

Child Care Misalignment Among Families With Child Care Scholarships in Maryland

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This brief presents findings from a survey of families who applied for child care subsidies through Maryland's Child Care Scholarship (CCS) Program in April 2025 and received a scholarship from April to June 2025. Scholarships provide financial assistance to help eligible working, training, or student families help pay for child care and early education at licensed or registered providers¹ or with approved informal providers.

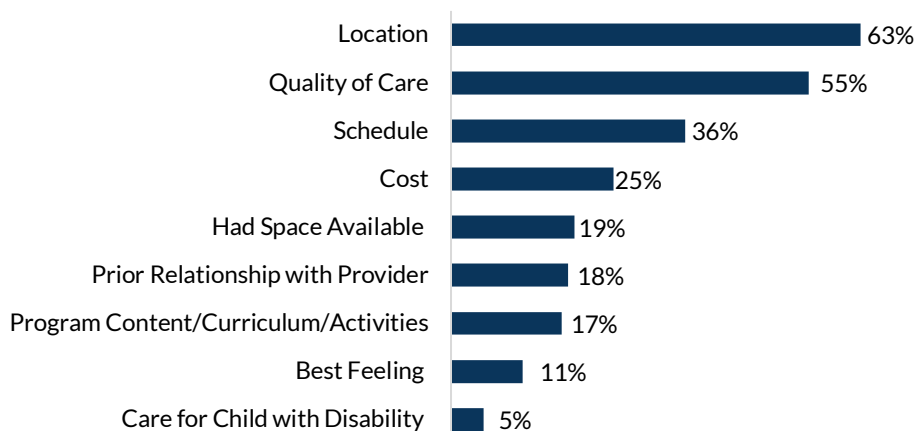
In the following sections, we describe the extent to which the child care used by parents receiving CCS aligned with the child care they needed or preferred, based on survey items from the *Misalignment Index* (see Box 1). Parents with two or more children receiving a scholarship were asked to focus on either their youngest child or their child with a disability, if they had one, when answering the questions.

More about this research partnership: Child Trends and the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) are collaborating on a four-year research partnership (2022-2026) to understand the ECE workforce in Maryland and changes to the Child Care Scholarship Program. For details on the data and analyses in this brief, please visit the [product page](#). For other publications from this project, please visit the [project website](#).

Top Reasons Parents Select Providers

We asked parents to select their top three reasons for selecting their current child care provider funded through a scholarship. Most parents prioritized location, quality of care, schedule, and cost (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Parents' top three reasons for selecting their current provider (n=83)



Note. Parents could select up to three reasons for selecting their provider.

¹ "Licensed or registered provider" refers to any individual, agency, or organization explicitly authorized and regulated by the [Maryland State Department of Education \(MSDE\) Office of Child Care \(OCC\)](#), including Family Child Care Homes, Centers, Before or After School Care Providers, or Letter of Compliance (LOC) Facilities.

Misalignment Between Providers' Offerings and Parents' Needs

Box 1. About the Access Framework and Misalignment Index

The *Access Framework*ⁱ provides state and community leaders with an actionable, family-centered definition of early care and education (ECE) accessibility. Instead of simply counting the number of child care slots available, the Access Framework considers whether available slots meet parents' needs and preferences related to things like location, hours, cost, staff qualifications, curriculum, disability accommodations, and more.



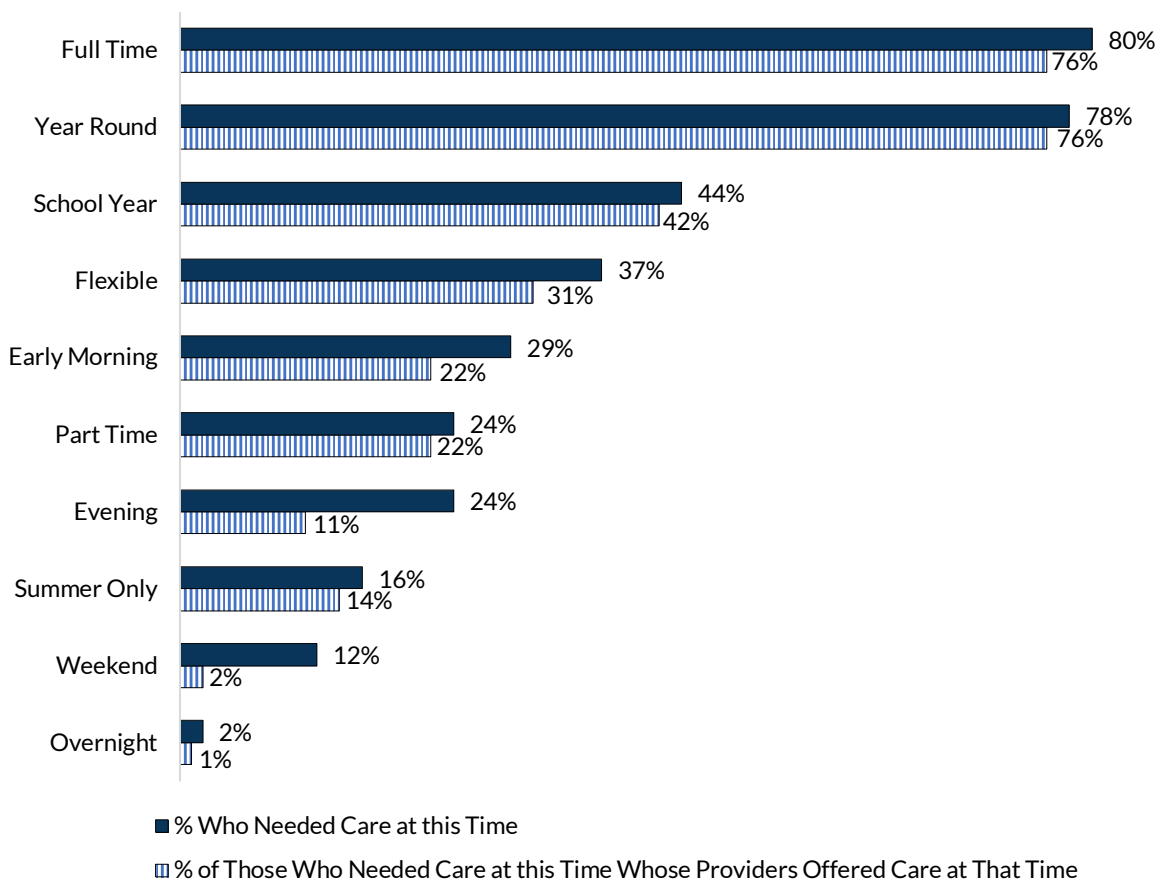
The *Misalignment Index*ⁱⁱ is a survey tool based on the Access Framework, which asks parents to rate: (1) the importance of specific features of child care, and (2) whether the features they rate as important are present in their current care arrangement. This method allows us to determine which specific aspects of child care are misaligned with parents' needs and preferences. More information about the Misalignment Index is available on the [ECE Access Center webpage](#).

Most parents used child care that met their scheduling needs.

Parents were asked whether they needed child care with any of 10 schedule types, such as full-time care, evening care, or care with flexible hours from week to week. They were then asked whether their provider offered care with the schedule type(s) they needed. Key findings include:

- Most parents (77%) had alignment between their scheduling needs and the hours their providers offered. About a quarter (23%) indicated that their provider's hours conflicted with their needs.
- Most parents needed full-time and year-round care (78-80%).
- The most common schedule/hours of care needed by parents were flexible hours (37%) and early morning hours (29%).
- Parents who needed evening or weekend care experienced the largest gaps in access.

Figure 2. Parents' schedule needs and their current provider's offerings (n=84*)



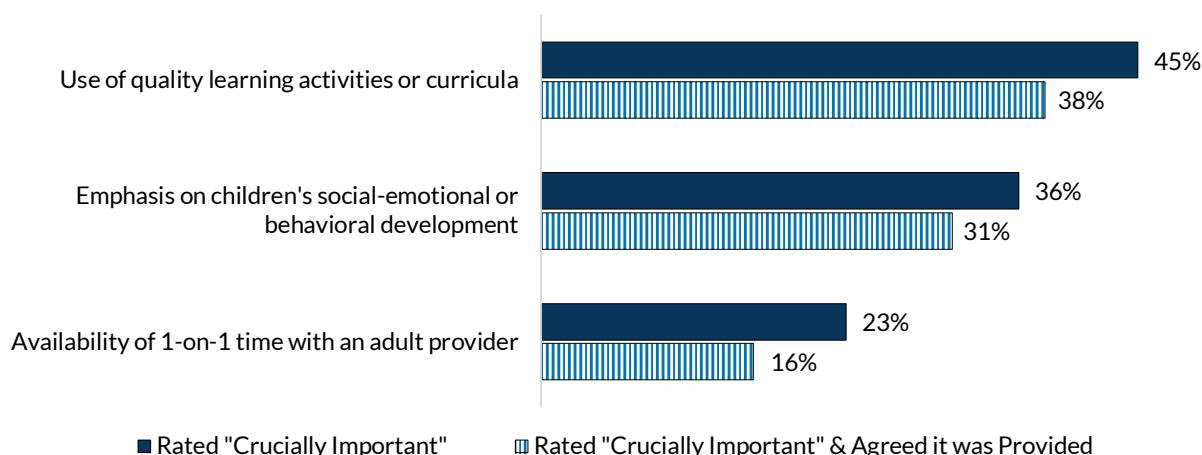
Note. *Valid sample sizes varied from 81-84 for each scheduling question.

Most child care providers had the quality features parents wanted.

Parents were asked, "When thinking about the last time you searched for child care for [child's name], how important were the following factors relating to the ability of the provider to support your child's learning and development?" The three quality features are shown in Figure 3. Possible response options were: *Crucially important – I would not consider a provider who did not offer this*; *Very important*; *Important*; *Slightly important*; and *Not at all important*. We then asked whether the provider offered each feature.

Overall, most parents (66%) had alignment between their preferences and their provider's quality features. Fifteen percent rated at least one of the three quality features as "crucially important" and experienced misalignment; an additional 19 percent rated at least one of the quality features as very important, important, or slightly important and experienced misalignment.

Figure 3. Parents' perceptions of the importance of child care quality features, compared with their current provider's offerings (n=77)



Most parents used one of their preferred child care types.

Parents were asked to select the type of provider used for the child's primary care arrangement. Parents were then presented with a list of 10 care settings and asked, "If cost didn't matter, how would you rank your top three preferences for the following child care settings for your child?"² We considered their first two choices to be their preferred settings. Figure 4 shows parents' preferences by the child's current type of care.

Overall, most parents (76%) used a provider type that was one of their top two choices:

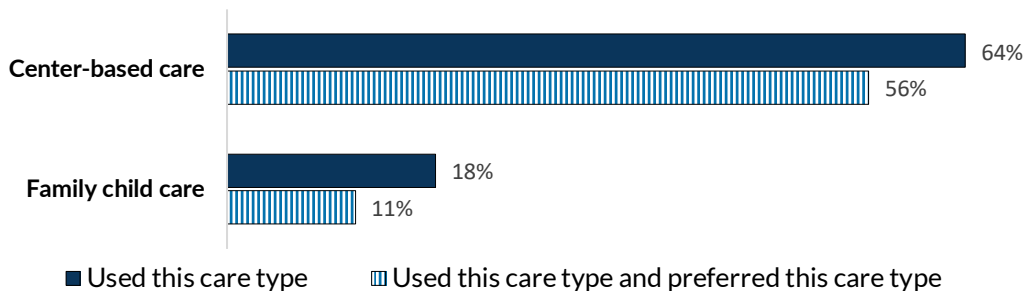
- Of those using center-based care, 87 percent named center care, faith-based care, and/or preschool or nursery school in their top two choices. For the purpose of analysis, we assumed these were all forms of center-based care.
- Of those using a family child care provider (FCC), 62 percent said an FCC was either their first or second choice of care.

One quarter (24%) of parents used a provider type that was not their first or second choice.

- Of those using center-based care who preferred a different child care type, parents' top choices for care were before or after school care, FCC, family, friend, or neighbor care (FFN), and summer camp.
- Of those using an FCC who preferred a different child care type, parents' top choices were center care, faith-based care, and FFN.

² Care types offered as options included center care; faith-based programs; family child care (FCC), before or after school care; family, friend, and neighbor care (FFN); preschool or nursery school; nanny or babysitter; summer camp; single-activity care; and public pre-K or Head Start.

Figure 4. Type of care used, compared to parents' preferred type of care (n=72)



Note. Thirteen of the 72 parents reported that their child used something other than center-based care or family child care (i.e., before or after school care, care from a family member or relative, or summer camp). Due to the small sample, results are not shown in the figure.

Most parents were getting what they needed in terms of cost, location, alignment with family beliefs and customs, and language.

Relatively few parents (less than 20%) experienced misalignment on factors they rated crucially important related to cost (15%), family beliefs/ways (15%), language (6%), or location/transportation (3%). Key findings regarding the importance parents placed on each feature include:

- **Parents prioritized cost.** Two-thirds of parents (62%) reported that, during their last search for care, it was crucially important for providers to accept scholarships. About half of families receiving scholarships (49%) said it was crucially important for child care costs to be within their price range or budget. Research shows that receiving a child care subsidy may reduce parents' concerns about cost and allow them to focus on factors other than cost when choosing a provider.ⁱⁱⁱ
- **Location/transportation was also prioritized.** Over one-third of parents (35%) said that it was crucially important that their child care provider was within a reasonable driving distance from their home or workplace. Additionally, parents reported that it was crucially important to have child care accessible by public transportation (12%), within walking distance (9%), or with free bussing/transportation provided (11%).
- **Alignment with family beliefs and ways was prioritized by a small proportion of families.** One-fifth (21%) of parents said it was crucially important that their child care provider incorporate culturally relevant learning materials, activities, or curricula. Eight percent also said it was crucially important for their provider to incorporate religious content or values. *Diversity of staff* and *diversity of other children* were each rated as crucially important by 14 percent of parents, and opportunities to engage with the child care program (e.g., volunteering, community events) were rated as crucially important by 13 percent of parents.
- **Bilingual staff or staff that speak a language other than English was prioritized by a small proportion of families.** Just eight percent of parents reported that it was crucially important for program staff to speak a language other than English or be bilingual.

Key Takeaways

Results show that parents are typically aligned in their preferences and experiences when it comes to the child care features they value most: location, quality, schedule, and cost. However, some parents are making important trade-offs.

Hours and scheduling: Most parents said they needed year-round full-time care and most were using providers that offered these schedules. Flexible and morning hours were the most needed accommodations in terms of hours of operation. Again, most parents who needed flexible hours were getting that accommodation. Although relatively few parents said they needed evening and weekend hours, those who did experienced the largest gaps in access. State administrators for the CCS program could consider developing rate structures or incentives that support the provision of care during non-standard hours, particularly for evening and weekend hours.

Quality and curriculum: Over half of parents said that quality was one of their top reasons for selecting their current provider. Indeed, the majority of parents (66%) used care that aligned with their preferences and needs regarding quality features. However, some parents (15%) used care that did not have the quality features that they rated as crucially important. Given the importance that parents place on quality, quality improvement funding offered to providers who accept scholarships could complement existing quality-rating efforts. Additional surveys or interviews with parents could further explore what elements of quality they are looking for and what elements of quality their current providers are missing. Findings could inform changes to the Maryland EXCELS QRIS to better align with parents' values.

Child care provider type: Most parents (76%) indicated that their current provider was one of their preferred provider types. However, some families who received a scholarship were not using their preferred care type. Misalignment could have been due to a lack of available child care slots at parents' preferred setting or inability to get care during the needed hours. However, it is also possible that administrative factors limit the range of providers available to families receiving scholarships. For example, some families may want to send their child to a provider who was not eligible to receive a child care scholarship payment. In addition, parents may prefer care from a family member or relative, but they may not have a family member or relative able to provide child care. Interviews or focus groups with parents could shed light on why parents were not accessing preferred settings.

Local variation: Parents' needs and preferences may vary by location. Further collection and disaggregation of misalignment data by region or family characteristics could help identify where gaps are most pronounced and where investment might have the greatest impact on child care access.

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