



The Child Care Workforce in New Jersey: Findings from Focus Groups with Providers

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ABOUT THE
**RUTGERS CHILD CARE
RESEARCH COLLABORATIVE**

With funding and support from the New Jersey Department of Children and Families, the Center for Women and Work, the Heldrich Center for Workforce Development, and the National Institute of Early Education Research at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey have joined together to form the Rutgers Child Care Research Collaborative for the purpose of conducting research and facilitating community conversations that develop a broad and comprehensive understanding of New Jersey's child care landscape. Our research aims to increase understanding about the needs and interests of parents in New Jersey, the supply and motivations of the child care workforce, and the capacity of the child care sector to meet demand for child care today and into the future within our diverse state.



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	4
Methods.....	4
Child Care Workforce Study.....	4
Post-Survey Focus Groups	5
Findings	6
Family Child Care Providers	6
Motivations.....	6
Barriers and Challenges	8
Recommendations.....	10
Licensed Child Care Center Staff — Assistant Teachers	12
Motivations.....	13
Workforce Dynamics	14
Barriers and Challenges	15
Recommendations.....	17
Discussion	18
Conclusion	20
Next Steps.....	21
Appendix A: Family Child Care Focus Group Protocol	22
Appendix B: Assistant Teacher Focus Group Protocol.....	24

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INTRODUCTION

The John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, is part of a multi-center collaborative project focused on child care in New Jersey and is working with the Center for Women and Work and the National Institute for Early Education Research with support and collaboration from the New Jersey Department of Children and Families. Through this work, the Heldrich Center is conducting an evaluation of the child care workforce through a multi-modal research approach. This report shares findings from the Heldrich Center's post-survey focus groups of family child care (FCC) providers and licensed center staff in New Jersey.

METHODS

▲ Child Care Workforce Study

For the Heldrich Center's evaluation of the child care workforce in New Jersey, the research team is employing a mixed-methods approach, comprising three primary data collection endeavors designed to complement each other. First, the Heldrich Center conducted six focus groups to capture and understand the perspectives of 45 child care workers, inclusive of FCC providers and licensed center staff. The insights derived from these focus groups were used to inform the development of survey instruments — the second source of primary data collection. In 2024, the Heldrich Center fielded two surveys: a survey of FCC providers was deployed in May and June 2024, and a second survey of teachers and assistants in licensed child care centers was fielded in November 2024. These surveys captured the insights of over 2,000 child care workers in New Jersey. Third, in late 2024 and early 2025, the Heldrich Center conducted a series of focus groups to clarify and expand upon the findings identified through the surveys. To complement the analyses of these primary data sources, the

Heldrich Center is simultaneously conducting quantitative analyses of the characteristics, wages, and labor force dynamics of the New Jersey child care workforce using administrative data from the New Jersey Statewide Data System.

▲ Post-Survey Focus Groups

The research team held two series of focus groups — one with FCC providers and another with assistant teachers working in licensed child care centers — to build on survey findings and engage more deeply with survey respondents.

For FCC providers, the research team conducted five virtual focus groups in December 2024 and January 2025, which included 34 FCC providers. Three focus groups were conducted in English, and two were conducted in Spanish. Most of the FCC provider focus group participants shared having significant experience working in FCC, as well as experience across various child care settings, with many having 10+ years of experience.

For licensed child care center staff, the research team conducted six virtual focus groups in May and June 2025. The research team chose to focus on assistant teachers for the post-survey focus groups to gather insights from a targeted population that is often underrepresented in research. The research team conducted four focus groups in English and two in Spanish, and connected with a total of 37 assistant teachers working in licensed child care centers in New Jersey. Focus group participants reported a wide range of experience working in child care, spanning 1 to 40 years, with most having worked in the child care field between 10 and 20 years.

Across both focus group series, meetings were scheduled on weeknights and Saturdays to reduce barriers to participation and encourage broad engagement. In total, these focus groups allowed the research team to gather feedback and insights from 71 child care workers, representing two different working environments.

Semi-structured focus group protocols were used in this research. See Appendices A and B for the full focus group protocols. Focus group participants were asked a series of questions about their motivations for entering and remaining in the child care field, perceived barriers and challenges, and recommendations for improvements. The research team selected these topics for the focus groups based on the survey findings, which indicated a need for continued exploration to address underlying “why” questions that cannot be fully captured through quantitative data alone. All focus groups were attended by three to four research team members, with one team member facilitating the discussion and the others taking notes. Focus group participants received a \$50 Visa gift card in appreciation for their 60 minutes of time. The criteria for inclusion in the focus groups were individuals who were over the age of 18, currently working in the child care field, and had responded to the Heldrich Center’s child care workforce surveys and indicated their interest in participating in future research. Individuals who expressed interest in future research and whose job titles matched the focus groups’

populations of interest — FCC providers and assistant teachers — were contacted for participation in the Heldrich Center’s post-survey focus groups.

Audio recordings of the focus groups were transcribed verbatim and coded topically by a multilingual member of the research team. The coding was then summarized, highlighting key themes, patterns, and representative quotes. The Spanish language focus groups were first coded in their original language to preserve the nuance and cultural context of participants’ responses. Following coding completion, the Spanish language transcripts were translated into English to ensure consistency in the analysis and facilitate integration with the summaries derived from the English language focus groups. These summaries were then reviewed by other research team members who observed the focus groups for feedback and validity checks. Topical coding of the focus group transcripts was organized and summarized in line with the protocols deployed in this study.

FINDINGS

This section presents findings for FCC providers and licensed center staff separately; however, the implications of the findings are discussed jointly.

▲ Family Child Care Providers

FCC providers offer a distinct perspective on working in child care, as they run child care businesses out of their homes. Focus group participants shared their motivations for becoming an FCC provider, the barriers and challenges they face in their work, and their recommendations for improving working conditions in the field.

Motivations

FCC providers cited two prevailing motivations for entering the field — meeting the needs of their families and a desire for a more flexible work arrangement. Most FCC provider focus group participants noted having children of their own and needing to find reliable child care, with some providers mentioning having a child with special needs that made finding care more challenging. FCC providers spoke of becoming a registered provider to both earn a living and be the primary caregiver for their own children. In this way, working as an FCC provider allowed focus group participants to balance their families’ diverse needs. One participant shared:

“Actually, the factors that motivated me...because that time my daughter was a baby. Before that, she was at a daycare center, but she was sick all the time. So that’s when one of the teachers told me, ‘Why don’t you be a childcare provider?’ So that’s why I tried to work at home and then I can see my daughter grow at same time.”

Regarding providers' search for a flexible work arrangement, focus group participants spoke of flexibility in several ways. Some participants cited needing flexibility in their work to hold a job and provide child care for their own children as a single parent or while their partners were unavailable. Other participants defined and prioritized flexibility as the ability to work from home and have control over their work schedules. Additional focus group participants spoke of having greater flexibility in determining the details of the care that they would offer to children, as illustrated by building their own curricula, setting the number of children in their care, and determining care routines with children, such as setting feeding schedules. As one participant described:

"I've actually worked in daycare centers and I didn't like how strict they were about certain things. Umm, for example, one was the food. You can only feed them at certain hours of the day and like I had children come in all the time like 'I'm hungry, I'm hungry, I'm hungry.' I don't know if their parents are feeding them or not."

While flexibility was often discussed, FCC providers defined the term in a variety of ways, speaking to their own prioritization of their needs and wants from their jobs.

When reflecting on the provision of child care, focus group participants spoke of feeling motivated to provide high-quality care by offering continuity of care; assuming more of a closer, almost familial, presence in children's lives; and creating "safe havens" for children. Participants shared:

"And to be providing even, I think, higher quality care, we're giving these kids continuity of care, which research over and over again shows that it builds their social and emotional, their capacity for their success."

"I wanted to be like a safe haven for our kids. I wanted kids to know that no matter what, like whatever is happening in their home, they have, like, a safe place that they can go to, like, during certain hours."

FCC providers took pride in being able to offer a robust and high-touch model of care that was rooted in creating safe spaces for children to feel connected and deeply cared for by their caregivers. FCC providers were effusive in stating that their model of care should be regarded as equal to, if not better than, the care provided in licensed child care centers.

Lastly, when discussing motivations and pathways into the child care field, the research team noted a key difference between focus group participants who participated in the English and Spanish language sessions. FCC providers who participated in the English language focus group spoke of their clear intentions to enter the child care field and some noted working in adjacent care-related fields or different child care settings prior to becoming a FCC provider. Overall, providers who participated in the English language focus group depicted a cohesive career journey in the child care field. In contrast, individuals who participated in the Spanish language focus group spoke of a more disjointed career pathway into working in child care upon immigrating to the United States. Many of

these participants referenced their careers in their home countries, often citing various professional roles that were not possible when seeking work in the United States. Participants shared:

“I’ve been working in child care for 10 years now. I had a dentist’s profession in my country...but I am working here because I dedicated myself to family child care” (translated from Spanish).

“In my home country, I worked in administration and in vocational schools” (translated from Spanish).

In this way, those who participated in the Spanish language focus group spoke of working in FCC as their pathway to employment, with few other options available to them. This divergence in perspective and experience in entering the child care field is notable, and reflects complex dynamics about employment opportunities for immigrants in the United States.

Barriers and Challenges

When discussing the barriers and challenges associated with being an FCC provider, most participants referenced the challenges of low pay and a lack of access to benefits, which was also a primary theme when providers discussed their recommendations to policymakers for improvements for FCC providers. Participants frequently spoke of relying on other family members, particularly their spouses, for benefits, which was the critical support that allowed them to continue working as an FCC provider. As one participant shared:

“But without the support of a working family member, we wouldn’t have health insurance. It’s impossible for the providers” (translated from Spanish).

Increased pay and access to benefits were prevalent topics throughout the focus group discussions and are explored further in the next section of this report as one of the recommendations made by FCC providers to improve the field.

Another prevalent daily challenge for nearly all providers was setting boundaries with the families for whom they provide care. While many noted that they had good relationships with their current families, they also touched on negative prior experiences and implementing stronger boundaries to foster clearer parent-provider expectations. Upon exploring these dynamics further, providers shared that the most prevalent daily challenges they experienced with families were parents’ ability to arrive on time to pick up their children and receiving pay for their services at the agreed-upon rate and time. As two participants noted:

“Running late with parents seems to be a big problem. Because if you got something else to do. Or, you know, like you said, it runs into your personal family life and time, and no one else but you to...do the work.”

“But the boundaries? That’s a big one sometimes, you know...They’re supposed to come at a certain time. You know, you have a life outside of being a childcare provider. And they just sometimes they’re like, ‘Oh, 15 minutes is nothing or 30 minutes is nothing.’ You know and then you have to charge them. And that becomes an issue.”

Interwoven in the conversations about establishing boundaries with parents was the explanation that providers feel the need to justify their provision of care as a legitimate business and their role as a FCC provider as a profession. Providers mentioned the need to frequently remind parents that the child care services they provided are part of a business that adheres to rules and regulations, just like any other establishment, and that the fact that services were provided from their homes was not a reason to circumvent established business practices. Furthermore, providers spoke at length about the negative public perception of FCC providers and how this perception posed a challenge in their daily operations and interactions with parents, other educators, and the public. FCC providers specifically shared that they felt the profession was disrespected, devalued, and misunderstood. Participants spoke of feeling that they were not regarded as educators, but rather babysitters, whose role in children’s lives was insignificant. To this end, participants shared:

“They don’t view us as educators. We educate the most important stage of a child’s life. It is in our hands. They call us babysitters. I am not a babysitter. I’m an educator. We enlighten these children and expose them to worlds that they would never have gotten if we were babysitters.”

“A con is just everyone in general not kind of respecting our field and what we do. And they still, look at us at a lens where we’re nannies and they don’t see beyond what we are capable of doing.”

“I get ‘Oh, you are home all day with the kids. Oh, you watching TV’ and ‘Oh, it’s so easy.’ You know...it’s like they don’t realize that it’s a job and you’re taking care of a kid.”

The challenge with the perception of FCC further fed into what providers believe to be a disparity of conditions and a lack of equal opportunity with educators working in licensed child care centers. While this theme was most prevalent in regard to pay and access to benefits, there was discussion about uneven access to funding opportunities. In this way, FCC providers spoke of having challenges assessing grants and expressed feeling disadvantaged, as compared to their center-based counterparts. As one participant mentioned:

“So, they come up with a lot of programs and a lot of things like the grant, that \$20,000 grant (as part of the Child Care Facilities Improvement Program) that we have right now sounds amazing. But even though we’re restricted on what we need to buy and how we can have 100% deductible from our business, it’s still gonna count as income.”

As illustrated by the participant's comment, while grateful to be able to access additional funding, the structure of operating an FCC business presents challenges to receiving new sources of funding. Specifically, the participant was referencing the tax and financial implications and complexities of operating an independent small business. This perceived disadvantage further fed into the conversation about not being regarded as an educator in the same way licensed child care center staff are considered.

Recommendations

Overall, FCC providers' recommendations for improving their working conditions centered on increasing wages and expanding access to benefits, which were both closely tied to eligibility for public assistance programs and opportunities to boost child enrollment, along with suggestions to reduce the administrative burden of operating their businesses. In discussing recommendations to improve working in the child care field, the most common recommendation for FCC providers, and the primary theme across multiple topic areas of discussion, was to increase wages. Many FCC providers indicated that their compensation fell below the minimum wage when accounting for all the hours they spend operating their businesses and after factoring in the cost of all their business expenses. Participants commented:

"Sometimes I'm like 'If I was only taking care of one kid' and I divided by the time that I they spend with me. I'm like, 'No, this is crazy.' Not even minimum wage."

"No, no one here is going to go to a job and be paid \$1.50 or \$2.00 an hour. And that money is not just for you. You have to pay water out of it, electricity, make sure the place is heated. You are constantly sanitizing, vacuuming, dusting, do so many things out of that dollar that you have been given. You have to pay your rent and mortgage, right?"

Other participants drew contrasts between what they are paid per hour and the pay rates and structures of those employed in licensed child care centers. One participant commented:

"I would say that we should be recognized and compensated in the same manner that the public education system recognizes and pays professionals. Those teachers are making very good salaries, they have state benefits for insurance and retirement plans and all of those things. We're doing the same work."

Another recommendation frequently cited by focus group participants was related to increasing access to benefits, such as healthcare and retirement savings accounts. Participants commented at length on the difficulties they experienced in finding and maintaining their own affordable health coverage. A participant commented:

“I recently managed to obtain insurance after almost two years without health insurance. And after searching and searching, I managed to get at least one coverage. Yeah, and I have to pay for it, and if I go to get any specialty, I have to pay a lot of money. Thank God, I’m a healthy person, but you have to have health insurance in case of an emergency” (translated from Spanish).

While broad recommendations focused on pay and benefits were also prevailing themes in the research team’s previous focus groups and survey research with the child care workforce, a more nuanced conversation about a misalignment with pay and benefits emerged in the post-survey focus groups. More specifically, the research team heard some providers designate themselves as part of “the working poor,” individuals who do not earn enough to make ends meet but also earn too much to qualify for supportive programs. As it relates to benefits, participants noted the need to balance their income with the Medicaid income threshold to ensure continued access to healthcare. Another participant mentioned having difficulties navigating the dynamic of being self-employed and not qualifying for Social Security, as it was optional to pay into it. The participants specifically shared:

“That the insurance...when you start making too much money, because right now I get, you know, Medicaid through the state. So, when my clientele starts building. I know what they’re going to cut me off.”

“You know, as I’m getting older, is that I pretty much always been self-employed. So, I haven’t earned enough credits to even qualify for Social Security. And my husband and I raised eight kids. So, in raising eight kids, there was never enough money to have extra to put aside to do that. Everything we made, we needed.”

Interrelated with the recommendation of improving wages, FCC providers also suggested increasing the number of children allowed in care, which would afford them more opportunities for enrollment and greater pay. While there was no consensus on the “ideal” number of children allowed in care at one time, this recommendation was noted across focus groups. Participants shared:

“I only accept full-time kids. But I have to maximize my income because I’m so limited with only five children, but in order to maximize what the amount of money I can potentially even earn, that’s the only way I can do it.”

“The number of children you have as a child care provider if you are registered with the state is limited.”

Focus group participants also offered a few administrative recommendations for the state to consider, particularly focused on reducing the amount of required paperwork and streamlining inspections. Participants frequently mentioned the need to address the administrative and compliance needs of their businesses outside of the hours that children are in their care. Participants mentioned how it can be challenging to juggle the provision of care and the administrative needs of their businesses, prompting recommendations for how to increase efficiencies for these required processes. A participant shared:

“It’s a big piece of what we do and typically outside of our care hours. I’ve known providers who just let the kids do their thing and do it, but then then you’re not providing the high quality of care and being the most attentive, so it is a lot.”

To this end, FCC providers recommended exploring ways to reduce, simplify, and/or streamline the administrative compliance and paperwork that they are required to do.

Furthermore, another prevalent administrative recommendation was for the state to consider how to consolidate regulatory interactions with FCC providers, specifically suggesting having one agent that was a primary point of contact and who handled all inspections and regulatory actions, because currently, different agencies oversee different programs. Providers spoke of the disruption caused by engaging with multiple entities and completing multiple inspections that serve different purposes, taking time and resources away from the provision of child care. One provider stated:

“And I feel like it’s all the rules and regulations that the state has. Like the fact that I’m part of the food program, so I get inspected multiple times a year. And then I’m on a whole bunch of other programs and things like that. So, I’m inspected a lot throughout the year.”

However, all providers who referenced this also noted the importance of the regulatory institutions and policies that govern FCC, but wished that the oversight could be operationalized more efficiently. One participant commented:

“You’re having to plan all of the things. Prepare for inspections. If you’re in Grow, you’re meeting and working on your quality improvement program. So, it takes a lot...There’s a lot of documentation and paperwork. Don’t get me wrong, I think it’s important. I think it’s valid. We need those things. We need the health and safety. We need the financial record. But it’s a lot and you’re one person doing all the care, all the cleaning, all the teaching, all the documentation, all the compliance.”

The conversations with FCC providers revealed that their primary recommendations for improving their work focus on increasing access to competitive pay and benefits and reducing the administrative burden of operating their businesses.

Licensed Child Center Staff — Assistant Teachers

The following findings, focused on motivations, workplace dynamics, barriers and challenges, and recommendations, were identified through six focus groups with assistant teachers in licensed child care centers. These findings are both alike and different from those derived from conversations with FCC providers, with key differences stemming from the workplace environment and relationships associated with working in a more formalized child care setting.

Motivations

When asked about their motivations for seeking employment in the child care field, many focus group participants spoke of becoming an assistant teacher after looking for care for their own children and having been encouraged and recruited by their peers. Many participants referenced comfort and familiarity caring for children as a reason that they sought employment in the field, speaking of their love and fondness for working with and nurturing young children. One participant encapsulated this sentiment by sharing:

“I started working with children almost 22 years ago as a babysitter for several families, and once I had the chance to work at a preschool, I seized the opportunity because that was my dream. I’ve always wanted to work with children.”

Building upon findings from the Heldrich Center’s survey of teachers and assistants, the research team wanted to investigate if focus group participants felt that working in child care was their “calling.” When asked why they work with young children, 59% of survey respondents ranked “it is my personal calling” in their top three reasons for working in child care.¹ To probe deeper into this topic, focus group participants were asked if child care was their “calling” or specifically the work that they felt they were meant to be doing and that resonated with their purpose and sense of self very deeply. Most did not agree with this description but offered similar sentiments about feeling a natural gravitation toward and enjoyment of caregiving, even if they did not identify with the term “calling.” As one participant put it:

“I love...the part I enjoy the most about working with children is the children themselves. I love seeing how...the difference one can make in the lives of children” (translated from Spanish).

As the research team was focused on the specific job role of assistant teachers, focus group participants were asked about the aspects of their roles that they enjoyed and that most directly contributed to their motivation to continue working in a licensed child care center. A majority of the assistant teachers who participated in the focus groups felt that the structure, standards, safety, and support of their roles were critical aspects that directly contributed to their continuing to work in child care. First, expanding on an appreciation for structure, many participants detailed how relying on existing schedules and curricula, often planned by their head or lead teachers, made it easier for them to focus on executing the planned activities, minimize the preparation for classroom activities, and provide quality care. To this end, participants commented:

“I like that it’s regimented and like structured, I really like the structure.”

“I like the structure of it. I like the curriculum because we have a curriculum, even if she’s not there...My lead? I know what to do, you know?”

¹ *Voices of licensed center child care providers in New Jersey*. (in press). Heldrich Center for Workforce Development, Rutgers University.

The second most frequently cited factor contributing to assistant teachers' job satisfaction was the standards and the clarity of those standards by which their centers and classrooms operated. Many participants noted that they had very clear expectations from their head or lead teachers, and appreciated the straightforward guidelines provided by their superiors. Participants also appreciated the standards set forth by the state's licensing and inspection agencies, as they clarified the baseline from which their center and all staff should operate. Participants remarked:

"Yeah, I do also enjoy working because you have standards that you adhere to, lots of resources, there's books, you know what to do and you know, we know we have visits from the state, and we know what we're expected to do. So that takes the guess work out of everything."

"I would say you know, as employees, there are expectations, there are boundaries."

Lastly, participants expressed appreciation for the safety provided in their roles, as they had job protections in place due to the aforementioned structure and standards. Assistant teachers also expanded upon their sense of safety by highlighting how a supportive work environment, fostered by both co-workers and center administrators, further contributed to their feelings of security in their roles. Focus group participants commented:

"I like all the...You know, protections that are in place. They do, you know, they have come in to where I work to make sure everything is safe. So that makes me feel better."

"I like working in a licensed center because I feel like I have more support from co-workers."

"I like how the kids become part of your family. And you are given the support needed from the admin staff."

From the conversations about motivations for entering the field, as well as the factors that contribute to continuing to work in child care, many participants expressed an innate interest in working with and helping children, but also prioritized being able to provide that care in a regimented and protected working environment.

Workplace Dynamics

The research team further investigated the workplace dynamics and factors that contribute to keeping assistant teachers employed in their current roles. A key theme that emerged was the importance of the relationship between assistant teachers and their lead or head teachers. A majority of participants shared overwhelmingly positive sentiments about their relationships with their lead or head teachers, noting that they felt like partners and/or teammates and trusted their lead or head teacher's ability to navigate difficult situations that they might not have been equipped to handle. Participants were also effusive about their ability to collaborate and communicate with their lead or head teachers to ensure

high-quality care. Participants noted that the relationships they had with their lead or head teachers determined the success of their caregiving role, with many mentioning that they could not do their job or would not enjoy doing it without the positive relationships they maintained with their lead or head teachers. This sentiment was expressed by focus group participants:

“We got [a] good communication. We always meet halfway with everything we do in the classroom. Yeah, we...all she always tells me, like before, she always wants like my input when we do things. Yeah. So, we...I would say that we have good communication overall.”

“My lead teacher is a young lady full of joy. Communication is the key. I try to be her right hand and back her up in all the areas she needs me.”

Building on the importance of a positive lead or head teacher-assistant teacher relationship, some participants shared previous negative experiences with their lead or head teachers and the difficulties of working together due to a poor relationship. Participants who mentioned these negative experiences noted that, in some cases, it led them to seek other employment arrangements within their existing child care center or in a new center. One participant noted:

“I have had a terrible experience this year with the lead teacher. She has poor classroom management and doesn’t properly plan for the children. This causes not only issues for the children but us teachers.”

As such, many participants emphasized the importance of the relationship with their lead or head teachers as having a direct correlation to their feelings of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with their working environment.

Barriers and Challenges

In conversations with the research team, focus group participants were asked to share the challenges they faced while working as assistant teachers. Many participants cited pay as a challenge to continuing in their current roles, with some participants regarding pay as the factor that may lead them to seek employment in another field. Participants explained:

“I do love my center and everything, but there are times where I’m like, I make you know, I’m making so little money and I’m watching five babies...people are quitting and it’s like, why am I having all this frustration? For how little of the money I am making and when I could be making double that at my other job?”

“I don’t want to leave on a bad note because I do love this center. But it’s just...I need money, just like you know.”

Another frequently cited challenge by focus group participants was navigating relationships and communication with the parents of the children in their care. Although a small number of participants noted that their lead or head teacher was primarily responsible for parent communication, many participants shared that the provider-parent relationship really impacted the day-to-day operations of their classroom and their centers at large. A participant commented:

“Like I think as the years go by, you know, like we’re having a little bit of difficulty with the partnership with parents. You know, we would love for us to see them more involved, you know.”

The conversation about parent-provider relationships was also frequently mentioned when participants shared their experiences working with children with special needs, individualized education programs, and/or additional behavioral support needs. Participants shared that their ability to communicate with parents about particular behaviors or needs that their child may have was generally difficult, noting that some parents were unwilling to explore the concerns further or did not have the resources to do so. As one participant described:

“Currently have a child who is violent. The director doesn’t want to rock the boat because she had issues with his parents and older brother’s behaviors. The parents are in denial.”

These difficulties with communication and the relationship with parents were noted as areas of need for additional training, support, or resources.

Lastly, the research team asked focus group participants about their experience with turnover in their licensed child care center. While most shared that their child care center had reliable staffing year to year, those who had experienced turnover attributed those dynamics to individual provider characteristics and work misalignments. For example, focus group participants attributed turnover in their centers to young, junior staff members who were either planning to be temporarily employed or were not prepared for the demands of the role. Participants noted the difficulties of being short-staffed when there was turnover within their centers. Participants also spoke about the impacts of turnover on the children in care, citing the difficulties of adjusting to new teachers and assistant teachers. Participants shared:

“From where I worked, I’ve noticed that there’s a lot of like...working students. And so, the fast turnover happens whenever they graduate from the universities, they...they just leave. Like it’s more like they’re there for what they earn and not really into it.”

“I’m sorry, I would also like to say, like in hiring very young people without the training as well, so that’s the challenge right there because they come in without the training to work with children.”

These identified barriers and challenges offer insights into the complexities of the dynamics for assistant teachers navigating caregiving responsibilities while earning low salaries, interacting with parents, and ensuring classroom coverage when colleagues depart their centers.

Recommendations

Similar to those cited by their FCC counterparts, the most frequent recommendations to improve working conditions for assistant teachers included increasing their pay and the availability of benefits, expanding opportunities for training, offering additional support for navigating interactions with parents, and growing staffing to ensure classroom coverage. The conversations centered on pay and benefits offered recommendations that assistant teachers be compensated more competitively, specifically calling for salaries comparable to their head or lead teacher counterparts. To this end, participants said:

“Hiring more staff. Increasing pay and offering better benefits.”

“More pay and training so we can do our jobs to the best of our ability. Also, to feel more equal to head teachers; we do a lot of the same hard work and don’t get the acknowledgment we deserve.”

This recommendation for more pay and benefits is both in line with and in contradiction to the focus group participants’ descriptions of their relationships with their head or lead teachers. While participants spoke of being equal partners in the classroom with their head or lead teachers, they also enjoyed having a structure put in place for them by their head or lead teachers, who assumed more responsibility for planning activities and interfacing with parents. This juxtaposition is further exacerbated by compensation dynamics, which are complex in nature and are likely intertwined with other factors. In some participants’ responses, the research team heard that the recommendations for reform were frequently rooted in a desire for more respect for the profession overall. To this end, participants shared:

“Well, I wish we were able to like maybe have more training and more knowledge where we could talk to the parents. Then I’m just a daycare teacher. I’m an assistant rather, you know, like, maybe if they knew we had more knowledge that they would be more respectful of what we’re saying, that that’s the only thing I really wish that we had the training as well.”

“Like a simple acknowledgment, not just during teacher appreciation week. You know, it’s a very challenging job and then it will like, motivate and encourage a lot of teachers and staff.”

These sentiments further underscore the recommendations from assistant teachers for expanded opportunities to participate in training and additional support in navigating interactions with parents. While focus group participants broadly suggested a need to participate in additional training opportunities, in conversations, they often did not specify the exact training topics that interested

them. These insights can be garnered from the Heldrich Center’s forthcoming survey report. Broadly, these recommendations center on assistant teachers feeling that they may need more tools to navigate the day-to-day experiences of their jobs.

Finally, participants offered a recommendation specific to working in licensed child care centers, which called for more statewide structure regarding forced breaks and classroom coverage opportunities. Many participants noted a desire to expand the floater pool for temporary coverage needs, which they regarded as affording them more flexibility and balance with their work responsibilities. Participants shared:

“I would say more forced breaks, because we’re there for, you know, six plus hours. It’s reasonable that you might want to check your phone once or twice and, you know, have a moment for the bathroom or whatever, be able to eat your lunch in peace, and we don’t really get that.”

“So, like, our kids only nap for like 20 minutes. So, we’re trying to scarf down our lunches as they, you know, are constantly like talking and fidgeting and moving around. And, so, it’s really not a break.”

“More teachers. And not to be like understaffed. Because it’s like in my school sometimes when, like, three teachers call out, they don’t have enough floaters to cover.”

These multifaceted recommendations from assistant teachers underscore the need for enhanced support related both to classroom dynamics and to broader structural aspects of employment in the child care sector.

DISCUSSION

The themes highlighted in the post-survey focus groups align with the findings from the Heldrich Center’s surveys of the child care workforce but offer more details about the dynamics, perceptions, and considerations that drive these critical segments of child care providers in New Jersey. This research focuses on FCC providers and assistant teachers in licensed child care centers, which are roles in the child care workforce that are often understudied. This research builds upon the Heldrich Center’s other data collection efforts centered on the child care workforce in the state. From these focus groups and previous research efforts, the research team discusses potential implications for the state when considering child care worker recruitment and retention.

While there are key similarities in the conversations with FCC providers and assistant teachers in licensed child care centers, notable divergences also exist in their workplace dynamics, which likely contribute to different preferences, dislikes, and recommendations for improvements. FCC providers and assistant teachers are unified in entering employment in the child care field after looking for care for their own children and having been motivated by their love of working with children and

watching them grow. There is, however, a significant divergence in the aspects of their work that most directly contribute to their job satisfaction. FCC providers prioritize flexibility and autonomy, setting their own hours, building their curricula, and establishing a routine that works well for them and the children in their care. Conversely, assistant teachers emphasized the importance of structure and standards in their work, providing them with regimented guidance and support in their work. This key difference in work structure speaks volumes to the individual provider priorities and personality types that might be most successful within each distinct work arrangement.

In examining pathways into the child care field, another key difference that emerged within the FCC provider focus groups was the divergence in pathways to child care employment for those who participated in the English and Spanish language focus groups. Notably, the individuals who participated in the Spanish language discussions shared their pathway into FCC as often having included careers in their home countries that were not related to child care, while English language participants were more likely to have direct and intentional pathways into working in child care. While these dynamics are reflective of immigrants' experiences obtaining employment and are not unique to employment in FCC or the child care field at large, there are considerations the state and other entities could make when offering resources and supports to this segment of the child care workforce.

Both FCC providers and assistant teachers voiced that they experience challenges in working with parents and that this was an area of need for further support and training. FCC providers struggled with setting boundaries with parents, while assistant teachers felt challenged in communicating with parents about their children. A similar undercurrent in this challenging dynamic with parents was a desire for more respect for their professions. FCC providers and assistant teachers emphasized feeling disrespected by parents, voicing that they felt their communication was dismissed or not taken seriously. With this comparison, the research team identified a continuum of respect as it was discussed by FCC providers and assistant teachers. FCC providers want to be regarded with the same level of respect that they feel their center-based counterparts receive, while assistant teachers, working in child care centers, want to be regarded as equal to and respected like their head or lead teachers. This hierarchy of perceived respect is of interesting note, as neither of the job roles included in this research study — FCC providers and assistant teachers — were satisfied with how they feel parents and the public regard their profession. Respect for the child care profession is an ongoing issue that requires attention from relevant sector stakeholders and the state, particularly within the context of ongoing efforts to recruit more workers, in a variety of settings, into the child care field.

A cross-cutting theme emerging from the focus groups is the desire for greater pay and benefits for FCC providers and assistant teachers. While both groups discussed compensation dynamics at length, FCC providers were more vocal about struggling to make ends meet and expressed a particular concern about their eligibility or ineligibility for other public assistance and social insurance programs. Compensation and benefits, specifically health insurance, were significant pain points for FCC providers and assistant teachers and were frequently cited as reasons why they would seek employment in another field. In considering worker recruitment and retention in the child care workforce, the state could explore instituting mechanisms and programming to increase competitive compensation and expand access to benefits for the child care workforce in New Jersey.

CONCLUSION

The focus groups with FCC providers and assistant teachers ultimately served to amplify child care workers' voices, providing deeper insights and adding critical context to the prevailing themes from the Heldrich Center's surveys of New Jersey's child care workforce. The discussions that emerged from these focus groups reveal the complexities of workers' motivations, job satisfaction, challenges, and recommendations for improving the child care field as a whole. In some instances, the research team noted differences within participants' responses and across job roles, further highlighting the uniqueness and nuance of workers' perspectives. Conversely, there were numerous topics, such as compensation, healthcare benefits, and respect for the profession, that highlighted many of the shared experiences that participants attributed to working within the child care ecosystem.

The collective learnings from the focus groups add to the growing body of knowledge on FCC providers and assistant teachers, whose roles in the overall child care ecosystem are crucial. The nuanced perspectives and insights shared by these workers could help shape state-led efforts to increase the supply of workers and improve working conditions in the child care ecosystem. As stakeholders consider how to design and implement programs and policies for the child care workforce in New Jersey, it will be essential to prioritize strategies that address the challenges faced by this workforce, especially those centered on recruitment, retention, and working conditions.

The Heldrich Center's analysis suggests a need for targeted, strategic interventions across related dynamics impacting the child care workforce. First, child care worker recruitment strategies could be strengthened by considering personality traits and dispositions that align with the specific demands of the varied child care settings, such as independent and flexible versus structured work environments, thereby increasing the likelihood of successful employment and worker retention. These key dynamics about home-based and center-based child care settings could be elevated by relevant stakeholders to help facilitate job matches for those interested in entering the child care field. Second, the focus groups with FCC providers and assistant teachers in licensed child care centers similarly underscored a need to strengthen respect for early childhood educators, particularly in their interactions with parents. The state could consider ways to address this issue, one of which

could be to advance a public education and awareness campaign aimed at elevating the perception of the profession, alongside offering, or highlighting existing, training and professional development resources that equip providers with the tools and knowledge to manage parent dynamics more effectively. Lastly, increasing respect for the profession could be cultivated by mechanisms to more competitively compensate and provide benefits for child care workers, including both FCC providers and licensed child care center staff, acknowledging the critical nature of financial stability and workplace supports for worker recruitment, retention, and working conditions. In sum, New Jersey and relevant child care sector stakeholders, including employers, could consider how to collaboratively devise a path forward to provide greater support and resources to these key segments of the child care workforce so that they may continue to serve the state’s children and families.

N E X T S T E P S

The research team will continue to assess findings from the child care workforce focus groups and surveys, culminating in a final report to the New Jersey Department of Children and Families as well as related briefs and other products. The research team is also continuing its analysis of administrative data from the New Jersey Statewide Data System, focused on key workforce dynamics, including turnover and retention.

Appendix A: Family Child Care Focus Group Protocol

Rutgers Child Care Research Project
Focus Group Protocol - Family Child Care (FCC) Providers
Round 2 (Post-Survey Focus Groups)

Icebreaker question: Could you please tell me a little bit about yourself and your FCC business?

Motivations to Enter/Stay and a Typical Day

Can you talk about what drew you into FCC?

- Probe: When you decided to become an FCC provider, what factors contributed to that decision?
- Probe: Were you in search of care for your own children?

What do you like about being your own boss/working for yourself? What are some of the challenges?

- Probe: Business administration

Some people might say, “Why work with other people’s children in your home? What’s so great about it?” What do you say to these perceptions? Why do you do FCC versus other child care work/arrangements?

Can you take me through a typical day or week and the decisions you have to make about your FCC business?

- Probe: Do you have the same kids all day? Same kids all week?
- Probe: How did you decide how many kids to have in your care?

Barriers/Challenges

A lot of FCC providers have told us that they cannot be an FCC provider without the support of others in their household for health and other benefits. What is your reaction? How do you manage to provide child care and make ends meet and have the necessary health coverage?

- Probe: Can you tell us more about how access to benefits and insurance impacts your satisfaction with your job?

According to our survey results, a major challenge FCC providers face is the ability to take time off. Can you tell us about the experience of taking time off from your perspective?

Can you tell me about a really difficult day in your life as a FCC provider? What kind of supports would have helped you?

- Probe: Would you characterize the biggest challenges as administrative, policy, or face-to-face with kids/parents?
- Probe: What kinds of training or education do you think would help you?

What kinds of supports would you need to enable you to pursue more education?

We heard that many FCC providers feel supported by their local CCR&R (Child Care Resource and Referral agency). Can you tell me a little bit about your experience with your CCR&R and why you may or may not feel supported by your CCR&R?

Working Environment

Are you aware of any incentives for expanding and/or offering non-traditional care hours (offering care for children outside of traditional business hours)? If yes, have you accessed any of these incentives?

How do you set your rates for your FCC business? Do you set your rate based on the subsidy scale or is it set based on the going rate in your community?

Recommendations for Improvements

How do you feel the child care profession is viewed by the public?

- Probe: Why do you think the profession is viewed in that way?

If you could have your wish list, and you got the chance to tell policymakers what FCC providers need to do their job well, what would you say?

Appendix B: Assistant Teacher Focus Group Protocol

Rutgers Child Care Research Project
Focus Group Protocol - Licensed Center Staff (Assistant Teachers)
Round 2 (Post-Survey Focus Groups)

Icebreaker question: Could you please tell me a little bit about yourself and your experience working in child care?

Motivations and Satisfaction

Can you talk about what drew you to child care?

- Probe: How did you find your job (friends/family, community, Internet search, etc.)?
- Probe: What factors contributed to your decision to become an assistant teacher?
- Probe: Were you in search of care for your own children?

In our survey, a lot of people said that working in child care is their calling. Does this resonate with you?

If you were to tell someone why you work in child care, what would you say?

What do you like about working in a licensed child care center?

Working Environment

Can you take me through a typical day in your center/classroom?

- What would be a typical day for the lead teacher?

Please tell us a little bit about how you and your lead/head teacher work together.

Do you feel you have the support of your center's leadership in doing your daily work?

What, if anything, would you like to change about where you work?

Would you say there is a lot of turnover where you work? Why do you think that is?

Do you feel like you are set up for success to do your job well?

- Probe: Do you have the necessary supports in your classroom (staff, resources, time, support of leadership, etc.)?

Career Pathways

What kinds of additional training and/or education do you think would help you do your job better?

- Probe: How does your center help you access training?
- Probe: Are trainings to be completed during the work day or after hours?

Do you have any plans to pursue more education?

- If yes, what kinds of supports would you need to enable you to pursue more education?

What factors might contribute to you leaving your current position?

- Probe: If you did leave, where would you go (public school, another center, leave the child care field altogether)?

Barriers/Challenges

Can you tell me about a really difficult day in your life as an assistant teacher? What kind of supports would have helped you?

What are some of the challenges about working in a licensed center?

- Probe: Challenges from the survey — co-worker relations (head/lead teacher), leadership/admin relationship, lack of planning/prep time, availability of advancement and training opportunities

Working with Special-Needs Children

One of the things we have learned from talking with child care providers and in our survey is that meeting the needs of children with special needs can be challenging. What has been your experience with children who might need more support?

Recommendations for Improvements

If you could have your wish list, and you got the chance to tell policymakers what assistant teachers need to do their job well, what would you say?

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The [Heldrich Center for Workforce Development](#) is devoted to transforming the workforce development system at the local, state, and federal levels. The center provides an independent source of analysis for reform and innovation in policymaking and employs cutting-edge research and evaluation methods to identify best practices in workforce development, education, and employment policy. It is also engaged in significant partnerships with the private sector, workforce organizations, and educational institutions to design effective education and training programs. It is deeply committed to assisting job seekers and workers attain the information, education, and skills training they need to move up the economic ladder.