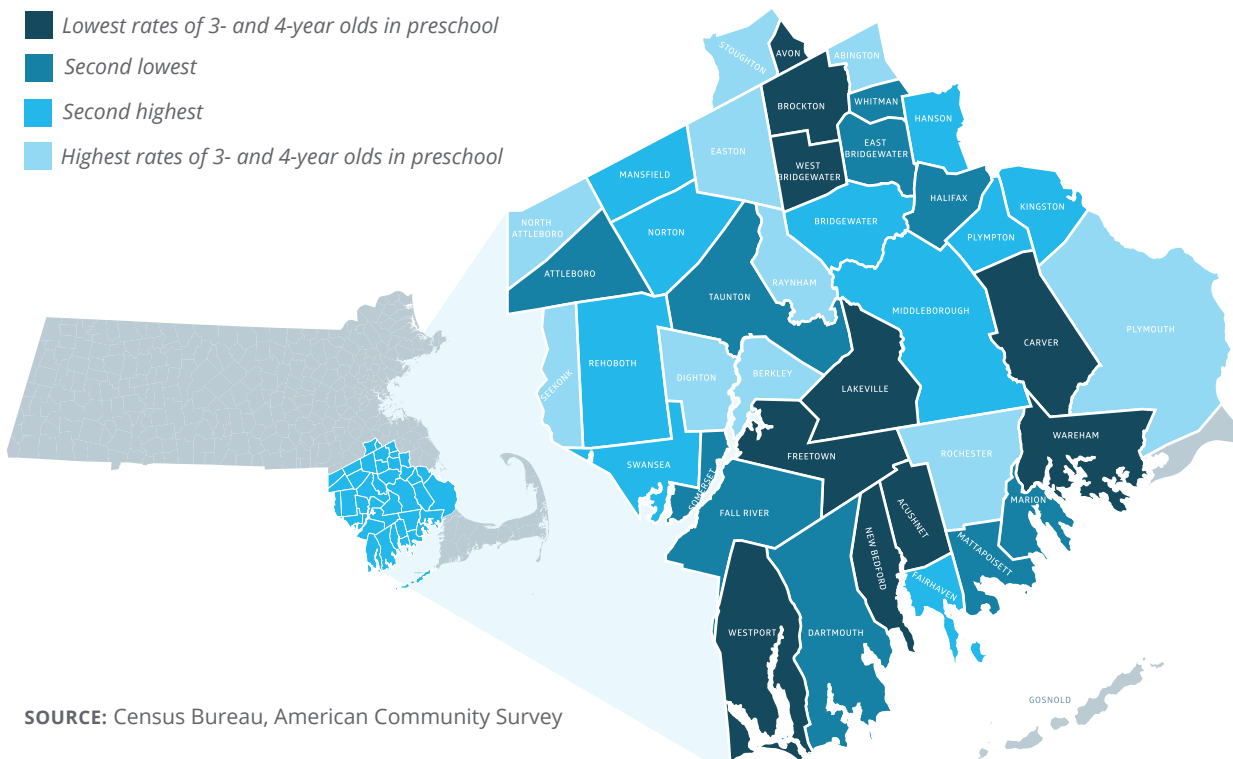
Note, however, that there’s a lot of uncertainty in these town-by-town measurements.

To begin, the best local data is limited to 3- and 4-year-olds, with less comprehensive coverage for infants and toddlers.

Just as important, attempts to look at access for all kids run up against the fact that families often cross town lines for care. Sometimes, that’s because they can’t find good options close to home, but it can also reflect a desire to get coverage close to work.

Access to early education and child care varies across towns but doesn't always match contours of economic and racial inequity

Share of 3- and 4-year olds enrolled in some form of preschool



SOURCE: Census Bureau, American Community Survey

STAFF MAKEUP AND TURNOVER

On some dimensions, early education and care workers in the South Coast look like the surrounding population. For instance, just under 20 percent of caregivers and teachers are people of color — which is similar to what you find in the community at large.

But there's a massive gender imbalance, with women comprising well over 90 percent of child care workers and early education teachers.

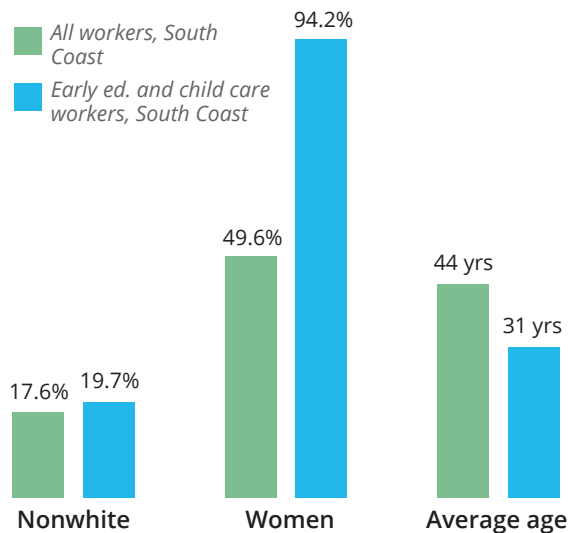
Workers in early education and child care tend to be younger as well, which reflects a broader problem of retention. Rather than build a career in the field, many young people who start their professional lives as caregivers ultimately leave for other fields.

The reasons for this retention problem are many, including low pay and the difficult and emotionally draining nature of the job. Lesley Guertin, Early Childhood Manager in the New Bedford Public Schools, put it succinctly: "Educators are finding that there's too much on their plate. They're not just dealing with the academic but their own social and emotional health — as well as that of the kids in their care."

PAY CHALLENGES

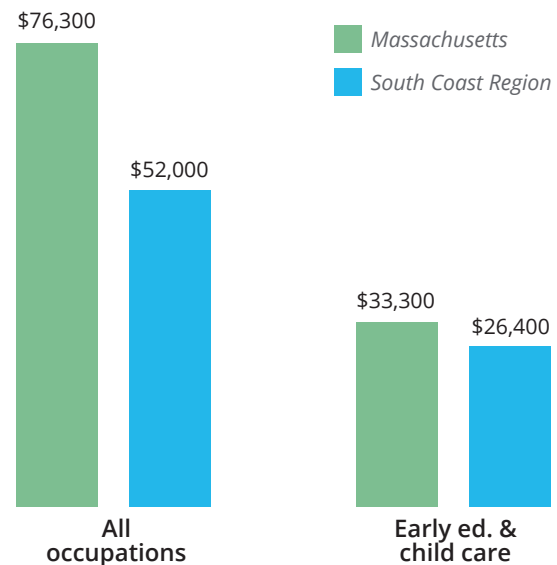
Across the South Coast, early education and child care workers earn very low wages, with average salaries hovering around \$26,000. And despite the limited pay, they face relatively stiff education and licensing requirements.

Early education and child care workers don't always mirror broader population



SOURCE: cSPA tabulation of data from IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota

Pay for early education & child care workers is lower in South Coast



SOURCE: Census Bureau, Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages

"Wages have to be more clearly tied to the requirements, so that you're remunerating folks fairly," according to Julie Gagliardi, First VP of Corporate Giving and Community Relations at BayCoast Bank.

That view got a similar endorsement from Gail Fortes, Executive Director of the YWCA Southeastern Massachusetts. "When child care requirements and demands increase every year without increasing our reimbursement, you drive people to look for other careers that better reward their credentials."

Raising staff salaries is a priority for providers, but it's also financially challenging. Even with today's low standard for pay, salary and benefit costs eat up [60 to 80 percent of the typical provider's budget](#).

Given that financial reality, the only way to substantially raise worker pay is to increase tuition costs for parents or vastly expand state and federal support.

QUALITY OF CARE

Not all early education and child care is created equal; quality matters a lot. However, program quality is one of the hardest things to track and measure.

Massachusetts does have a quality rating system for early education and care, but the data is known to be uneven and only weakly reflective of the things parents and advocates care most about.

Still, there are things we know about the availability and key elements of high-quality care.

To begin with, wealthier families seem to have an easier time identifying and accessing it. Recent research connecting early education and socio-economic status (SES) [has found that](#) "higher-SES children tend to receive care of higher measured quality."



We also know that skilled teachers are key to improving quality for all families. Professional development plays an important role here, but the surest path to attracting and retaining good teachers is likely better pay.

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

COVID-19 upended the world of early education and care: shuttering centers, forcing families into remote routines, and threatening the salaries and job security of many teachers and caregivers.

The data we've presented thus far is mostly pre-COVID, so it doesn't reflect the full force of these pandemic disruptions. That choice was deliberate, as a focus on more stable times allows us to see the long-term challenges facing the early education and care system in the South Coast region. But clearly, there are a number of urgent, short-term COVID-related needs that deserve attention.

On the positive side, COVID does not seem to have produced any meaningful change in the number of early education and child care spaces for kids under 5 in the South Coast. There were 17,000 licensed slots in February 2020 and a

similar number in September 2021, which speaks to the effectiveness of state and federal efforts to keep providers afloat.

But to say that there are still 17,000 slots does not mean that 17,000 kids are currently able to enroll. Centers struggling with COVID restrictions and the ongoing challenges of hiring and retention can't always accept as many kids as their licenses allow, creating large potential gaps between the number of slots and the amount of available care — a gap that we can't easily measure.

What's more, even if much of the early education and care infrastructure has survived the pandemic, there have been limited opportunities for expansion or improvement. That's particularly true of staff development, according to Kim Moran, Senior Vice President of Child Development & Protection at Old Colony YMCA. "A lot of the professional development opportunities are just now coming back, whether it's skill training, CPR, or otherwise; there's a whole ecosystem of that stuff that hasn't been available."

OPPORTUNITIES

In order to support kids and boost the long-term prospects of our whole region, the SouthCoast Community Foundation is eager to help families, providers, teachers, caregivers, and advocates improve the early education and child care system. Our preliminary discussions with local groups suggest a number of possibilities.

Regional leadership

Michael O'Sullivan, Co-CEO of the SouthCoast Chamber of Commerce, put it directly: "People turn to the SouthCoast Community Foundation for leadership, and by focusing on this they're showing the importance of early education as a priority for the community."

In the case of early education and care, regional leadership could involve a number of different activities:

- **Organizing convenings.** With its network of regional and statewide connections, the Community Foundation could organize discussions, presentations, and brainstorming sessions to share information and build consensus among different groups. Some of this work could be done in conjunction with existing state groups.
- **Sharing best practices.** The Community Foundation could work with researchers to identify effective policies and approaches in early education and care — and then provide that information to interested parties around the South Coast and throughout Massachusetts.
- **Pursuing direct advocacy.** Joining with existing efforts would give additional clout to groups and coalitions that sometimes struggle to get their voices heard.

Targeted investments

While only a massive public investment can really address the true funding needs in the early education and care space, there are nonetheless many targeted ways for the Community Foundation to expand access and improve quality.

- **Focusing on wraparound services.** Beyond the core challenge of providing high-quality care, many centers would like to offer more high-impact ancillary services like transportation, healthier meals, classroom upgrades, mental health resources, or diaper distribution.
- **Improving the workforce pipeline.** One way to ensure a new generation of well-trained early education and care workers is by partnering with community colleges and vocational schools to develop programs and support interested students.
- **Building capacity for smaller organizations.** Committed volunteers at a number of local organizations have helped build awareness of the importance of early-stage brain development and the value of high-quality care. More secure funding for these groups could generate large

returns from the improved stability and planning opportunities.

- **Supporting pilot programs.** Small, well-designed interventions could not only help local families but provide valuable information about which approaches work best — and how to scale them.



Methodological Notes

Throughout this paper, the phrases “South Coast” and “South Coast region” refer to the 41 cities and towns included in the South Coast Community Foundation’s catchment area.

Our analysis relies on two main data sources.

The first, from the U.S. Census Bureau, provides detailed information about individuals and families, including their race, income, age, and number of kids in preschool. We gathered this census data in two forms: town-level information from published tables, and family-level information from IPUMS microdata keyed to the geographies of the South-Coast Community Foundation’s catchment area.

Separately, we received information from the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care listing the location and capacity of all licensed child care centers in Massachusetts, including a breakdown of capacity by age group.

Together, these data sources allowed us to examine how different families interact with our early education and care ecosystem — and the local options available to them.

To better understand pay and salary norms, we also drew on the Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages.

Each of these data sources cover slightly different timeframes and geographic areas; care was taken to ensure the best fit in each case.