Including Family Child Care (FCC) Programs in Publicly-Funded Pre-K: Conditions for Success

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Introduction

Attending a high-quality, publicly-funded preschool program has been shown to have positive impacts on children's academic outcomes in the short and long term,[1] and on later-in-life outcomes such as behavioral and health benefits and increased college enrollment and persistence;[2] and the positive effects of preschool are often strongest for low-income children.[3] While the strongest evidence of continued impacts of preschool programs come from smaller, model programs (e.g., Perry Preschool and Abecedarian Project),[4] other larger at-scale programs such as those in New Jersey, Boston and Tulsa public schools also show positive impacts on children's development.[5]

State-funded preschool is already offered in mixed-delivery settings in most states, meaning that along with public schools, children are also served in settings such as child care centers, Head Start agencies, and private schools.[6] However, just 39% of 4-year-olds and 14% of 3-year-olds were enrolled in publicly-funded programs, such as state-funded pre-K, special education, or Head Start in the 2020-21 school year,[7] demonstrating many children still lack access to these programs. Increasingly, decision-makers and advocates are proposing that one part of the solution to ensuring more children have access to state- and other publicly-funded programs may lie in increasing enrollment slots available to children in other settings beyond school- and center-based classrooms, such as in family child care homes (FCCs).

Many families already use home-based settings for early care and education; National Survey of Early Care and Education (NSECE) estimates indicate that in 2019, nearly 5.2 million home-based providers cared for children ages 12 and younger in their home.[8] While most home-based providers are unregulated caregivers (i.e., family, friend, and neighbor caregivers), FCC educators differ in that they are regulated (either licensed, certified or registered, depending on state policies)[9] and the majority care for at least one non-relative in their home. While FCC homes already represent a small proportion of home-based care, the number of these educators has declined rapidly in the past decade: NSECE data shows a decline of 25% of listed FCC educators between 2012 and 2019.[10] Supporting FCC educators to provide publicly-funded pre-K could be one way to address this decline while also increasing access to high-quality pre-K programs for children.

During the 2019-20 school year, 44 states and D.C. operated 62 state-funded pre-K programs; of these programs, approximately half (29 out of 62) in 24 states allowed FCCs to receive state funding directly or through subcontracts in order to provide publicly-funded pre-K to children enrolled in their program.[11] Of those 24 states, 7 had no FCC educators enrolled in the pre-K program, and of the remaining programs, most served less than 1% of preschool children in FCC homes. While there are a few exceptions (e.g., San Francisco enrolled almost 18% of children in FCCs, and Oregon Preschool Promise enrolled almost 14%), very few states report actually funding FCCs to participate in pre-K programs, even if the state allows it. And for those that do, participation numbers are small.

Despite the limited inclusion of FCCs in state-funded pre-K programs, these programs are an important component of the ECE landscape for many reasons. Research indicates that parents in low-income families, parents who work nonstandard hours, and ethnic and racial minorities are more likely to use home-based care.[12] Parents choose FCC settings for a host of reasons, ranging from practical concerns to a desire for individualized care in a smaller environment and keeping mixed-age siblings in the same setting. Meeting the needs of families with the preference for this type of care setting through the provision of high-quality pre-K in FCC homes represents one way in which families currently largely left out of publicly-funded pre-K could be reached.

Furthermore, FCC educators and the settings in which they work provide assets that could be beneficial to children and families. For example, because of the mixed-age nature of FCC programs, children have the opportunity to learn beside siblings or different-age peers in FCC settings, which may benefit their cognitive and social development, although findings are mixed.[13] In addition, some research shows children in FCC settings are more likely than children in center-based programs to participate in outings to community locations such as libraries or zoos, representing how home-based settings promote authentic instructional activities for children.[14] In addition, more than 50% of low-income children under the age of 6 have at least one parent who works during non-standard hours (i.e., nights and weekends);[15] attendance at a pre-K program offered for a few hours in the middle of a weekday may be particularly difficult for families with non-standard work schedules (often low-income families) to navigate. FCC educators already typically work longer than full-time hours, with one study indicating an average of 11 hours of programming per day.[16] Embedding high-quality pre-K within a system that is well positioned to meet the needs of low-income and other working families is one example of a strength FCC brings to the pre-K context.

Including publicly-funded pre-K seats in FCC settings could expand access to publicly-funded programs for hard to reach families, and may provide opportunities to address issues such as workforce capacity and linguistic and cultural responsiveness. Publicly-funded pre-K classrooms often have higher quality standards than other early learning settings, and typically higher funding than licensing and quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS) require, which poses an opportunity to define and fund quality pre-K in FCC settings.[17] Finally, the inclusion of FCC educators in state-funded pre-K represents an avenue through which ECE systems can center equity, as many children currently attending FCC programs are low-income or live in rural areas with few early learning options.[18] In addition, women of color make up almost 40% of the FCC workforce;[19] ensuring these educators are equitably compensated as part of the publicly-funded pre-K system represents another opportunity to center equity in pre-K systems-building work.

Yet defining what quality preschool looks like in FCC settings is complex. In each year since 2002, The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) has issued a preschool Yearbook, which outlines ten research-based, preschool policy benchmarks that help policymakers seeking to support and guide quality in state-funded pre-K programs.[20] The research base on early learning and particularly on publicly-funded pre-K in home-based settings is sparse compared to the research base on pre-K in school- and center-based settings, making the development of FCC specific research-based pre-K program standards challenging. In reviewing the research to develop guidelines about how to set children up for success in home-based settings, we looked at research related to quality in home-based settings, along with research about what has worked in other early learning programs in mixed-delivery settings.

This process ultimately led to the development of the following conditions for success as a starting point for policymakers seeking to guide quality in publicly-funded pre-K programs in home-based settings. While we used the Yearbook benchmarks as an initial guide for defining quality pre-K, the learning environment in home-based settings differs in important ways from center- and school-based preschool; our goal was to make recommendations of baseline conditions for success that the state should strive to support, which consider and take advantage of the strengths of the FCC setting. These conditions for success could ultimately help guide the development of FCC specific pre-K program quality standards, as some states consider moving towards inclusion or expansion of FCC in state-funded programs. We intend for these conditions to start the conversation of what quality pre-K looks like in FCC homes but understand that just as our Yearbook benchmarks have evolved and changed over time, these too will evolve and change as the research base on providing early learning, and specifically publicly-funded pre-K, in FCC homes continues to advance. Each condition for success includes a research-based rationale, along with considerations of what may affect future implementation.

Conditions for Success for Including FCCs in Public Pre-K

1. The state[1] has an integrated and aligned system tailored to FCC educators and the home-based learning environment, which includes guidance[2] and resources in the following areas:

    a. selecting or developing and implementing a curriculum that is connected to a system of professional learning and supports and is appropriate for a home-based setting;

    b. aligning instruction with the state's early learning and development standards (ELDS), which outline age-appropriate expectations for learning and development across multiple domains;

    c. using authentic child assessments aligned with the state ELDS and the curriculum;

    d. accessing professional development, which includes formal on-site coaching, training and peer-to-peer networks and mentoring; and

    e. participating in a continuous improvement system that is appropriate to the home-based setting.

2. The state provides funding and opportunities for FCC educators to obtain, at minimum, a bachelor's degree with specialized training in effective practices in home-based settings.

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[1] We anticipate publicly-funded pre-K in FCC homes will include programs funded at the state, county, and city level. Programs funded at the city or county level would ideally also receive supports from the state; however, program supports will likely look different depending on the local context.

[2] We envision guidance as more than just passive forms of guidance (e.g., unchanging documents), but rather ways in which administrators actively support educators (e.g., through customized and tailored supports, providing infrastructure appropriate to the home-based setting, and other guidance comparable to what school- and center-based programs receive).

3. The state supports FCC educators in offering a program appropriate for and tailored to mixed ages.

4. The state sets group size, ratios, and environmental recommendations appropriate for home-based settings and mixed age groups, and supports implementation of these recommendations.

5. The state has a system that allows educators offering publicly-funded pre-K (including FCC educators) to receive equitable compensation/benefits.

6. The state's system supports FCC educators in ensuring children obtain yearly vision, hearing, and developmental screenings.

7. The state's system provides guidance and support to FCC educators in facilitating strong relationships with families, which includes regular, bidirectional communication and facilitation of family engagement in children's learning.

8. The state provides guidance and support to FCC educators with fiscal and business management and sustainability, such as in navigating the financial requirements of contracted seats, completing administrative and business tasks, and connecting educators with business supports.

9. The state develops cost estimates of providing high-quality early education that are specific to FCC settings, and considers the unique nature of FCC when dispersing payments.

Rationale and Considerations for The Conditions for Success

1a. The state has an integrated and aligned system to support FCC educators which includes guidance in the following areas: selecting or developing and implementing a curriculum that is connected to a system of professional learning and supports and is appropriate for a home-based setting.

Rationale: There is a large body of evidence demonstrating that the use of a high-quality curriculum can have positive impacts on pre-K children's mathematics achievement,[21] literacy skills,[22] and socioemotional skills.[23] However, to our knowledge, no studies have documented the effectiveness of a curriculum designed specifically for use in FCC settings, although many studies have documented the moderate to large impact of curricula usage on child outcomes in centers.[24]

Considerations: Many commercially available curricula are written for use in center-based settings and have limited to no published evidence of positive impacts on child outcomes,[25] limiting the relevant curriculum options FCC educators have to choose from. In one qualitative study, a team of researchers found through focus groups with FCC educators that a key way they defined quality was in preparing children for kindergarten, and that this included using a curriculum.[26] Yet in a study of 156 staffed family child care networks (SFCCNs), researchers found that just 25% reported requiring that FCC educators use a specific evidence-based curriculum;[27] and other researchers have found that FCC educators use a published curriculum less frequently than educators in other pre-K settings, with many using a curriculum they create themselves.[28] SFCCNs and state guidance can play an important role in recommending a curriculum or supporting educators in selecting, adapting or developing a curriculum that is appropriate for use in the unique home-based setting in which FCC educators teach.[3]

1b. The state has an integrated and aligned system to support FCC educators which includes guidance in the following areas: aligning instruction with the state's early learning and development standards (ELDS), which outline age-appropriate expectations for learning and development across multiple domains.

[3] The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine has convened an ad hoc committee currently conducting a study on pre-K curriculum quality with a focus on meeting the needs of Black and Latinx children, dual language learners, children with special needs and those experiencing poverty. Recommendations from this study could guide SFCCNs in curriculum selection, development and implementation.

Rationale: Although children grow and develop at different speeds, there is a set of skills and knowledge that children should be able to do and understand upon completion of pre-K that will set them up for success in school.[29] The National Education Goals Panel established five domains as fundamental to children's learning: physical well-being and motor development, socio-emotional development, approaches to learning, language development, and cognition and general knowledge; state ELDS are typically developed with a focus on development in these domains.[30] FCC educators should follow comprehensive state ELDS required of other high-quality programs to ensure they structure learning experiences that support child development across domains.

Considerations: Ensuring that FCC educators have the resources they need to meaningfully incorporate state ELDS into their programs through a state's network or system is necessary. In a survey of early childhood leaders working in 48 states, 4 territories and Washington, D.C., 66% of respondents indicated state-funded pre-K programs in public schools required programs to follow age 4 learning standards, while state-funded programs in non-school based settings were much less likely to mandate the use of standards (38% required their usage).[31] Multiple reviews of state ELDS[32] have noted that there is a strong need for effective professional development to be paired with state ELDS regarding using the standards for all children, and that teachers (in all settings) often do not understand how to incorporate standards into their teaching in a developmentally appropriate way.[33] State systems can play a role in ensuring FCC educators have access to these types of professional development opportunities in modes that meet their scheduling, language, and cultural needs. Furthermore, in their position statement on advancing equity in early childhood education, the National Association for the Education of Young Children recommends that all professionals in the early childhood space should recognize that the professional knowledge base on child development is changing and that practitioners should have a willingness to challenge outdated approaches, including in state ELDS.[34] Ensuring FCC educators (and all ECE professionals) are trained in and support other aspects of positive child development that may not be explicitly outlined in state ELDS (e.g., racial and ethnic identity development, biculturalism) not only advances equity, but can also contribute to academic skills in children.[35]

1c. The state has an integrated and aligned system to support FCC educators which includes guidance in the following areas: using authentic child assessments aligned with the state ELDS and the curriculum.

Rationale: The primary purpose of administering child assessments should be to further children's educational goals through the information collected, allowing teachers to make instructional decisions and administrators to make program-level decisions that benefit children's learning.[36] Assessments selected by programs tend to become a focus for providers, policymakers and the public, and can thus have the potential to shape what goes on in the classroom, in ways that are positive or negative. It is therefore important that child assessments are purposefully selected, so that the data they yield can be used in a way that creates meaningful program improvements and ultimately benefits children without subjecting them to developmentally inappropriate assessments.[37]

Considerations: There is limited research on the use of child assessments in FCC programs. Researchers demonstrated in a qualitative study that FCC educators considered assessing children an important aspect of high-quality programs.[38] In another qualitative study, FCC educators described five domains related to their role, and one of these domains was assessment. Some FCC educators stated that while they had not been trained in administering developmental assessments, they were interested and willing to engage in this type of training.[39] Although many FCC educators already use formal and/or informal child assessments in their work, the state should ensure all educators receive support in the selection, funding, and use of aligned and authentic assessments that support children's learning.

1d. The state has an integrated and aligned system to support FCC educators which includes guidance in the following areas: accessing professional development, which includes formal on-site coaching, training and peer-to-peer networks and mentoring.

Rationale: Research shows that home-based educators who receive support from a staffed family childcare network, or a network that offers home-based educators options for quality improvement including technical assistance, home visits, training and peer support demonstrate higher quality care and higher levels of sensitivity than FCC educators who are unaffiliated with a network.[40] Other studies have demonstrated the importance of continued training on quality. For example, participation in a 15-25 hour Family-to-Family training program covering topics ranging from business practices to parent-provider relationships and promoting learning environments had a modest but positive effect on global quality.[41] In addition, other researchers showed that an attachment-oriented 8-week professional development intervention for FCC educators had a positive impact on educators' self-efficacy in managing challenging behaviors.[42] Still others have demonstrated the benefits of intensive professional development on quality.[43] Thus, research demonstrates that ongoing training, and particularly training provided by highly-qualified members of a staffed family childcare network, who reflect and understand the cultural and other specific needs of FCC educators, can make a meaningful difference on educator quality.

Considerations: Accessing professional development can be a challenge for FCC educators, who do not typically have access to the school-based PD that publicly-funded pre-K programs often provide for their teachers onsite. In addition, school-based PD may not cover topics relevant to the mixed-age, home-based setting FCC educators work in, and FCC educators often work longer than 40-hour weeks without the support of any others who could cover for them so they could attend training. Research shows that FCC educators are less likely than center-based teachers to obtain ongoing training and support;[44] and perhaps relatedly, many FCC educators report feeling isolated,[45] and are much more likely to seek professional development through conferences and workshops rather than face-to-face interaction with other teachers, which diverges from the preferences of school-based preschool teachers.[46] Ensuring that FCC educators do not have to go out of their way to access professional development, peer support, or mentoring, is a critical role the state's system can play in supporting educators in home-based settings. Furthermore, research shows that community of practice or other models that incorporate social support and on-site/in-home coaching are more likely to be effective in improving quality in FCC homes as opposed to large group trainings; therefore, ensuring PD models include opportunities for on-site coaching and peer engagement is important.[47] State systems can provide virtual learning opportunities, substitutes, or other flexible options to ensure FCC educators are not left out of participation.

1e. The state has an integrated and aligned system to support FCC educators which includes guidance in the following areas: participating in a continuous improvement system that is appropriate to the home-based setting.

Rationale: The focus of a quality improvement system should be on support for continuous improvement, rather than compliance. Effective quality improvement systems operate at state and local levels to ensure information is regularly gathered on program processes and outcomes, and that the information gathered guides improvement. To be effective, this system supports programs in regularly and systematically collecting information and using this information to help improve practice. Effective preschool programs are characterized by this cycle of planning, gathering and analyzing information, and decision-making.[48]

Considerations: Participation in a system tied to quality improvement should center more on supporting rather than rating quality. Many state quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS) often adapt center-based standards to FCC educators without taking into account the aspects of quality that are unique to home-based settings;[49] and some research shows that increased requirements across ECE systems, including those of QRIS, can be a factor in the decision to leave the profession among FCC educators.[50] Furthermore, the measurement of quality through a rating and

improvement system can be complicated: The Family Child Care Environment Rating Scale – Third Edition (FCCERS-3)[51] is most often used by QRIS to rate quality, but it can be difficult to find data collectors and anchors reliable on the tool to complete observations, and the tool has been criticized for an overemphasis on environment, among other critiques.[52] Other measures of quality, such as the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS)[53] have multiple versions for different age ranges, making them complicated to use in mixed-age, home-based settings. Therefore, careful consideration should be taken regarding how quality is defined and measured, so systems meant to measure and support quality improvement are valid for and supportive of home-based educators.

2. The state provides funding and opportunities for lead teachers to obtain, at minimum, a bachelor's degree with specialized training in effective FCC practices.

Rationale: Multiple studies from the Institute of Medicine (IOM) and the National Research Council (NRC) of the National Academy of Sciences recommend that preschool teachers hold a bachelor's degree with training and specialized knowledge in early childhood education.[54] Additionally, a systematic review of 48 studies with 82 independent samples demonstrated that higher teacher qualifications in preschool classrooms were significantly correlated with higher classroom quality,[55] and other studies have demonstrated that teachers with a higher level of educational attainment have students who show greater gains in cognitive and socioemotional outcomes.[56] It is clear from research that highly-qualified teachers matter for children's learning.

Considerations: Research regarding how educational background impacts quality in FCC homes is nuanced. For example, in one study of FCC homes researchers found caregiver education, participation in recent child training, and higher levels of specialized training predicted warmer and more sensitive caregiving and a higher-quality physical environment.[57] Other caregiver characteristics (including experience) did not relate to quality in this study. Other studies have also demonstrated a link between providers' education levels and global quality.[58] However, some studies have found mixed relationships between FCC teachers' education level and classroom quality. One team of researchers found that education level did not predict global quality scores, with the exception of a two-year degree predicting higher scores on the Learning Activities subscale of the Family Day Care Rating Scale.[59] Research shows that higher education programs designed to prepare pre-K teachers (even those programs categorized as "early childhood related") differ substantially in their level of focus on children under age five and on preparing teachers to work with this age group.[60] The lack of consistent findings between degree and quality in FCC programs may be related to higher education programs not including any content specific to FCC educators in their coursework; therefore, coursework and fieldwork should be relevant to the home-based setting. Additionally, in one survey of providers in Massachusetts, 42% of FCC educators cited cost as their biggest barrier to participating in higher education.[61] Finding ways for FCC educators to participate without incurring debt to do so is also needed. In addition, the same barriers to participation in PD are present in attaining higher education; providing coursework virtually or on evenings and weekends would eliminate some of these barriers.

3. The state supports FCC educators in offering a setting appropriate for and tailored to mixed ages.

Rationale: Home-based settings are far more likely to support mixed-age groups than are center-based settings: Nearly 80% of listed, home-based educators care for mixed-age groups, while 9% of center-based educators do.[62] These mixed-age groups can offer benefits to children, including keeping siblings together and the provision of the unique types of learning opportunities that occur when different ages are present.[63] Furthermore, home-based care is the most common primary care arrangement outside of parental care for infants and toddlers, showing the critical need for home-based educators to continue to offer space for infants and toddlers.[64] In addition, the mixed-age nature of FCC homes is a unique strength of the setting that allows continuity of care, which is beneficial in the formation of a secure attachment with one caregiver that ultimately supports children's learning.[65]

Considerations: Teaching children of different ages requires specialized knowledge of development and pedagogical practices across age ranges. In a study of mixed-age preschool classrooms, researchers found that classrooms with greater age diversity had poorer teacher-child interactions; however, the negative effects were most prevalent among teachers with fewer years of education/experience and who held less child-centered views.[66] Other research, however, has pointed to the positive benefits of mixed-age preschool classrooms, including lower levels of peer conflicts and marginally lower levels of challenging behaviors for preschoolers in these settings.[67] Ensuring FCC educators have professional development in teaching across multiple age levels could allow them to feel supported in the complexities involved in teaching across developmental stages. Additionally, the impact that publicly-funded pre-K has on the availability of infant/toddler care should be carefully considered.[68]

4. The state sets group size, ratios, and environmental recommendations appropriate for home-based settings and mixed-age groups, and supports implementation of these recommendations.

Rationale: Providing and maintaining a safe environment is foundational to quality in home-based care.[69] Research shows that FCC educators who meet the requirements of licensing, which sets regulations for characteristics such as group size and health and safety requirements, score higher on measures of quality than non-licensed providers.[70] Developing environmental recommendations that set a foundation for health, safety, and learning is a critical element of providing high-quality early learning experiences in home-based settings.

Considerations: States often use child care licensing standards as a minimum to build from, and while these regulations typically support children's health and safety, ensuring environments are also designed to support educational quality is a process targeted more so by QRIS systems than by licensing.[71] Research on how group size and ratio affects quality in FCC homes is mixed,[72] and furthermore, licensing regulations are often structured to permit a larger number of children in care when related children are present, making it difficult to address how group size and ratio impact outcomes. The development of environmental recommendations should consider not just meeting children's health and safety needs, but also structuring an environment that supports high-quality educator-child interactions that research shows support child outcomes.[73] In addition, meeting licensing regulations can be uniquely stressful for FCC educators as it can feel particularly invasive to have one's personal home scrutinized during licensing visits,[74] and the time-consuming nature of ECE systems which includes licensing is a challenge that contributes to the decision to leave the profession for many FCC educators.[75] While regulations can support quality, care should be taken in understanding the unique nature of providing early learning in one's personal residence when implementing licensing visits.

5. The state has a system that allows educators offering publicly-funded pre-K (including FCC educators) to receive equitable compensation/benefits.

Rationale: The ECE workforce has been historically underpaid and undervalued, and this is especially seen in wages for FCC educators. In 2019, preschool teachers earned a median hourly wage of $14.67 per hour, with some differences in settings (e.g., preschool teachers in school-based settings earned a median wage of $26.95 per hour).[76] FCC educators fared even worse: in 2017, self-employed, home-based providers earned an average of $10.01 per hour, although those home-based educators defined as "incorporated" by the Census (just 5% of all home-based educators), earned an average of $16.94 per hour.[77] The poor economic conditions of working in ECE disproportionally impact educators of color including FCC educators, in part because they are more likely to work as assistants and with younger children, and in part because of the systemic inequities present in the U.S. that continue in ECE systems.[78] These low wages and discrepancies in pay have implications for classroom practice and quality. Numerous studies have demonstrated a link between classroom quality and teachers' wages or sense of economic security.[79] Higher pay has other benefits as well, such as influencing educator well-being. For

example, in a study of educators in FCC settings, centers and schools, researchers found those teachers who did not have health insurance, reported lower hourly wages, and reported working multiple jobs had higher depressive symptoms.[80]

Considerations: The FCC setting is unique: hours of operation in home-based settings often exceed hours in centers, with some educators spending 50-60 hours per week caring for children alone without the support of assistants or others;[81] thus, a consideration of equitable pay for FCC educators involves understanding the differences in work environment/conditions that home-based educators experience. Furthermore, compensation parity involves not just wages, but also salary schedules and benefits. Of 60 state-funded preschool programs providing data on non-salary benefits from the 2020-21 school year, just 26 (44%) provided parity in retirement benefits for preschool teachers in public school settings, 27 (46%) provided parity in health insurance benefits, and 33 (56%) provided parity in paid time off. Just one state reported providing all of these benefits to state-funded preschool teachers in settings outside of public schools.[82] This lack of access to non-salary benefits applies to FCC educators as well: For example, in 2019, 11% of all home-based providers (licensed and unlicensed) lacked health insurance coverage.[83] In interviews with regulated FCC educators who all left the field, a team of researchers found that 63% of these educators reported that the challenges and economics of FCC were a reason for exiting FCC, including lack of benefits.[84] Ensuring there is a system allowing for benefits and compensation aligned with qualifications is important not only for maintaining quality educators in the field but also for their health and wellbeing.

6. The state's system supports FCC educators in ensuring children obtain yearly vision, hearing, and developmental screenings.

Rationale: Not only are ECE programs vital to educational outcomes, but high-quality programs can also have positive impacts on children's health. For some children, preschool presents a first chance for the detection of vision, hearing and health problems which may impact learning and development. School can be one important context for children to receive access to screenings and other needed services: Pre-K attenders are found to be more likely to go to a doctor and receive immunizations and screenings than non-attenders.[85]

Considerations: There is some evidence demonstrating that FCC settings are less likely than center-based programs to offer resources for families helping them to access services like developmental or health screenings. Data from the NSECE shows that while 89% of centers reported helping families find services including health screenings, therapies and counseling services, only 44% of listed home-based educators reported doing this.[86] Another team of researchers found that just under half of staffed FCC networks reported directly offering developmental screenings for children, and 46% reporting offering health and nutrition services for children.[87] FCC educators are single-owner operators, usually working without additional staff; these discrepancies in support between centers and home-based sites demonstrate that rather than placing the responsibility on individual educators to connect children to these screenings, the system could better support children in FCC settings by having infrastructure that would connect them with these services and screenings. More families, particularly vulnerable families, could access these vitally important screenings if networks or systems that enroll children in pre-K in FCC settings could appropriately guide them, taking the burden of doing this off the FCC educator and allowing them to focus more of their attention on meeting children's educational needs.

7. The state's system provides guidance and support to FCC educators in facilitating strong relationships with families, which includes regular, two-way communication and facilitation of family engagement in children's learning.

Rationale: Family engagement in education during the pre-kindergarten years has been linked to children's early math and literacy skills and socioemotional development.[88] There are specific provider attitudes, knowledge, and behaviors that research demonstrates facilitate positive family-provider engagement, such as respect for family diversity, knowledge about child development and parenting skills, and being

conscientious and persistent in interactions with families.[89]

Considerations: Building strong relationships with families is a strength in FCC homes, and research finds FCC educators offer important supports to families such as flexible fees and hours and logistical support such as flexible payment schedules.[90] In addition, FCC educators build trusting relationships with parents and caregivers.[91] However, in one qualitative study with FCC educators, the majority mentioned interactions with parents as a significant source of work-related stress, even as they expressed concern for the wellbeing of the parents they work with.[92] The state's system can build on the strength educators have in building relationships with families while also helping alleviate some of the burden of being the sole person families turn to in their care setting for support, by providing resources to families through networks or other shared services.

8. The state provides guidance and support to FCC educators with fiscal and business management and sustainability, such as in navigating meeting the financial requirements of contracted seats, completing administrative and business tasks, and connecting educators with business supports.

Rationale: Running a successful FCC program requires considerable knowledge of business practices including billing, accounting, and small business operations, and managing the business side of care has been conceptualized as a core component of quality in FCC homes.[93] Program administrators also often need to use multiple federal, state and local funding sources to "blend" or "braid" funds. While using multiple funding sources helps meet the high cost of providing high-quality preschool, which is beyond the reach of many working families, each funding stream comes with its own purpose, regulations, and eligibility requirements.[94] Ensuring FCC educators have support in applying for funding and in managing and sustaining their business allows them to give more focus and time to the children in their care.

Considerations: Business leadership training programs have been effective at increasing FCC educators' self-efficacy in business management skills.[95] However, in one study with child care resource and referral specialists who worked with FCC educators, few reported their agencies provided trainings that mentioned topics such as tax preparation (25%) or business practices (43%), with some reflecting that while they wanted to cover these topics, it was hard to find individuals skilled in training FCC educators in the nuances of business management specific to their setting.[96] Supporting FCC educators in the challenges of meeting requirements of blending and braiding funding is an important role that the state's system should play in ensuring providers are able to meet the many regulations and requirements. Additionally, connecting FCC educators to business supports such as child care management systems that would help them participate in pre-K would free up time that educators can spend on high-quality interactions and instructional support rather than on time-consuming business management tasks.

9. The state develops cost estimates of providing high-quality early education that are specific to FCC settings, and considers the unique nature of FCC when dispersing payments.

Rationale: Decades of research have shown that there are significant benefits to high-quality pre-K programs for children that far outweigh their costs.[97] Pre-k program costs vary significantly as a function of the population served, location, and program design. This is especially true for FCC programs offering pre-K, which may or may not have access to shared services such as instructional coaches, and curriculum and assessment tools. Estimating the costs of providing high-quality pre-K in various types of settings, including FCC settings, will allow states to equitably estimate the costs for these services, and adequately support FCC educators who offer pre-K based on these costs.

Considerations: Estimating the true cost of providing high-quality education in FCC settings is an intricate process for many reasons, including the mixed-age setting of FCC homes and whether or not shared services alliances or SFCCNs, which could significantly reduce the cost of providing quality care, already exist.

In addition, while direct expenses in FCC homes such as food, educational materials, and office supplies will look similar to expenses incurred by schools or centers, other business expenses, such as the expense of maintaining the home, are less clear cut. States should consider the cost of various scenarios – including the availability of shared services, the number of pre-K versus infant/toddler-age children, and the hours allocated to state-funded pre-K versus wraparound care hours, when estimating the true cost of providing high-quality pre-K in FCC homes. Finally, challenges within the ECE system are a top reason former FCC educators report for leaving the profession,[98] with educators citing difficulties such as inequitable subsidy rates and payment policies. They cite burdens such as having to wait weeks to be paid, leaving them on the hook to cover costs for things like materials and educational supplies themselves because they are not paid upfront, as examples of frustrations with ECE systems. Ensuring educators are paid in a timely manner is critical for all, but especially for FCC educators who are not part of a larger system that may be able to absorb costs when payments are delayed.

Conclusion

Research shows that high-quality preschool education can make a meaningful difference in children's lives in many ways; for example, in positively impacting their educational and socioemotional outcomes in both the short- and long-term. Yet the data shows that innovative solutions are needed to expand access to high-quality early education, as enrollment in state-funded preschool across the United States remains low, particularly for vulnerable children who research shows often benefit the most from high-quality preschool programs.[99] FCC educators already fulfill an important role in the fragmented ECE system; expanding high-quality pre-K into these settings as part of a mixed-delivery system could provide an opportunity for reaching more children with educational experiences that will support their healthy development across the full range of domains.

This report introduces conditions for success for states and localities considering introducing or expanding publicly-funded pre-K into FCC settings; while these conditions may not be sufficient for programs to offer high-quality early education, the extensive research base on pre-K programs suggests these types of opportunities and supports for children represent the minimal conditions necessary for high-quality early learning experiences. Our aim in this report was to outline how the extensive research base regarding high-quality pre-K in other settings (e.g., school- and center-based settings) could be tailored to FCC settings, while also incorporating what is already known about quality in FCC settings, particularly in terms of the strengths FCC educators bring to their work.

To work towards these conditions, states can draw upon already available resources as a method for building towards the meaningful inclusion of FCC in state-funded pre-K. For example, analyses of the 2019-2021 Child Care and Development Fund Plans indicate 19 states currently use this funding to support a family child care network;[100] these states could ensure staffed

family child care networks offer shared services such as enrollment support or curriculum selection and usage, as recommended in the conditions for success.

While states already offer varied supports to FCC educators, less than half of states allow FCC educators to provide publicly-funded pre-K in FCC settings. Furthermore, for states in which FCC participation in pre-K is allowed, numbers of participating programs are low, and in nearly one-third of states that do allow it, no children are served. Research on why this is the case (e.g., are FCC educators choosing not to participate; or are there limited supports for applying and enrolling?) could help states plan to reach more children in this setting. Furthermore, states that already allow pre-K in FCC settings or intend to do so should have a plan to support FCC educators who want to participate, by doing things like simplifying the application process and ensuring professional development providers and coaches are trained in culturally relevant and FCC-specific practices. Building upon what is already in place for FCC educators, while also utilizing resources and supports the state offers for pre-K programs, is one step towards more cohesion in the fragmented early childhood landscape. States can also look to already existing programs such as the Seattle Preschool Program or the Philadelphia PHLpreK program for examples of how other cities and states have included FCC educators in publicly-funded pre-K.

High-quality pre-K programs are consistently shown to make a difference in the lives of children; however, many programs in the U.S. are of low quality. Diversifying the setting in which pre-K is offered, while still maintaining a vision of high-quality early learning experiences that set children up for success in the school years and beyond, is one important way states can consider how publicly-funded pre-K can further meet the needs of diverse families. Ensuring that quality is central to expansion in mixed settings is an important way to

promote equity, especially because low-income families and families of color, many of whom prefer FCC settings for their children, have historically lacked access to pre-K, particularly pre-K of high-quality.[101] And while FCC educators bring myriad strengths, they also report feeling isolated and lacking in supports that pre-K teachers often receive at their center or school sites.[102] Therefore, including FCC educators in a pre-K system without meaningfully considering the role states should play in supporting these educators would be a missed opportunity in centering equity when promoting high-quality, state-funded pre-K, and would not set children, families or educators up for success.

Providing publicly-funded pre-K through a mixed-delivery system increases the number of children who can be served and allows the system to better support parental preference for where children spend their preschool days.[103] However, mixed-delivery systems bring unique challenges – such as ensuring all pre-K educators are supported, not just those in larger, public school settings. Furthermore, some research indicates that in mixed-delivery pre-K systems, quality differences between classrooms in community-based settings and those in public schools are evident and tend to favor public schools; however, when community based settings and public schools are held to the same standards, some of these differences are reduced.[104] Holding FCCs to high standards while providing adequate support to meet those standards could ensure that mixed-delivery settings do not further perpetuate inequities by classroom setting.

Research indicates that quality early learning is already happening in FCC settings.[105] In the Conditions for Success, we have outlined that providing high-quality, publicly-funded pre-K in home-based settings through capitalizing on the strengths of FCC educators could be possible if states provide structures and supports for educators and families.

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