

**Arkansas Early Care & Education
Key Performance Indicators
Baseline Report**

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I. Executive Summary

This report establishes the first comprehensive set of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for Arkansas’s early care and education (ECE) system, focusing on access, quality, workforce, affordability, and data infrastructure. Arkansas’s ECE system plays a critical role in supporting children and families, yet persistent gaps in availability, affordability, and workforce stability continue to challenge progress.

The analysis draws from licensing data, publicly funded program enrollment, wage and employment data, and quality participation records to provide a statewide baseline. Findings show that licensed capacity remains insufficient to meet demand, with an estimated 60% of income-eligible children not enrolled in publicly funded programs such as Arkansas Better Chance (ABC), Head Start, or School Readiness Assistance (SRA). Child care costs consume 15–25% of median household income, far above federal affordability benchmarks, particularly burdening families who earn too much to qualify for subsidies but not enough to afford market rates.

Workforce challenges also remain acute: early educators earn wages well below both living-wage benchmarks and Kindergarten – 12th grade teachers, contributing to turnover and instability across the sector. On quality, participation in Better Beginnings is uneven, and while the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) is beginning to be implemented, statewide quality data are still developing. Persistent data gaps, like the absence of statewide waitlist information and incomplete coverage of private-pay enrollment, further limit a full understanding of unmet need. Based on these findings, the report presents several recommendations to strengthen Arkansas’s ECE system:

1. **Expand Publicly Funded Capacity:** Increase the number of available slots and streamline eligibility processes across programs to reduce barriers for families.
2. **Improve Affordability:** Develop targeted subsidies or tax credits for families above current subsidy thresholds and continue analysis of regional cost burdens.
3. **Strengthen the Workforce:** Raise compensation, expand professional development, and provide incentives for credential attainment to stabilize staffing.
4. **Enhance Quality Measurement:** Leverage CLASS alongside Better Beginnings to track and support continuous improvement in teaching and learning environments.
5. **Build Data Infrastructure:** Improve collection of waitlist and private-pay enrollment data and integrate reporting across funding streams.
6. **Incorporate Parent Voice:** Use state-specific parent surveys to ensure policies reflect real family needs related to affordability, flexible hours, and trusted providers.

Implementing these recommendations will allow Arkansas to track progress annually, target investments where they are most needed, and strengthen accountability. By building on this baseline, and on the progress already achieved by the state, Arkansas can continue building an early care and education system that is accessible, affordable, high quality, and responsive to the needs of children, families, and the workforce.

II. Introduction

The Arkansas early care and education (ECE) system plays a vital role in supporting the development of young children and facilitating parental participation in the workforce. Current data indicate that approximately 137,400 children under the age of six in Arkansas live in households where all available parents are in the labor force.¹ These children are among the most likely to require reliable access to early care and education. Meeting the needs of these families requires stable, high-quality services across a spectrum of settings, including community-based centers, family child care homes, Head Start and Early Head Start programs, and public pre-kindergarten classrooms.

This report establishes a baseline for a comprehensive set of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) designed to assess the current state of Arkansas's ECE system. Developed by the Office for Education Policy (OEP) in collaboration with state partners and stakeholders, the indicators align with available state and federal data sources. The framework is designed to support consistent, transparent monitoring and to inform ongoing improvement efforts, with subsequent updates anticipated in 2026 and 2027.

Despite the critical role of ECE, recent state estimates reveal gaps in both access and quality. Among children under age six, approximately 113,146 live in households below 200% of the federal poverty level (FPL) in 2023, a commonly used benchmark for economic disadvantage.² In FY2024, publicly funded programs served 23,059 through Arkansas Better Chance (19,186 seats and 3,873 home visiting), 19,905 through School Readiness Assistance subsidies, and 7,180 through Head Start and Early Head Start, supported by more than \$325 million in combined state and federal funding.³ ⁴ Although Early Intervention Day Treatment (EIDT) programs also provide public early care, statewide enrollment counts were not available. Some children in EIDT may also be included in early intervention and preschool special education counts which are funded through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). In 2024, IDEA funded 1,691 infants and toddlers along with 10,244 preschoolers.⁵ Alongside these public investments, families also

¹ U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce. (n.d.). Age of Own Children Under 18 Years in Families and Subfamilies by Living Arrangements by Employment Status of Parents. American Community Survey, ACS 5-Year Estimates Detailed Tables, Table B23008. Retrieved September 17, 2025, from <https://data.census.gov/table/ACSDT5Y2023.B23008?q=b23008&g=040XX00US05>.

² U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce. (n.d.). Age by Ratio of Income to Poverty Level in the Past 12 Months. American Community Survey, ACS 5-Year Estimates Detailed Tables, Table B17024. Retrieved September 17, 2025, from <https://data.census.gov/table/ACSDT5Y2023.B17024?q=B17024&g=040XX00US05>.

³ Arkansas Department of Education, Office for Early Childhood. (2025). Arkansas 2024 Annual Report. Arkansas Department of Education. https://dese.ade.arkansas.gov/Files/2024_OEC_Annual_Report_Final_OEC.pdf

⁴ Because children may be enrolled in more than one public program, counts across funding streams cannot be fully unduplicated.

⁵ Arkansas Department of Education, Office for Early Childhood. (2025). Arkansas 2024 Annual Report. Arkansas Department of Education. https://dese.ade.arkansas.gov/Files/2024_OEC_Annual_Report_Final_OEC.pdf

depend on a wide range of private providers, including licensed centers, family child care homes, and faith-based programs, for daily care and early learning.

Furthermore, while many providers participate in the state's Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS, known as Better Beginnings), notable disparities in quality and availability persist across regions, provider types, and funding streams. At the same time, workforce challenges, especially low wages and high turnover, pose a continued threat to program stability. For instance, as of May 2023, Arkansas child care workers earned a median annual wage of approximately \$27,000, and preschool teachers earned about \$30,100, both well below the statewide median of \$42,200 for all workers.^{6 7}

The primary objective of this report is to support data-informed decision-making by offering a clear and consistent set of indicators that can be tracked over time. Where current data are incomplete or unavailable, this report identifies those gaps and proposes potential sources or proxy measures for future development in collaboration with state partners. The following sections analyze access, quality, and workforce indicators, culminating in a discussion of next steps and data improvement priorities for upcoming reporting cycles in 2026 and 2027.

Taken together, these conditions point to a significant structural challenge. Even if all 1,751 licensed or registered providers operated at maximum capacity, they could not meet the potential demand represented by Arkansas's 137,400 children under age six with working parents. This shortfall means that a substantial share of child care needs is currently met through private-pay programs, informal care arrangements, or other untracked settings. Yet, statewide data on private-pay enrollment and informal care remain largely absent, leaving policymakers without a full picture of how families meet their needs. These gaps point to the importance of the KPI framework introduced in this report: to build the data infrastructure necessary for evaluating access, quality, and workforce stability in a comprehensive way over time.

III. KPI Framework

This report introduces a comprehensive Key Performance Indicator (KPI) framework designed to provide a consistent, data-driven way to monitor the Arkansas early care and education (ECE) system. The framework groups indicators into three core areas: Access, Quality, and Workforce.

⁶ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2023). Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics (OEWS): Childcare workers and preschool teachers in Arkansas. Retrieved from <https://data.bls.gov/oes/#!/geoOcc/Multiple%20occupations%20for%20one%20geographical%20area>.

⁷ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2023). Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics (OEWS): All occupations, Arkansas state total. Retrieved from <https://data.bls.gov/oes/#!/area/0500000>.

Access

These indicators measure the availability and affordability of care relative to family need.

- *KPI A1*: the number of licensed child care providers, disaggregated by provider type and urbanicity.
- *KPI A2*: enrollment in publicly funded child care programs (e.g., ABC, Head Start, School Readiness Assistance), disaggregated by provider type, age group, and geography, and compare to estimated eligible population.
- *KPI A3*: the number of children on waitlists for publicly funded child care slots, disaggregated by provider type, age group, and geography.
- *KPI A4*: the number of children enrolled in private-pay licensed child care programs, disaggregated by provider type, age group, and geography.
- *KPI A5*: child care subsidy utilization as a percentage of total licensed enrollment, disaggregated by age group and geography.
- *KPI A6*: the number of counties classified as child care deserts based on provider supply relative to population need.
- *KPI A7*: the average cost of child care as a percentage of state and county median household income, including current reported spending and estimated high-quality care costs.

Quality

These indicators assess program standards, classroom environments, and instructional practices.

- *KPI Q1*: the percentage of licensed providers participating in Better Beginnings, disaggregated by provider type, level, and geography.
- *KPI Q2*: average child-to-teacher ratios by classroom age group and compare to licensing and QRIS standards.
- *KPI Q3*: the percentage of providers implementing evidence-based curricula, disaggregated by provider type.
- *KPI Q4*: implementation of CLASS as a classroom quality assessment tool, including percentage of programs assessed and average scores, as available.

Workforce

These indicators capture the stability, qualifications, and compensation of early childhood educators.

- *KPI W1*: annual turnover and first-year retention rates among early childhood educators, disaggregated by provider type and region.
- *KPI W2*: workforce compensation (e.g., median hourly wages and annual earnings), disaggregated by role and provider type.
- *KPI W3*: workforce qualifications, including credential attainment and annual professional development hours, disaggregated by role and provider type

The remainder of this report is organized around the three core areas of the KPI framework. Section I examines ECE Access indicators, focusing on provider supply, enrollment patterns, subsidy use, child care deserts, and affordability. Section II addresses ECE Quality indicators, including program participation in Better Beginnings, child–teacher ratios, and the use of evidence-based curricula. Section III turns to ECE Workforce indicators, analyzing educator retention, compensation, and qualifications. Each section presents baseline measures using the most current data, identifies current data gaps, and discusses opportunities to strengthen the system through improved data collection and reporting.

IV. Access to Early Care and Education

Access to early care and education (ECE) in Arkansas depends on the availability of licensed providers, the reach of publicly funded programs, the role of private-pay enrollment, and the affordability of care for families. This section establishes a baseline for these indicators, drawing on administrative data, census estimates, and state reports. Table 1 provides a summary of key Access KPIs as a snapshot that frames the more detailed analyses in the subsections that follow. Together, these indicators provide a starting point for assessing how well Arkansas’s current ECE infrastructure meets family needs and where gaps remain.

Table 1.*Overview of Access KPIs, Baseline Measures, and Data Sources*

KPI	Indicator	Baseline Measure	Sources
A1	Number of licensed child care providers, by provider type and urbanicity	Total: 1,751. By type: Centers 1,081, EIDT 163, Family Child Care 201, Head Start/EHS 156, School-based 150. By urbanicity: Urban 878, Suburban 386, Rural 487.	ADE OEC (2025); Paykin et al. (2021)
A2	Enrollment in publicly funded programs vs. eligible population	ABC/ABCSS: 23,059 served, 59% of 38,988 eligible. Head Start/EHS: 7,180 served, 13% of 53,805 eligible. SRA (CCDF): 19,905 served, 31% of 65,228 eligible.	ADE OEC (2025); U.S. Census Bureau (n.d.-b); FFYF (2025); Office of Head Start (2024)
A3	Children on waitlists for publicly funded programs	Not available	Identified data gap.
A4	Children in private-pay licensed child care	Not available	Identified data gap.
A5	Child care subsidy utilization as a percentage of total licensed enrollment, by age group and geography	On average, less than 50% of licensed slots across infant/toddler, preschool, and school-age programs are filled by publicly funded children. Utilization is highest in infant/toddler settings (~49.2%). School-age utilization averages 46.8% (median 35.5%). Subsidy participation is concentrated among a subset of providers.	ADE OEC (2025)
A6	Counties classified as child care deserts	Deserts (<0.33): 2 counties, Madison 0.27, Grant 0.29. Limited access (0.33–0.66): 7 counties, Marion 0.55, Perry 0.55, Nevada 0.56, Clay 0.60, Little River 0.60, Lincoln 0.62, Saline 0.63.	ADE OEC (2025); U.S. Census Bureau (n.d.-a); Malik et al. (2018)
A7	Average cost of child care as a percentage of household income	Statewide 15–25%. Regional Examples: NWA infant care ≈ \$13,500 per year, ≈ 15% in Benton County and >20% in Washington County; Delta infant care ≈ \$4,800 per year, ≈ 12–15%.	McKelvey et al. (2024); U.S. Census Bureau (2023); U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2016)

Notes. ABC = Arkansas Better Chance; ABCSS = Arkansas Better Chance Statewide; SRA = School Readiness Assistance (Arkansas’s CCDF child care subsidy program); EIDT = Early Intervention Day Treatment; FFYF = First Five Years Fund; ACS = American Community Survey. Provider counts reflect a one-day scrape of the Arkansas Licensed Provider Database (May 2025). Eligibility denominators are based on ACS 2023 5-year estimates, which provide the most recent statewide and county-level data available. Licensed capacity refers to the maximum number of children a provider is permitted to serve and may exceed operational capacity due to staffing shortages or closures. Reported percentages of eligible children served are approximations and should be interpreted as baseline indicators.⁸

Provider Landscape and Capacity (KPI A1)

Access to licensed ECE programs is a critical foundation for supporting young children and their families. As of May 2025, Arkansas had 1,751 licensed or registered providers, according to the state’s publicly available provider database.

Licensed Providers by Type of Care

The distribution of these providers by type, shown in Figure 1, illustrates the diverse landscape of care options available. Community-based centers constitute the largest segment, accounting for 1,081 providers. In addition, there are 163 Early Intervention Day Treatment (EIDT) centers, Medicaid-funded programs serving children with developmental delays or disabilities, alongside 201 licensed or registered family child care homes, 156 federally funded Head Start or Early Head Start sites, and 150 school-based pre-kindergarten programs operated by public school districts.⁹

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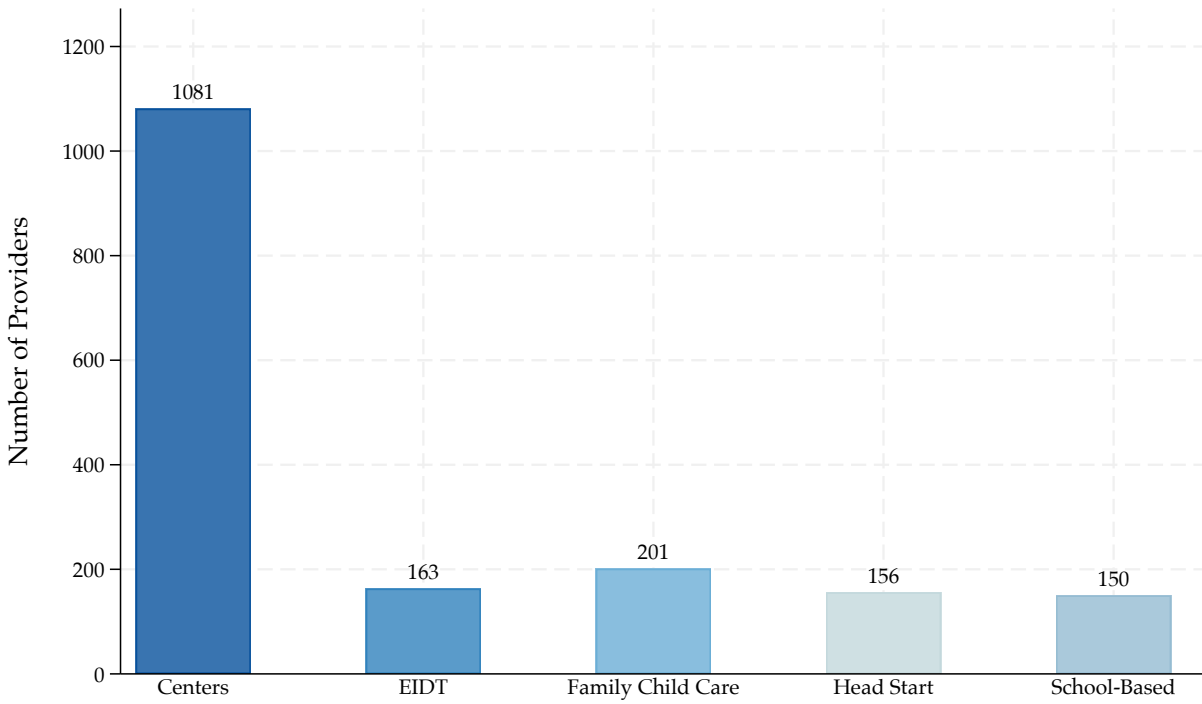
⁸ Sources referenced in Table 1 include the following: Arkansas Department of Education, Office for Early Childhood. (2025). Arkansas 2024 Annual Report. Arkansas Department of Education. https://dese.ade.arkansas.gov/Files/2024_OEC_Annual_Report_Final_OEC.pdf; Arkansas Department of Education, Office of Early Childhood. (2025). SRA Insight Portal. <https://insight-sra.ade.arkansas.gov>; First Five Years Fund. (2025). 2025 state fact sheet: Child care and early learning in Arkansas. <https://www.ffyf.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/2025-Arkansas-State-Fact-Sheet.pdf>; Malik, R., Hamm, K., Schochet, L., Novoa, C., Workman, S., & Jessen-Howard, S. (2018, December 6). America’s child care deserts in 2018. Center for American Progress. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/americas-child-care-deserts-2018/>; McKelvey, L., et al. (2024). 2023 Arkansas child care market price study. University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences. https://dese.ade.arkansas.gov/Files/Arkansas_Market_Price_Study_2023_Final_OEC.pdf; Office of Head Start. (2024). Program Information Report (PIR), 2023–24. <https://headstart.gov/program-data/article/program-information-report-pir>; Paykin, S., Menghaney, M., Lin, Q., & Kolak, M. (2021). Rural, suburban, urban classification for small area analysis. Healthy Regions & Policies Lab, Center for Spatial Data Science, University of Chicago. <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.25148.16009>; U.S. Census Bureau. (2023). American Community Survey, 5-year estimates: Table B19013, median household income in the past 12 months. [https://data.census.gov/table/ACS5Y2023.B19013?q=B19013&g=040XX00US05\\$05000000](https://data.census.gov/table/ACS5Y2023.B19013?q=B19013&g=040XX00US05$05000000); U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce. (n.d.-a). Age of own children under 18 years in families and subfamilies by living arrangements by employment status of parents. American Community Survey, ACS 5-Year Estimates Detailed Tables, Table B23008. <https://data.census.gov/table/ACS5Y2023.B23008?q=B23008&g=040XX00US05>; U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce. (n.d.-b). Age by ratio of income to poverty level in the past 12 months. American Community Survey, ACS 5-Year Estimates Detailed Tables, Table B17024. <https://data.census.gov/table/ACS5Y2023.B17024?q=B17024&g=040XX00US05>; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2016). Child care and development fund (CCDF) program, final rule. Federal Register, 81(190), 67438–67595. <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2016/09/30/2016-22986/child-care-and-development-fund-ccdf-program>

⁹ Provider categories in this report are defined as mutually exclusive. Each provider is assigned to a single category, even if it could reasonably fit more than one. For consistency, Head Start and Early Head Start were given priority; for example, a Head Start classroom located in a public school is classified as “Head Start” rather than “school-based.” This approach simplifies the complex ECE landscape but ensures that each provider is counted only once.

¹⁰ Provider counts reflect a one-day snapshot of [Arkansas’s publicly available licensed and registered child care provider search tool](#), accessed through a web scrape on May 5, 2025. Historical data for 2024 were not available at the time of this report. Actual provider numbers may fluctuate due to program openings, closures, or changes in licensing status.

Figure 1.

Number of Licensed Providers by Type of Care (as of May 2025): Centers, EIDT, Family Child Care, Head Start, and School-Based Programs



Notes. This figure displays the number of licensed or registered early care and education providers in Arkansas as of May 2025, by provider type. Categories are mutually exclusive and include licensed community-based centers (Centers), Early Intervention Day Treatment (EIDT) centers, licensed or registered family child care homes (Family Child Care), federally funded Head Start and Early Head Start programs (Head Start), and school-based pre-kindergarten programs operated by public school districts (School-Based). Programs were classified into a single category based on administrative records, prioritizing Head Start status when overlaps occurred. Counts are based on a web scrape of the Arkansas Licensed Provider database in May 2025.

As Figure 1 shows, community-based centers make up the largest share of licensed providers in Arkansas, while all other types of care together represent just under 40% of the total provider landscape.

To put this in perspective, if all 137,400 children under age six with all available parents in the labor force required access to licensed care, each provider would need to serve an average of 78 children. Total licensed capacity varies significantly by provider type, ranging from a median of 10 children in family homes to a median of 118 children in EIDT centers. While not all children require full-time, licensed care, this ratio illustrates the scale of capacity needed to meet potential demand. This comparison shows that while licensed capacity helps meet part of the need, the current number of providers could not accommodate the full potential demand, even if all operated at maximum licensed capacity.

Licensed Providers by Type and Urbanicity

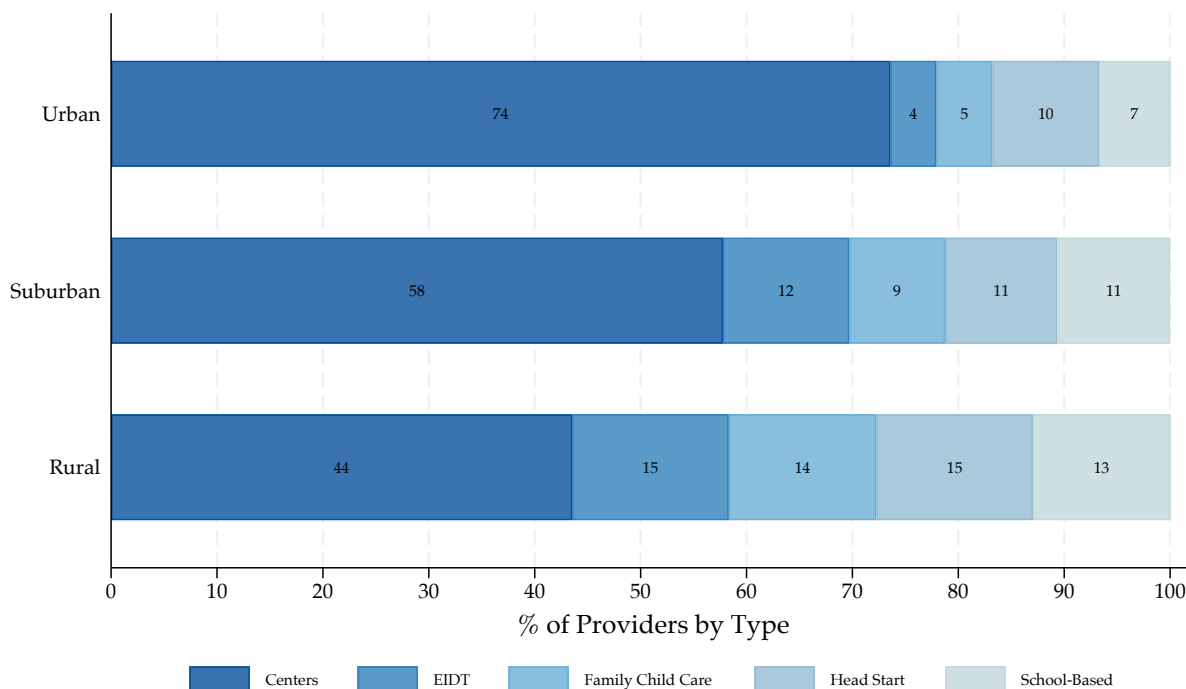
While provider type is one dimension of access, urbanicity is another. Access also varies across urban, suburban, and rural communities. For this report, each provider's address was geocoded and linked to its census tract, which was then assigned a Rural-Urban Commuting Area (RUCA) code, a system reflects both population density and commuting patterns. Following a classification developed by Paykin, Menghaney, Lin, and Kolak (2021),¹¹ providers were grouped into three categories: urban (RUCA code 1), suburban (RUCA codes 2 and 4), and rural (RUCA codes 3 and 5–10). See Appendix A for additional details about this process.

Figure 2 illustrates how the distribution of provider types varies across urban, suburban, and rural areas, highlighting both the predominance of center-based care and the greater diversity of options in rural communities.

¹¹ Paykin, S., Menghaney, M., Lin, Q., & Kolak, M. (2021). *Rural, suburban, urban classification for small area analysis*. Healthy Regions & Policies Lab, Center for Spatial Data Science, University of Chicago. <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.25148.16009>.

Figure 2.

Percent of Licensed Providers by Type and Urbanicity (Urban, Suburban, or Rural)



Notes. This figure displays the percent of licensed or registered early care and education providers in Arkansas by provider type and urbanicity classification, as of May 2025. Urbanicity is defined using Rural–Urban Commuting Area (RUCA) codes: Urban (RUCA 1), Suburban (RUCA 2 and 4), and Rural (RUCA 3 and 5–10). Each provider was assigned to a RUCA category based on its census tract. Provider types are mutually exclusive; programs were classified into a single category based on administrative records, prioritizing Head Start status when overlaps occurred. Percentages reflect the share of provider types within each urbanicity category and may not sum to 100 due to rounding. Counts are based on a web scrape of the Arkansas Licensed Provider database in May 2025.

Among the 1,751 licensed providers, about half operate in urban areas ($n = 878$). Suburban areas account for 22% of providers ($n = 386$), and rural areas account for 28% ($n = 487$).

As shown in Figure 2, center-based care represents the largest share of providers in each setting. In urban areas, center-based programs make up 74% of providers. The next most common type is Head Start (10%), followed by smaller shares of school-based programs (7%), family child care homes (5%), and EIDT providers (4%).

In suburban areas, center-based care still represents the majority (58%), while the remaining provider types each account for between 9% and 12% of providers.

In rural areas, provider types are distributed slightly more evenly. Centers represent 44% of rural providers, while EIDT centers and Head Start programs account for 15% each, family child care

14%, and school-based programs 13%. This distribution likely reflects the smaller population base in rural communities, which may limit the financial viability of larger center-based models.

Overall, Figure 2 shows that while center-based care remains the most common type of provider across all settings, rural communities rely more heavily on a diverse mix of provider types, with non-center options collectively making up more than half of all rural providers.

Licensed Providers by Public Funding Source

Many ECE programs in Arkansas rely on four major funding sources: Arkansas Better Chance (ABC), the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), Head Start and Early Head Start (Head Start), and School Readiness Assistance (SRA). These programs serve distinct purposes: ABC provides state-funded pre-kindergarten, while CACFP reimburses providers for meals and snacks served to children during care. Additionally, Head Start delivers comprehensive early childhood education, health, and family support through federal grants, and SRA supports families through child care subsidies funded by the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF).¹² In addition, many providers participate in more than one funding stream, reflecting the blending and braiding of funds that is often necessary to sustain operations.

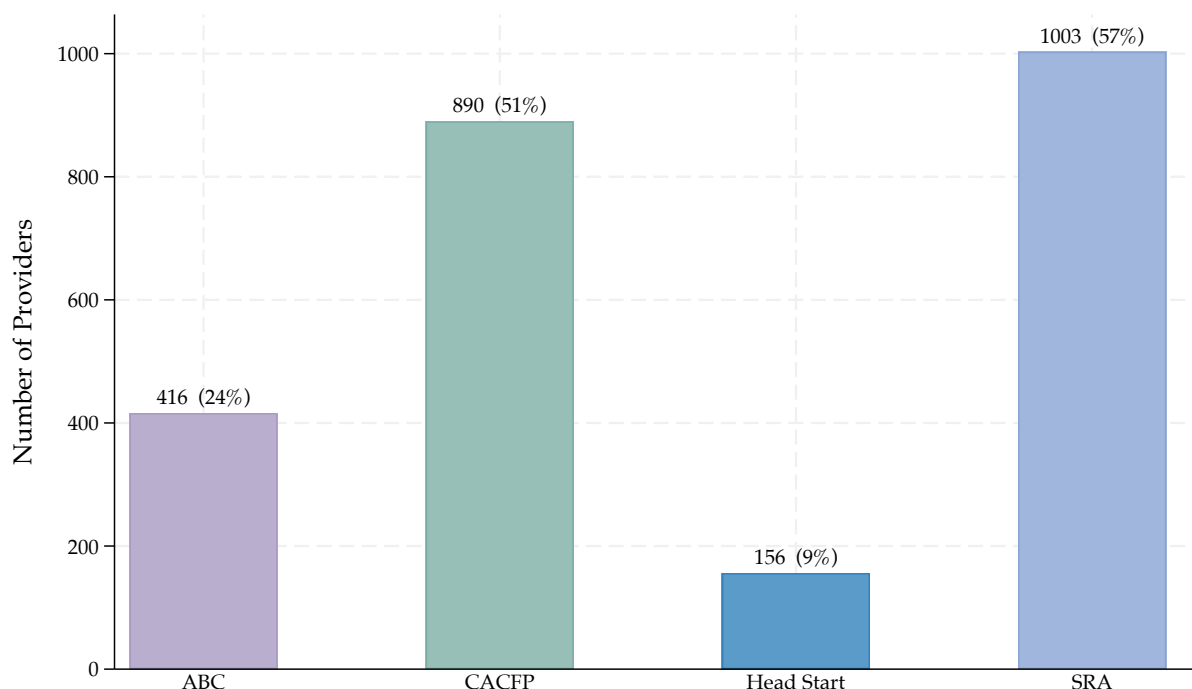
Importantly, each program serves only eligible families, and eligibility criteria vary by funding stream. Not all providers participate in these programs, meaning access to publicly supported care depends not only on family eligibility but also on provider availability and willingness to meet program requirements.

Figure 3 displays both the number and share of licensed providers participating in each of the four major public funding streams. A limitation of these data is that they exclude Early Intervention Day Treatment (EIDT) providers, which also receive public funding to serve young children. As a result, the figures presented here do not reflect the entire set of publicly funded providers in Arkansas.

¹² Denker, H. (2025). *Arkansas ECCE Funding Report*. Office for Education Policy, University of Arkansas.

Figure 3.

Licensed Providers Participating in Four Major ECE Funding Sources



Notes. This figure displays the number and percent of licensed or registered early care and education providers in Arkansas participating in four major public funding streams as of May 2025: Arkansas Better Chance (ABC), the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), Head Start and Early Head Start (Head Start), and School Readiness Assistance (SRA). Early Intervention Day Treatment programs are publicly funded but excluded due to data availability, so the totals presented here do not represent the universe of publicly funded providers. Percentages reflect the share of all licensed providers ($n = 1,751$) participating in each of the four programs where data are available. Because many providers participate in multiple programs, percentages sum to more than 100% and counts do not total $n = 1,751$. Counts are based on a web scrape of the Arkansas Licensed Provider database in May 2025.

As shown in Figure 3, SRA reaches the largest number of providers, with 1,003 providers, or about 57% of all licensed providers, receiving subsidies through the state’s child care assistance program. CACFP supports 890 providers (51%), while ABC, the state’s public pre-kindergarten program, includes 416 providers (24%). Head Start has the smallest footprint, reaching 156 providers (9%).

Taken together, the breakdowns by provider type, urbanicity, and funding provide a comprehensive response to KPI A1. Community-based centers make up the largest share of providers statewide, yet rural areas depend on a more diverse mix that includes family child care homes, Head Start, and school-based programs. At the same time, more than half of providers participate in SRA or CACFP, demonstrating the central role of public funding in sustaining operations and enabling access for eligible families. Still, not all providers are connected to these funding streams, which may limit affordability and consistency of access. These patterns show that while Arkansas has a

substantial licensed provider base, challenges remain in ensuring families across the state can reliably find and afford the care they need.

Publicly Funded Enrollment and Eligibility Gaps (KPI A2)

While KPI A1 focused on the overall supply of licensed providers, KPI A2 examines the demand side of Arkansas's ECE system by comparing enrollment in publicly funded programs with the number of children estimated to be income eligible. This indicator provides a system-level view of participation relative to potential need. Results presented here reflect state-level estimates for 2023–24 and developing disaggregated participation rates by region and county is a goal for future reporting cycles.

According to the American Community Survey (ACS), an estimated 113,146 children under age six in Arkansas lived in households below 200% of the Federal Poverty Line (FPL) in 2023.¹³ This figure is a system-level reference point, not the precise denominator for each program, since each program has its own age and income eligibility rules.

Arkansas Better Chance (ABC) primarily serves three- and four-year-olds in families at or below 200% of the FPL.¹⁴ In FY2024, ABC supported 19,186 preschool seats and an additional 3,873 home-visiting participants, for a total of 23,059 children served.¹⁵ When compared against the 38,988 preschool-aged children estimated to be below the 200% FPL threshold in 2023, ABC reached 59% of eligible children.¹⁶ Relative to the total statewide population of children, ABC enrollment represented 19% of all three-year-olds and 32% of all four-year-olds in 2023–24.¹⁷

Head Start and Early Head Start (HS/EHS) serve children from birth to age five in families at or below 100% of the FPL, as well as children categorically eligible through foster care, homelessness, or receipt of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Supplemental Security Income (SSI), or Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits.¹⁸ In 2023,

¹³ U.S. Census Bureau. (2023). American Community Survey, 5-year estimates. Table B17024: Poverty status by age. Retrieved from

[https://data.census.gov/table/ACSDT5Y2023.B17024?q=B17024&g=040XX00US05\\$0500000&moe=false](https://data.census.gov/table/ACSDT5Y2023.B17024?q=B17024&g=040XX00US05$0500000&moe=false).

¹⁴ Friedman-Kraus, A., Barnett, W. S., Hodges, K. S., Garver, K. A., Duer, J., Weisenfeld, G., & Siegel, J. (2025). The state of preschool 2024: State preschool yearbook. National Institute for Early Education Research. <https://nieer.org/sites/default/files/2025-04/2024NIEERStateofPreschool-1.pdf>.

¹⁵ Arkansas Department of Education, Office for Early Childhood. (2025). Arkansas 2024 Annual Report. Arkansas Department of Education. https://dese.ade.arkansas.gov/Files/2024_OEC_Annual_Report_Final_OEC.pdf

¹⁶ This was calculated by dividing the total number of children under six at or below the 2.00 ratio of income to poverty level from American Community Survey (ACS) Table B17024 by the total number of children under six from the same table. This equals 0.52, which multiplied to the state's 75,867 three- and four-year-olds, suggests that about 38,988 preschoolers are income-eligible for Arkansas Better Chance (ABC) programs. See the Arkansas 2024 Annual Report for ABC eligibility criteria.

¹⁷ National Institute for Early Education Research. (2025). The State of Preschool 2024: State Preschool Yearbook. Retrieved from <https://nieer.org/sites/default/files/2025-04/2024NIEERStateofPreschool-1.pdf>.

¹⁸ Office of Head Start. (2024). Program Information Report (PIR), 2023–24. Retrieved from <https://headstart.gov/program-data/article/program-information-report-pir>.

ACS estimates suggest that 27,762 Arkansas children ages three to five and 26,043 children under age three were income eligible, for a total of 53,805.¹⁹ In 2024, HS and EHS programs enrolled 7,180 children statewide.²⁰ This equals 13% of the income-eligible population.²¹ Relative to the total population, HS served approximately 7% of three-year-olds and 5% of four-year-olds in 2023–24.

School Readiness Assistance (SRA), Arkansas’s child care subsidy program funded through the federal Child Care Development Fund, supports children from birth through age 12 whose families earn up to 85% of the State Median Income (SMI). As of July 1, 2024, the state lowered the activity requirement to 20 hours per week and eliminated copayments for families below 75 percent of SMI.²² In 2024, SRA served 19,905 children under age six.²³ Federal estimates published by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and summarized by the First Five Years Fund indicate that 65,228 Arkansas children under six were eligible under CCDF income thresholds.²⁴ This means SRA reached 31% of income-eligible children in 2024.

In addition to these three core programs, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) provided early intervention and preschool special education services to 1,691 infants and toddlers and 10,244 preschoolers in 2024, for a total of 11,935 children.²⁵ Because no statewide estimate of the number of children with qualifying disabilities is published, coverage rates cannot be calculated. Relatedly, Early Intervention Day Treatment (EIDT) facilities funded through Medicaid blend therapies, developmental supports, and full-day care for children with documented developmental delays or disabilities.²⁶ In 2024, Arkansas had 163 licensed EIDT facilities per the Arkansas Licensed Provider database, but statewide enrollment counts were not available in the Arkansas 2024 Early Childhood Annual Report. Some children served through EIDT may also be included in IDEA counts, making it likely difficult to isolate participation levels.

¹⁹ U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce. (n.d.). Population Under 18 Years by Age. American Community Survey, ACS 5-Year Estimates Detailed Tables, Table B09001. Retrieved September 17, 2025, from <https://data.census.gov/table/ACSDT5Y2023.B09001?q=B09001&g=040XX00US05>.

²⁰ Arkansas Department of Education, Office for Early Childhood. (2025). Arkansas 2024 Annual Report. Arkansas Department of Education. https://dese.ade.arkansas.gov/Files/2024_OEC_Annual_Report_Final_OEC.pdf

²¹ U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce. (n.d.). Age by Ratio of Income to Poverty Level in the Past 12 Months. American Community Survey, ACS 5-Year Estimates Detailed Tables, Table B17024. Retrieved September 17, 2025, from <https://data.census.gov/table/ACSDT5Y2023.B17024?q=B17024&g=040XX00US05>.

²² Arkansas Department of Education, Office of Early Childhood. (2025). SRA Insight Portal. Retrieved from <https://insight-sra.ade.arkansas.gov>.

²³ Arkansas Department of Education, Office for Early Childhood. (2025). Arkansas 2024 Annual Report. Arkansas Department of Education. https://dese.ade.arkansas.gov/Files/2024_OEC_Annual_Report_Final_OEC.pdf.

²⁴ First Five Years Fund. (2025). 2025 State Fact Sheet: Child Care and Early Learning in Arkansas. <https://www.ffyf.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/2025-Arkansas-State-Fact-Sheet.pdf>.

²⁵ Arkansas Department of Education, Office for Early Childhood. (2025). Arkansas 2024 Annual Report. Arkansas Department of Education. https://dese.ade.arkansas.gov/Files/2024_OEC_Annual_Report_Final_OEC.pdf.

²⁶ Arkansas Department of Human Services. (n.d.). Developmental Daycare (EIDT) Age 0-21. Divisions and Shared Services. <https://humanservices.arkansas.gov/divisions-shared-services/developmental-disabilities-services/service-for-children-with-dd-id-needs/developmental-daycare-eidt-age-0-21/>.

Taken together, enrollment data show that ABC served 23,059 children in FY2024, HS/EHS served 7,180, and SRA served 19,905—a combined total of about 50,100 children. Compared with the 113,146 children under six living below 200% of FPL, this suggests that at most 44% of economically disadvantaged children were served. Because this figure draws on different program eligibility rules and overlapping enrollment counts, it should be interpreted as a composite upper bound rather than a precise coverage rate. Program participation is also likely to vary across regions and counties, and developing disaggregated estimates will be an important goal for future reporting. Even with these limitations, KPI A2 makes clear that a large share of Arkansas’s economically disadvantaged children are unserved, underscoring the importance of improving data and eligibility alignment in future reporting cycles.

Public Funded Waitlists and Private-Pay Enrollment (KPI A3, A4)

The next indicator, KPI A3, shifts from enrollment to waitlists, examining how many eligible families remain unserved even after meeting program requirements. Waitlist data offer an important window into unmet demand for publicly funded early childhood programs. The Office of Early Childhood (OEC) has recently made aggregated waitlist counts for SRA publicly available through the SRA Insight Portal.²⁷ These figures change daily, but at the time of this report, approximately 877 applications were on the waitlist. This number represents families who meet eligibility requirements but cannot currently be served due to funding limitations or provider capacity.

For ABC, no statewide waitlist information was publicly available at the time of writing. The absence of these data creates a gap in understanding the extent of unmet need, particularly for preschool-aged children. Collecting and publishing ABC waitlist data would strengthen future monitoring efforts and provide a more complete picture of demand. KPI A3 is designed to track unmet demand through waitlists; while SRA reporting provides a critical first step, the lack of comparable ABC data cannot yet fully capture the scope of unmet demand across programs.

Persistent waitlists indicate that even when families meet program requirements, they may be unable to access care. By publishing SRA waitlist data, OEC has taken an important step toward transparency. Expanding these reporting practices to include ABC and to allow disaggregation by provider type, age group, and geography would help policymakers and stakeholders identify where additional investments or policy changes are needed to expand access.

Together, KPI A3 and KPI A4 illustrate how Arkansas’s current data systems capture only part of the picture: unmet demand for public programs is visible through waitlists, while the role of private-pay programs remains largely unmeasured. While publicly funded enrollment can be tracked through administrative records, there are currently no comprehensive statewide data on

²⁷ Arkansas Department of Education, Office of Early Childhood. (2025). SRA Insight Portal. Retrieved from <https://insight-sra.ade.arkansas.gov>.

private-pay enrollment. Without reliable data on both public and private care, it is difficult to fully assess the scale of need, identify where additional investments would be most effective, or evaluate whether families are able to access the care they require.

The OEC is currently undertaking a statewide child count that will, for the first time, provide a clearer picture of private-pay enrollment. Watershed is providing technical assistance to OEC in this effort, but the data collection and resulting insights are part of OEC's leadership to improve Arkansas's early childhood data infrastructure. KPI A4 is intended to capture the size of the private-pay sector, but at present this remains a data blind spot. Once available, these data will allow future KPI reports to incorporate private-pay enrollment alongside publicly funded enrollment, offering a more complete picture of the state's early care and education system. Filling this gap is essential for KPI A4 to provide a true picture of how families access care across both public and private sectors, and ultimately for ensuring that policy decisions are based on a complete understanding of the system.

Public Subsidy and Capacity Utilization (KPI A5)

Public funding through Arkansas Better Chance (ABC) and School Readiness Assistance (SRA) is central to access in licensed ECE settings across the state. Understanding how much of the state's licensed child care capacity is filled by publicly funded children provides insight into how effectively these programs are meeting family needs, and where barriers to access may persist.

To gauge how well public dollars connect to available seats, we examine two related views:

1. the share of provider-reported enrollment funded by ABC or SRA, and
2. the share of total licensed capacity filled by children receiving subsidies, a system-level view of how much licensed capacity is used by publicly funded children

Together, these indicators speak to alignment between funding and capacity, and where Arkansas may be under-leveraging its existing infrastructure.

Historical, Policy, and Data Context for Interpretation

ABC's design and scope have evolved. At its inception in 1991, the program served children from birth through age five.²⁸ Over time, the Arkansas Better Chance for School Success (ABCSS) strand became the state's primary vehicle for pre-K, focusing on 3- and 4-year-olds.²⁹ These shifts

²⁸ Barnett, W. S., Hustedt, J. T., Robin, K. B., & Schulman, K. L. (2005). The state of preschool 2005: State preschool yearbook. National Institute for Early Education Research, Rutgers University. <https://nieer.org/state-preschool-yearbooks/the-state-of-preschool-2005>

²⁹ Hustedt, J. T., Jung, K., Barnett, W. S., & Williams, T. (2015). Kindergarten Readiness Impacts of the Arkansas Better Chance State Prekindergarten Initiative. *The Elementary School Journal*, 116(2), 198–216. <https://doi.org/10.1086/684105>.

matter for interpretation: small infant and toddler ABC counts in recent data may be real, while earlier-year nonzero values are more likely to reflect reporting, linkage, or legacy contracts.

This analysis uses administrative enrollment data provided by the Arkansas Office of Early Childhood (OEC) for 2024–2025, including information on ABC programs, SRA subsidies, provider-reported enrollment, and licensed capacity. We calculate subsidy shares of enrollment as the number of children receiving ABC or SRA funding divided by a provider’s total reported enrollment, and capacity utilization as the number of children receiving subsidies divided by a provider’s licensed capacity.

Several considerations affect the interpretation of these measures. Provider-reported enrollment figures are point-in-time snapshots that may exclude private-pay children, which can make the share of publicly funded enrollment appear higher than it is in practice. In addition, although ABC primarily serves three- and four-year-olds, some records show ABC enrollment in infant/toddler or school-age categories. These values may reflect historical eligibility rules, recent program expansions, or administrative coding and linkage issues.

The integration of administrative datasets also introduces challenges. Some children are dually enrolled in ABC and SRA, creating potential double counting, and enrollment files may represent slightly different reporting periods. As a result, a notable number of providers show ABC and SRA enrollment combined that exceeds their total reported enrollment. This reflects a key data limitation: because no child-level identifier is available across the two programs, we cannot determine whether these cases represent true dual enrollment, timing mismatches, or other reporting errors. Finally, capacity utilization figures are based on licensed capacity, which reflects the regulatory maximum. In practice, providers may serve fewer children due to staffing shortages, classroom closures, or other operational constraints.

It is important to note that these analyses are limited to child-level data on ABC and SRA and do not include Early Intervention Day Treatment (EIDT) or Head Start programs. Because these programs also serve young children with public funds, the figures presented here do not capture the full universe of utilization.

Subsidy Utilization as a Share of Total Provider Enrollment

With these caveats in mind, the analysis shows that ABC and SRA funding supports a meaningful, but uneven, share of reported enrollment. Across providers, SRA appears to support a majority of infant/toddler and school-age enrollment, while ABC funding is concentrated in preschool classrooms, consistent with program purpose and the ABCSS focus. Table 2 reports the average share of provider-reported enrollment accounted for by ABC and SRA, broken out by age group, and using the 2024-2025 OEC child-level data.

Table 2.*Share of ABC and SRA Enrollment out of Total Provider Reported Enrollment by Age Group*

Age Group	Mean ABC %	Median ABC %	Mean SRA %	Median SRA %
Infant/Toddler	6.2	0.0	56.1	50.0
Preschool	29.8	32.5	29.5	2.7
School-Age	38.4	0.0	75.2	50.0

Notes. Shares are calculated as provider-level ABC or SRA enrollment divided by each provider’s total reported enrollment in the relevant age group; means and medians are computed across providers. Historically, Arkansas Better Chance (ABC) served children birth–5 (Barnett et al., 2005), with the ABCSS strand focusing on preschool-aged children (Hustedt et al., 2015). Nonzero values for infants/toddlers may reflect original ABC eligibility, recent program expansions, or data-linkage anomalies. Nonzero values for school-age children may represent 5-year-olds not yet in kindergarten or data artifacts. Reported ABC and SRA shares may occasionally exceed 100% due to dual funding, overlap across sources, or timing mismatches. Data are drawn from 2024–2025 child-level enrollment records for ABC and SRA provided by the Arkansas Office of Early Childhood (OEC).

These patterns are consistent with program design. ABC is concentrated in preschool classrooms, while SRA spans a wider age range and supports a large share of school-age care, including before- and after-school. In some cases, reported ABC and SRA shares sum to more than 100%. This probably reflects dually funded children, overlap across administrative sources, or timing differences in the underlying data. The data quality limitations noted above suggest these estimates should be interpreted as indicative rather than precise measures of subsidy utilization.

It is also important to note the differences between the mean and median values in Table 2. In several cases, the mean is substantially higher than the median, suggesting that a small number of providers serve a disproportionately large share of publicly funded children, while many serve few or none. For example, the median SRA share for preschool is only 2.7%, compared to a mean of 29.5%, indicating that most providers report little or no SRA-funded preschool enrollment, but a small subset serve many such children. These distributional patterns reinforce that public funding is concentrated, with certain providers carrying much of the subsidized enrollment. Future analysis may explore whether these differences correspond to geography, provider type, or quality rating level.

Capacity Utilization by Publicly Funded Children

Even where public funding is available, not all licensed slots are filled with children receiving it. Table 3 presents how much of each provider’s licensed capacity is filled by children receiving ABC or SRA funding, based on the 2024–2025 child-level data from OEC. This measure offers a proxy for system-level utilization.

In this report, “utilization” refers to the percentage of a provider’s licensed capacity that is filled by children whose enrollment is funded through ABC or SRA. This provides insight into how much of the state’s licensed infrastructure is supported by public dollars. However, utilization does

not capture the number of operational seats actually available, since staffing shortages, classroom closures, or other constraints often reduce the number of licensed slots that can be used in practice.

Table 3.

Share of ABC and SRA Enrollment out of Total Licensed Capacity by Age Group

Age Group	Mean Utilization %	Median %	25 th -75 th Percentile Range
Infant/Toddler	49.2	44.4	27.5% - 64.8%
Preschool	46.6	39.8	26.1% - 54.7%
School-Age	46.8	35.5	20.0% - 62.5%

Notes. Utilization equals provider ABC + SRA enrollment divided by licensed capacity for the age group; statistics are computed across providers. Licensed capacity is the maximum number of children a provider may serve; in practice, operational seats are often lower due to staffing shortages or closures. Data are drawn from 2024–2025 child-level enrollment records for ABC and SRA provided by the Arkansas Office of Early Childhood (OEC).

On average, fewer than half of licensed slots across infant/toddler, preschool, and school-age programs are filled by publicly funded children. Utilization is highest among infant/toddler providers (49.2%) but remains well below full capacity. For school-age settings, licensed capacity may substantially overstate the number of full-day equivalent seats, since many providers only offer before- and after-school care. These figures reflect licensed capacity, not necessarily staffed capacity, so true operational utilization may differ.

In each age group, the mean exceeds the median, suggesting that some providers operate with relatively high utilization, while others serve fewer publicly funded children relative to capacity. For example, while the mean utilization for school-age programs is 46.8%, the median is 35.5%. The interquartile ranges show that most providers fall between 20% and 65% utilization, reflecting wide but not extreme dispersion. This pattern may indicate that some providers consistently serve more children with public funding, but the distribution is not heavily skewed.

These patterns highlight several dynamics. Some families who are eligible may not enroll due to barriers such as transportation, lack of awareness, or burdensome paperwork. Providers may also limit subsidy participation if they can reliably fill classrooms with private-pay families, particularly when reimbursement rates do not cover the true cost of care. In addition, workforce shortages are likely an additional constraint, especially in infant/toddler classrooms where staffing ratios are stricter, leading some providers to operate below their licensed capacity. Finally, subsidy rules, such as frequent redeterminations for income eligibility, may reduce continuity for families whose circumstances do not align neatly with program regulations.

Tracking this metric over time can help state agencies and partners identify where additional outreach or targeted supports can be most effective. It also offers a system-level lens on whether Arkansas’s current investments in child care capacity are being fully leveraged to support working

families. Because licensed capacity does not always reflect the number of operational seats available, KPI A5 should be interpreted as an indicator of potential rather than actual utilization. Even with this limitation, the results suggest that public funding supports a meaningful share of enrollment but does not consistently translate into high use of licensed capacity, with participation concentrated among some providers and underutilization persisting elsewhere.

Child Care Deserts and Geographic Access (KPI A6)

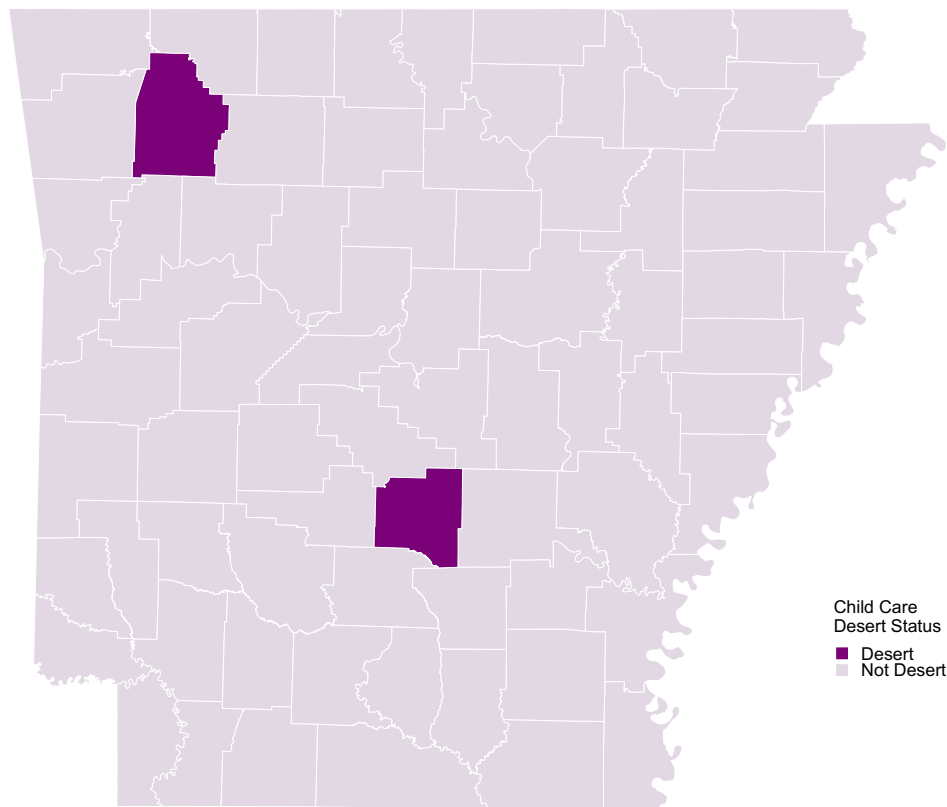
KPI A6 tracks geographic access by identifying “child care deserts,” or areas where the ratio of licensed slots to the number of children under age 6 with all parents in the labor force falls below 33%. This threshold serves as a conservative screening tool to identify areas where licensed supply is likely insufficient to meet potential demand. It is not intended as a definitive measure of unmet need. Because licensed capacity reflects potential rather than actual availability, deserts identified with this metric may understate true shortages.

Figure 4 maps the Arkansas counties identified as licensed capacity child care “deserts,” defined here as having fewer than 33 licensed slots per 100 children under age 6 with all parents in the labor force (a slot-to-child ratio below 0.33). National estimates suggest that more than half of U.S. residents live in child care deserts, based on the same threshold of more than three young children per licensed slot.³⁰

³⁰ Malik, R., Hamm, K., Schochet, L., Novoa, C., Workman, S., & Jessen-Howard, S. (2018, December 6). America’s child care deserts in 2018. Center for American Progress. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/americas-child-care-deserts-2018/>

Figure 4.

Counties Flagged as Licensed Capacity Child Care Deserts (Fewer than 33 Slots per 100 Children Under Age 6 with All Parents in the Labor Force)



Notes. Counties with ratios below 0.33 are flagged as potential child care deserts. In Arkansas, Madison (0.27) and Grant (0.29) fall below the threshold. The ratio is calculated as licensed capacity (numerator, from the Arkansas Licensed Provider database, May 2025) divided by the population of children under age 6 with all parents in the labor force (denominator, ACS 2023). Ratios are based on licensed capacity, not actual enrollment or staffed availability, and should be interpreted as a best-case scenario of supply.

In Arkansas, two counties fall below this threshold: Madison (0.27) and Grant (0.29). This designation is based on a comparison between licensed provider capacity from May 2025 (numerator) and 2023 estimates of children under age 6 with all parents in the workforce from the American Community Survey (denominator).

The numerator includes all licensed providers listed in the May 2025 scrape of the Arkansas Licensed Provider database who report a non-missing licensed capacity for at least one age group (infant, toddler, preschool, or school-age). Center-based, EIDT, family child care homes, Head Start, and school-based providers are included, regardless of funding type. Licensed capacity reflects the maximum number of children a provider may serve and not actual enrollment or operational availability. The denominator reflects children under age 6 with all parents in the labor

force, drawn from the 2023 5-Year American Community Survey.³¹ This population is commonly used to estimate the number of children likely to need full-time care, although it may slightly understate demand by excluding parents who are enrolled in school or actively seeking employment.

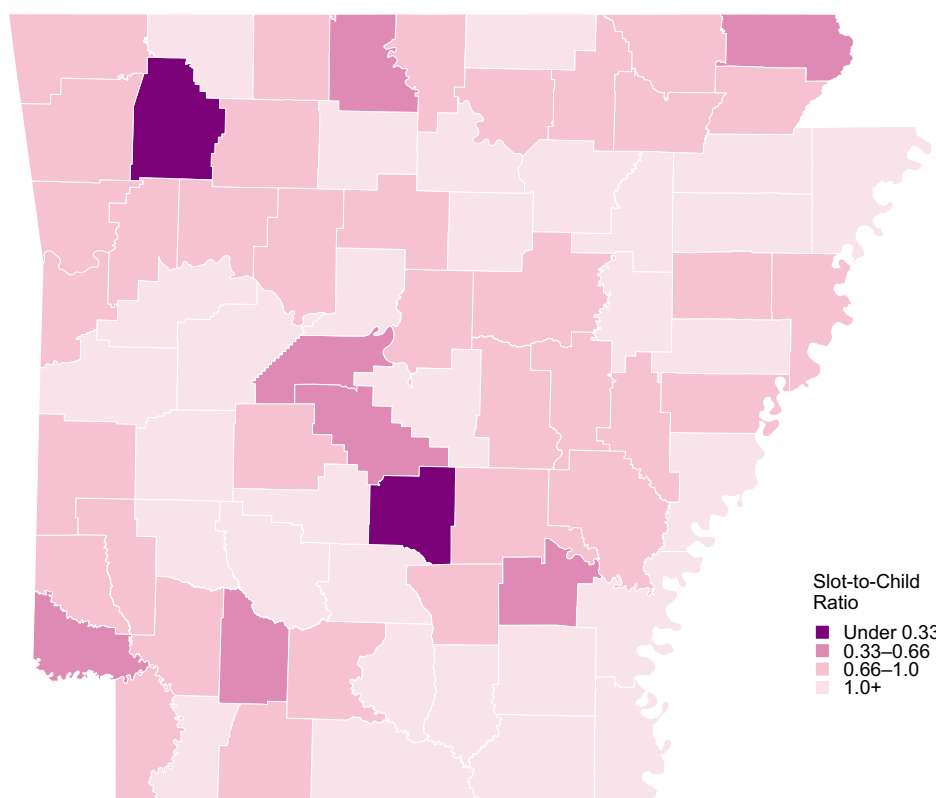
As Figure 4 shows, only a small number of counties qualify as deserts under the 1:3 benchmark, but this finding should be interpreted with caution. Although child care access challenges are often widespread, this snapshot suggests that most Arkansas counties appear to meet or exceed the threshold. However, because licensed capacity does not reflect actual enrollment or staffing levels, and because the numerator and denominator are drawn from different years, these ratios likely overstate available supply. In practice, they should be read as a best-case scenario. They also do not capture temporal access gaps, such as districts moving to four-day school weeks without corresponding adjustments to child care, or the persistent lack of summer care for school-age children in many rural areas.

To provide a more nuanced view, we also examined licensed slot-to-child ratios as a continuous measure. As before, these ratios estimate the number of licensed ECE slots available per child under age 6 with all parents in the labor force. Whereas Figure 4 presents a binary flag for child care desert status, Figure 5 offers a gradient view of availability across counties. It categorizes counties into four ranges: less than 0.33 (Desert), 0.33–0.66 (Limited Access), 0.66–1.00 (Moderate Access), and 1.00+ (High Access).

³¹ U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce. (n.d.). Age of Own Children Under 18 Years in Families and Subfamilies by Living Arrangements by Employment Status of Parents. American Community Survey, ACS 5-Year Estimates Detailed Tables, Table B23008. Retrieved September 17, 2025, from <https://data.census.gov/table/ACSDT5Y2023.B23008?g=040XX00US05>.

Figure 5.

Licensed Child Care Capacity by County in Arkansas, Categorized by Slot-to-Child Ratios



Notes. Ratios reflect licensed slots per child under age 6 with all parents in the labor force (2023 ACS). Counties are grouped into four categories: <0.33 (Desert), 0.33–0.66 (Limited Access), 0.66–1.00 (Moderate Access), and 1.00+ (High Access). See Appendix B for methodology and additional details about counties in these categories. Data sources: ACS 2023; Arkansas Licensed Provider database, May 2025.

Although only two counties fall below the 0.33 threshold, seven additional counties fall between 0.33 and 0.66, suggesting limited availability that may still pose barriers for families. These include Marion (0.55), Perry (0.55), Nevada (0.56), Clay (0.60), Little River (0.60), Lincoln (0.62), and Saline (0.63). For example, counties in this middle tier may have just enough capacity to avoid being flagged as deserts, but small shifts in provider operations, staffing availability, or family demand could tip them into shortages. Details about these counties are shown in Appendix B.

This gradient view helps identify counties that may be on the cusp of inadequate supply, where targeted investment, monitoring, or policy action could have the greatest impact. While licensed capacity has limitations, it still offers a useful benchmark for understanding county-level variation. In practice, many providers operate below their licensed maximums due to staffing constraints, funding limitations, or space configuration challenges. As a result, capacity deserts may be more widespread than these figures suggest. Future analyses will incorporate actual enrollment, staffing data, and quality indicators to provide a more complete picture of unmet need. Overall, KPI A6

shows that while most Arkansas counties meet the 1:3 capacity benchmark, pockets of limited access remain, and the reliance on licensed capacity means true shortages are likely greater than these figures suggest.

Affordability: Costs vs. Median Household Income (KPI A7)

Affordability is a core dimension of access. KPI A7 compares the cost of licensed early care and education to the incomes of Arkansas families, asking whether typical child care expenses fall within a reasonable share of household resources. This indicator provides a system-level view of how accessible child care is from a financial perspective.

In 2023, the median household income in Arkansas was approximately \$58,700.³² This figure is not specific to households with children under age six, but it provides a consistent statewide benchmark for comparing child care costs to family resources. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services recommends that families spend no more than 7% of their income on child care.³³ In practice, Arkansas families often spend far more. Full-time licensed child care typically consumes 10–20% of a household’s income, well above the federal affordability benchmark. Affordability is not only a family-level concern but also a system-level issue, shaping whether public investments and policies are sufficient to make licensed care realistically accessible.

This section presents child care costs by setting and age group, using data from the 2023 Arkansas Child Care Market Price Study³⁴ and recent income statistics from the American Community Survey. By examining these costs relative to median household income, KPI A7 highlights the extent to which families may face financial strain when securing licensed care.

Child Care Costs

According to the 2023 Arkansas market rate survey,³⁵ centers charge the highest rates for infants, with costs gradually decreasing for toddlers and preschoolers. This reflects higher staffing needs and stricter ratios for younger children.

³² U.S. Census Bureau. (2023). American Community Survey, 5-year estimates. Table B19013: Median household income in the past 12 months. Retrieved from [https://data.census.gov/table/ACSDT5Y2023.B19013?q=B19013&g=040XX00US05\\$0500000](https://data.census.gov/table/ACSDT5Y2023.B19013?q=B19013&g=040XX00US05$0500000).

³³ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2016). Child care and development fund (CCDF) program final rule. Federal Register, 81(190), 67438–67595. Retrieved from <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2016/09/30/2016-22986/child-care-and-development-fund-ccdf-program>.

³⁴ McKelvey et al. (2024). 2023 Arkansas Child Care Market Price Study. University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences. Retrieved from https://dese.ade.arkansas.gov/Files/Arkansas_Market_Price_Study_2023_Final_OEC.pdf.

³⁵ Ibid.

Table 4 summarizes the median full-time annual rates³⁶ by age group, along with the corresponding share of the state’s median household income.³⁷ For example, full-time infant care in a licensed center costs families approximately \$9,600 annually, or 16% of the state median income. By comparison, preschool-age care averages \$7,800 annually (13%). For context, in-state tuition for 30 hours of undergraduate coursework at the University of Arkansas is about \$8,100, emphasizing how early care can equal or exceed the cost of higher education.

Table 4.

Estimated Annual Child Care Cost in Arkansas, 2023

Child Care Scenario	Approx. Annual Cost (2023, full-time)	% of State Median Household Income
Infant in Centers	\$9,620.00	16%
Toddler in Centers	\$9,133.80	16%
Preschooler in Centers	\$7,833.80	13%
Infant in FCCs	\$6,505.20	11%
Toddler in FCCs	\$6,240.00	11%
Preschooler in FCCs	\$6,154.20	11%
Infant in Better Beginnings Level 6	\$15,340.00	26%

Notes. Centers = Center-based child care. FCCs = Family child care homes. Costs represent median full-time annual rates reported in the 2023 Arkansas Child Care Market Price Study (McKelvey et al., 2024) and do not reflect subsidies or discounts. These costs are reported in 2023 dollars. Percentages show the share of the state median household income from the 2023 American Community Survey 5-year estimates (\$58,800). The “Better Beginnings Level 6” scenario illustrates the estimated cost of high-quality care, not the average cost across all providers. This is the approximate annual cost for infants in both centers and FCCs at Level 6. Better Beginnings ratings range from 1 to 6.

Licensed family child care homes (FCCs) tend to be less expensive than centers but still represent a major household expense. Statewide, infant care in an FCC is around \$30 per day (~\$6,500 annually), or 11% of median household income. FCCs generally charge 20–25% less than centers for the same age group, offering some savings, but costs still exceed 10% of household income in most cases.

As Table 4 shows, infant care remains the most expensive. Costs decline slightly for toddlers, and more for preschoolers, as centers can operate with higher child-to-staff ratios. High-quality care costs substantially more. For example, an infant enrolled in a Better Beginnings Level 6 program, the highest quality rating for Arkansas ECE providers, would cost over \$15,000 annually, or about

³⁶ Full-time care assumes at least 7 hours of care per day, 5 days per week, 52 weeks per year.

³⁷ Median household income is used rather than mean income to avoid distortion from extreme values. Household income is used because it better reflects the total resources available to families, including single-earner and multi-earner households.

26% of a typical Arkansas household's income. Whether in a center or an FCC, this level of care represents nearly four times the federal affordability benchmark of 7%. While these figures reflect statewide medians, affordability challenges vary significantly across regions, where both child care prices and household incomes differ sharply.

Regional Variation

While the statewide medians show clear affordability challenges, the burden of child care costs depends heavily on where families live. Both child care prices and household incomes vary widely across Arkansas's 75 counties, producing very different affordability landscapes.

The Northwest Arkansas (NWA) region (e.g., Benton and Washington counties) has some of the state's highest market rates. According to the 2023 Arkansas Market Rate Study, the 75th percentile price for full-time infant care in NWA was \$55 per day, or over \$13,500 per year. In comparison, the median in many rural counties is closer to \$30 per day, or about \$7,000 annually. For some age groups, NWA rates are nearly double those in rural areas. For instance, preschool care in rural Arkansas averages about \$22–23 per day, compared to \$40 or more in NWA. These differences reflect higher demand, cost of living, and tighter supply in high-growth regions.

NWA also benefits from higher household incomes. Benton County's median household income is approximately \$92,700—more than double that of Delta counties like Chicot, where median incomes fall below \$40,000. Even so, affordability is strained: an NWA family paying \$13,500 per year for infant care still spends 15% of household income in Benton County and more than 20% in neighboring Washington County (median income ~\$66,000). In the Delta, the picture is equally challenging. Infant care may cost around \$4,800 annually in some rural counties, but with incomes between \$30,000 and \$40,000, families still spend 12–15% of their income on child care.

Across Arkansas, these disparities underscore that affordability is a statewide issue. The same tuition bill can represent very different financial burdens depending on local income levels. Even in areas with relatively low prices, child care often consumes double or triple the federal affordability benchmark, leaving many families—urban, suburban, and rural alike—without affordable options.

Overall, KPI A7 shows that child care in Arkansas remains unaffordable for many families, even though prices are lower than national averages. Infant care is the most expensive, quality-linked costs push expenses even higher, and regional income disparities mean that affordability challenges are widespread across the state. In practice, full-time licensed care often requires 15–25% of a household's income—two to three times the federal affordability benchmark of 7%. Continued tracking of market rates over time will be essential for KPI A7 to monitor whether affordability improves as policies and investments evolve, or whether the burden on families remains persistent.

V. Quality of Early Childhood Programs

The quality of early childhood programs is closely tied to children’s development and long-term success.³⁸ This section establishes a baseline for key quality indicators, drawing on administrative data, licensing records, and state policy guidance. Table 5 provides a summary of Quality KPIs, including provider participation in *Better Beginnings*, child-to-staff ratios, curriculum use, and the implementation of classroom observation tools. Together, these indicators provide a foundation for understanding how Arkansas’s early childhood system defines, measures, and supports quality, and they frame the more detailed analyses in the subsections that follow.

Table 5.
Overview of Quality KPIs, Baseline Measures, and Data Sources

KPI	Indicator	Baseline Measure	Sources
Q1	Percentage of licensed providers participating in <i>Better Beginnings</i> , disaggregated by provider type, level, and geography.	78% of licensed providers participate in <i>Better Beginnings</i> . Overall: 6% of providers are at Level 1, 25% at Level 2, 23% at Level 3, 12% at Level 4, 7% at Level 5, 5% at Level 6, and 22% of providers remain unrated. By Urbanicity: Urban (76%), Suburban (78%), Rural (81%). By Program Type: Head Start (86%) and School-Based (89%) providers most likely at Levels 3–6; FCC homes (71%) and EIDT programs (63%) concentrated at lower tiers.	Arkansas Licensed Provider Database, web scrape May 2025; ADE Office of Early Childhood
Q2	Average child-to-teacher ratios by classroom age group, compared to licensing and QRIS standards.	Most Level 4–6 programs meet or exceed ratio standards for toddlers and preschoolers. Infant classrooms are more challenging: average ratios at Levels 4–5 slightly exceed maximum allowed, while Level 6 meets standards consistently. By provider type: centers generally within limits; school-based programs meet ABC standards; Head Start programs hover just above federal limits for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers.	Arkansas Licensed Provider Database, web scrape May 2025; Arkansas Licensing Standards; ABC Program Standards; Head Start Program Standards

³⁸ Burchinal, P., Kainz, K., Cai, K., Tout, K., Zaslow, M., Martinez-Beck, I., & Rathgeb, C. (2009). Early care and education quality and child outcomes. Research-to-Policy, Research-to-Practice Brief). Washington, DC: Child Trends and the Office of Policy, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families.; Campbell, F. A., Pungello, E. P., Burchinal, M., Kainz, K., Pan, Y., Wasik, B. H., Barbarin, O. A., Sparling, J. J., & Ramey, C. T. (2012). Adult outcomes as a function of an early childhood educational program: an Abecedarian Project follow-up. *Developmental psychology*, 48(4).; Yoshikawa, H., Weiland, C., Brooks-Gunn, J., Burchinal, M. R., Espinosa, L. M., Gormley, W. T., Ludwig, J., Magnuson, K. A., Phillips, D., & Zaslow, M. J. (2013). Investing in our future: The evidence base on preschool education. Society for Research in Child Development.

KPI	Indicator	Baseline Measure	Sources
Q3	Percentage of providers implementing evidence-based curricula, disaggregated by provider type.	Curriculum use is widespread. Approved curriculum use: Head Start (98%), EIDT (95%), School-Based (90%), Family Child Care (83%), Centers (80%). Reporting rates vary: Centers (51%), EIDT (26%), FCC (32%), Head Start (74%), School-Based (67%). Most commonly used: <i>Adventures in Learning</i> (still widely used though not on 2025 interim list); <i>Creative Curriculum</i> and <i>Investigator Club</i> align with updated approved list.	Arkansas Licensed Provider Database, curriculum reports, web scrape May 2025; ADE Office of Early Childhood curriculum approval lists (2023, 2025 interim)
Q4	Implementation of CLASS as a classroom quality assessment tool, including percentage of programs assessed and average scores, as available.	CLASS implementation is in early stages. Higher Better Beginnings levels currently require evaluation using one of several approved classroom observation tools. State plans to collect CLASS data annually starting in 2025 for publicly funded providers (ABC, Head Start, SRA), with goal of fall and spring observations by 2026–27. No statewide CLASS scores available yet.	ADE Office of Early Childhood; Better Beginnings standards; CLASS observation framework (Teachstone)

Notes. BB = Better Beginnings; FCC = Family Child Care; EIDT = Early Intervention Day Treatment; ABC = Arkansas Better Chance; CLASS = Classroom Assessment Scoring System. Data reflect Arkansas Department of Education, Office for Early Childhood (OEC) Licensed Provider Database web scrape (May 2025) unless otherwise noted. Better Beginnings levels (1–6) represent progressively higher quality standards. Staffing ratios are self-reported averages and compared against state licensing rules, ABC standards, and federal Head Start Program Performance Standards. Curriculum use reflects self-reported adoption of comprehensive curricula, aligned with Arkansas’s 2023 approved list and the interim 2025 list. CLASS is being phased in as a statewide observational measure beginning in 2025–26.³⁹

Better Beginnings Participation and Distribution (KPI Q1)

In Arkansas, a key indicator of program quality is participation in *Better Beginnings*, the state’s voluntary Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS). Better Beginnings provides a tiered framework designed to help licensed providers strengthen and demonstrate quality. Programs can advance through six levels by meeting increasingly rigorous standards in areas such as learning

³⁹ Sources referenced in Table X include the following: Arkansas Department of Education, Office for Early Childhood. (2025). Arkansas 2024 Annual Report. Arkansas Department of Education. https://dese.ade.arkansas.gov/Files/2024_OEC_Annual_Report_Final_OEC.pdf; Arkansas Department of Education, Office for Early Childhood. (2025). Arkansas licensed provider database (web scrape, May 2025); Office of Head Start. (2024). Program Information Report (PIR), 2023–24. <https://headstart.gov/program-data/article/program-information-report-pir>; Teachstone. (n.d.). Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS). <https://teachstone.com/classroom-assessment-scoring-system>

environments, staff qualifications, professional development, family engagement, and program administration.

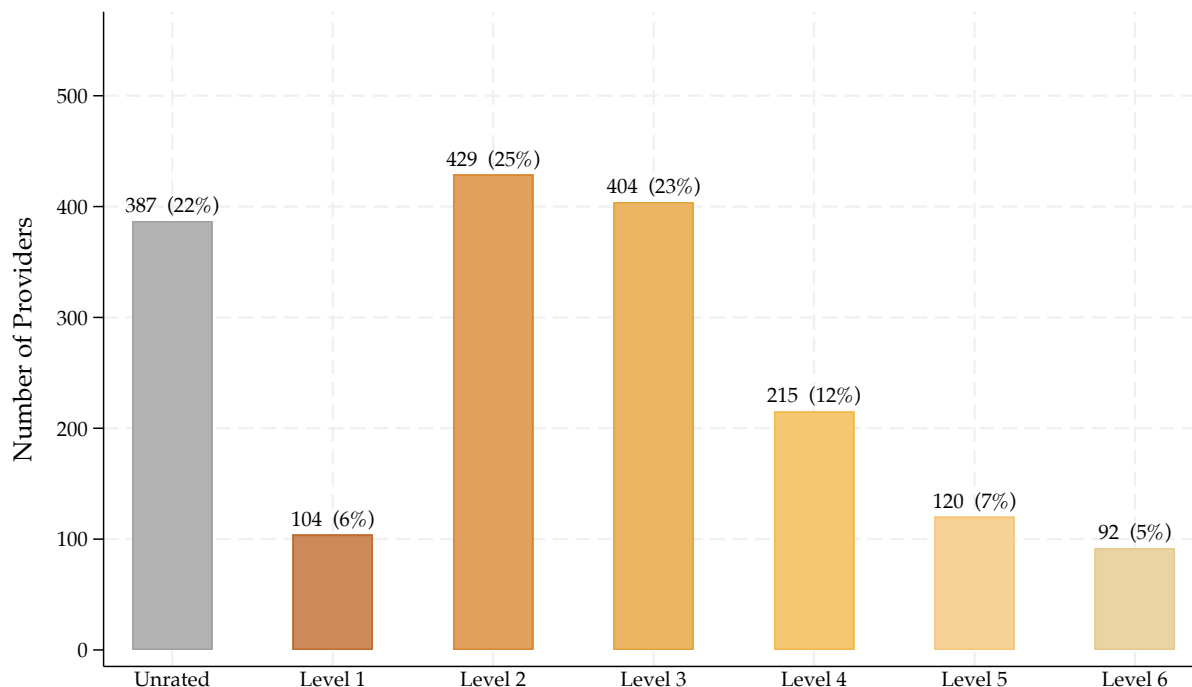
Providers by Better Beginnings Levels

Providers who are unrated in our data are licensed or registered by the state but have not opted into Better Beginnings. These providers meet baseline health and safety standards but do not participate in the quality improvement system. At Level 1, providers complete the QRIS orientation, submit an application, and document foundational quality practices, such as posting a daily schedule, implementing a family engagement plan, and establishing a staff training plan. Level 2 requires a written curriculum aligned with Arkansas's Early Learning Standards, regular child observation, and expanded professional development hours for staff. Level 3 introduces more robust quality markers, including systematic self-assessment, use of child portfolios, and lower child-to-staff ratios than those required under minimum licensing. Levels 4 through 6 require external assessments of classroom quality, with rising cut scores at each level. These tiers also introduce stronger credentialing requirements for lead teachers and formal documentation of continuous quality improvement. Together, these requirements reflect a system in which each successive level signals a deeper, sustained commitment to high-quality early learning environments.

Figure 6 provides a snapshot of how providers are distributed across this quality continuum. It shows both the number and percentage of licensed providers at each Better Beginnings level, making it possible to see where participation is concentrated and how many providers remain outside the system altogether.

Figure 6.

Better Beginnings Program Participation by Level (Unrated, Levels 1-6)



Notes. This figure shows the number and percentage of licensed or registered early care and education providers in Arkansas by Better Beginnings quality level, as of May 2025. Better Beginnings is Arkansas’s voluntary Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), with Level 0 (Unrated) representing licensed providers not currently enrolled in the system. Levels 1 through 6 indicate progressively higher levels of quality based on program standards. Data are from a web scrape of the Arkansas Licensed Provider database conducted in May 2025.

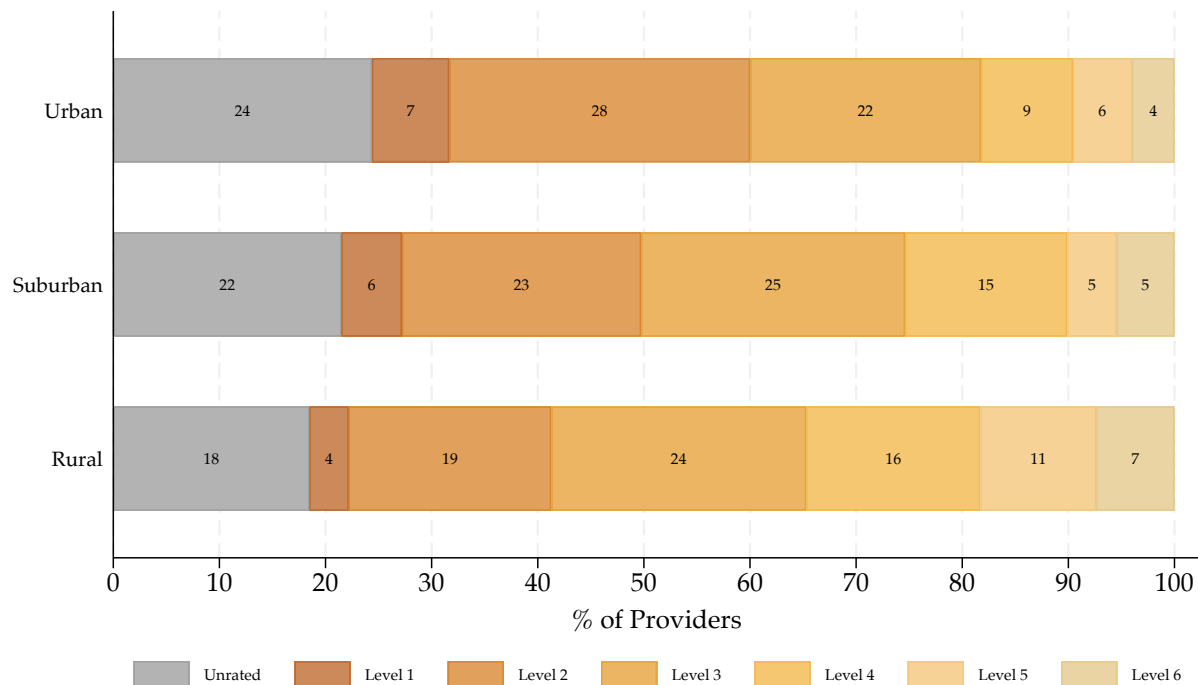
As of May 2025, 78% of licensed providers participate in Better Beginnings, with the largest shares at Levels 2 (25%) and 3 (23%). Smaller shares are found at Levels 4 (12%), 5 (7%), and 6 (5%). About 22% of licensed providers remain unrated and outside the system. This distribution suggests two broad patterns: many providers either do not participate at all or are concentrated in the middle tiers (Levels 2 and 3), while relatively few have advanced to the highest quality levels (Levels 5 and 6). Together, this indicates that although Better Beginnings participation is widespread, movement into the top tiers of quality remains limited.

Providers by Better Beginnings Levels and Urbanicity

Participation varies by urbanicity, as shown in Figure 7. This figure highlights not only whether providers are participating in Better Beginnings but also how their ratings are distributed across quality levels in urban, suburban, and rural areas. Looking across these contexts allows us to see whether higher-quality providers are concentrated in certain regions or whether distribution is more even across the state.

Figure 7.

Better Beginnings Rating Levels Among Licensed Providers by Urbanicity (Urban, Suburban, or Rural)



Notes. This figure shows the percentage of licensed or registered early care and education providers in Arkansas by Better Beginnings rating level and urbanicity classification, as of May 2025. Better Beginnings is Arkansas’s voluntary Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), with Unrated indicating licensed providers not enrolled in the system. Urbanicity is defined using Rural–Urban Commuting Area (RUCA) codes: Urban (RUCA 1), Suburban (RUCA 2 and 4), and Rural (RUCA 3 and 5–10). Each provider was assigned to a RUCA category based on its census tract. Percentages reflect the distribution of Better Beginnings levels within each urbanicity category and may not sum to 100 due to rounding. Data are from a web scrape of the Arkansas Licensed Provider database conducted in May 2025.

Figure 7 shows that about 76% of urban providers are enrolled in Better Beginnings, compared to 78% in suburban areas and 81% in rural areas. Across all three categories, Levels 2 and 3 represent the largest share of rated providers, accounting for roughly half of participants.

Differences emerge more clearly at the higher tiers. About 9% of urban providers are rated at Level 4, compared to 16% in both suburban and rural areas. At Levels 5 and 6, 18% of rural providers have reached the top tiers, compared to 10% in both urban and suburban areas.

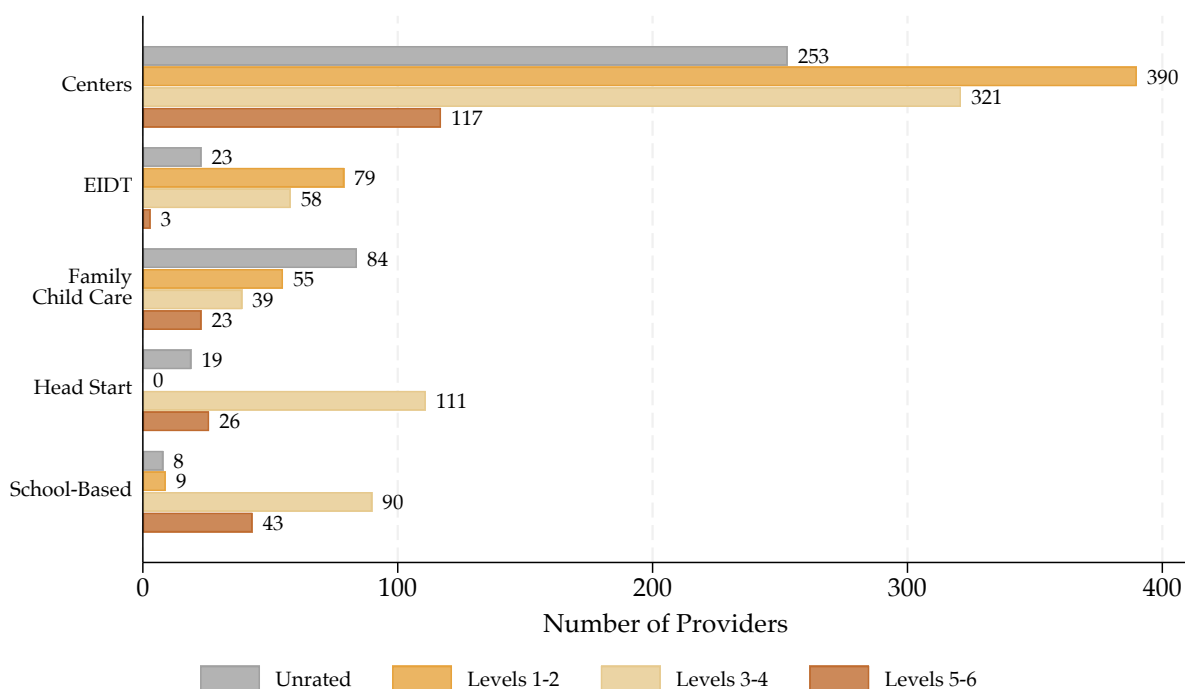
Overall, 34% of rural providers are rated at Levels 4–6, compared to 26% of suburban providers and 19% of urban providers. This distribution suggests that urban providers are more concentrated in the early stages of quality improvement, while rural (and to a lesser extent suburban) providers are more likely to be represented in the higher quality tiers of Better Beginnings.

Providers by Better Beginnings Level and Provider Type

Participation also varies substantially by provider type. Figure 8 displays the distribution of Better Beginnings ratings across five major provider categories: centers, Early Intervention Day Treatment (EIDT) programs, family child care homes, Head Start/Early Head Start programs, and school-based pre-K. Within each category, bars show the number of providers at each Better Beginnings level, grouped into unrated, Levels 1–2, Levels 3–4, and Levels 5–6. This data disaggregation makes it possible to compare not just how many providers fall into each quality tier overall, but also how participation patterns differ across provider types.

Figure 8.

Better Beginnings Rating Levels Among Licensed Providers by Provider Type



Notes. This figure shows the number of licensed or registered early care and education providers in Arkansas by Better Beginnings rating level and provider type, as of May 2025. Better Beginnings is Arkansas’s voluntary Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), which assigns providers to Levels 1 through 6 based on quality standards; unrated providers are licensed but not enrolled. Provider categories are mutually exclusive and based on administrative records: licensed centers (Centers), Early Intervention Day Treatment centers (EIDT), licensed or registered family child care homes (Family Child Care), federally funded Head Start and Early Head Start programs (Head Start), and school-based pre-K programs operated by public school districts (School-Based). Data are from a web scrape of the Arkansas Licensed Provider database conducted in May 2025.

Clear distinctions emerge across categories. Head Start programs show the highest alignment with Better Beginnings standards, with 86% (133 out of 155) rated at Levels 3 through 6 and none in the lower tiers. School-based programs are similarly strong: 108 of 122 providers (89%) are rated

at Levels 3–6. These patterns reflect the influence of federal program standards and public-school quality requirements.

By contrast, family child care homes and EIDT programs are concentrated in the lower tiers. Among family child care homes, 71% (139 out of 197) are either unrated or rated at Levels 1–2. For EIDT providers, 63% (103 out of 163) fall in those same lower categories. These distributions suggest that smaller or specialized settings may face greater challenges in advancing within the Better Beginnings system.

Center-based programs display the widest variation. Among centers, 41% (454 out of 1,098) are rated at Levels 3–6, 36% (391 providers) are at Levels 1–2, and 23% (253 providers) remain unrated. This distribution points to both the sector’s scale and its uneven progress toward higher quality standards.

Together, these findings show that Arkansas’s ECE system is unevenly distributed across the Better Beginnings tiers. Nearly half of providers cluster at Levels 2 and 3, signaling that many programs are making progress but have not yet reached the highest quality benchmarks. A sizable share of providers, especially FCCs, EIDT programs, and centers, remain either unrated or in the early stages of quality improvement. At the same time, Head Start and school-based pre-K programs demonstrate that higher levels of quality are achievable and sustainable at scale when reinforced by policy and funding structures. Overall, KPI Q1 suggests that while Better Beginnings participation is widespread, the pathway to higher quality remains uneven across settings, with particular challenges for smaller providers and opportunities to strengthen system supports for advancing quality statewide. Tracking these distributions over time will be essential for understanding whether Arkansas’s investments are helping more providers move into the higher tiers and, ultimately, expanding access to high-quality early learning opportunities for children and families.

Staffing Ratios and Compliance (KPI Q2)

Staffing ratios are a foundational element of program quality, shaping the level of individual attention children receive and the capacity of educators to support development. KPI Q2 examines whether Arkansas early childhood programs are meeting or exceeding regulatory standards for child-to-adult ratios, and how these patterns vary by quality level and provider type.

Child-to-adult ratios are a cornerstone of quality in early care and education, with lower ratios linked to higher quality teacher–child interactions.⁴⁰ Table 6 compares observed average staffing

⁴⁰Institute of Medicine & National Research Council. (2015). Transforming the workforce for children birth through age 8: A unifying foundation. National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/19401>; Mashburn, A. J., Pianta, R. C., Hamre, B. K., et al. (2008). Measures of classroom quality in prekindergarten and

ratios across Better Beginnings levels and provider types (upper panel) with the maximum allowable ratios set in Arkansas licensing, ABC, and federal Head Start standards (lower panel in italics). This provides a system-level view of whether programs are operating within regulatory limits and whether higher-quality programs maintain stronger staffing patterns.

Table 6.

Average Number of Children per Staff Member by Age Group, Better Beginnings Level, and Program Type, Compared with Program Requirements

Actual Ratios	Infants per Adult			Toddlers per Adult			Preschoolers per Adult		
	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N
BB Level									
Unrated	4.88	1.10	35	6.97	1.83	37	10.49	2.69	53
Level 1	4.58	1.32	18	7.03	1.98	20	11.12	2.27	25
Level 2	4.59	1.02	102	7.04	1.86	107	10.69	2.93	119
Level 3	4.50	0.61	127	6.49	1.89	135	10.39	2.07	165
Level 4	4.04	0.25	38	5.41	1.58	39	9.93	1.43	135
Level 5	4.21	0.40	12	5.21	1.72	12	9.83	1.44	74
Level 6	4.00	0.38	15	5.17	1.60	15	9.67	1.11	45
Provider Type									
Center-Based	4.65	0.88	265	7.01	1.70	290	10.41	2.28	453
Head Start	4.01	0.12	72	4.40	1.19	63	10.01	1.44	77
School-Based	*	*	*	*	*	*	9.76	1.66	86
Program Requirements	<i>Infants per Adult</i>			<i>Toddlers per Adult</i>			<i>Preschoolers per Adult</i>		
<i>BB Level</i>	<i>Max</i>			<i>Max</i>			<i>Max</i>		
<i>Levels 1-3</i>	-			-			-		
<i>Level 4</i>	4.00			7.00			12.00		
<i>Level 5</i>	4.00			6.00			10.00		
<i>Level 6</i>	4.00			6.00			10.00		
Provider Type									
<i>Basic Licensing for Centers</i>	5.00			8.00			15.00		
<i>Head Start Program Standards</i>	4.00			4.00			10.00		
<i>ABC Program Standards</i>	*			*			10.00		

children's development of academic, language, and social skills. Child Development, 79(3), 732–749. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2008.01154.x>; OECD. (2018). Engaging young children: Lessons from research about quality in early childhood education and care. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264085145-en>

Notes. * = Statistics were suppressed because N was less than 10 providers. SD = Standard Deviation. N = Number of Providers. Higher values reflect more children per adult, while lower values indicate smaller group sizes or higher staffing levels. Regulatory values represent the maximum allowable children per adult as defined in state and federal program standards. Observed ratios reflect average self-reported staffing patterns from licensing data web scraped in May 2025. Infants are defined in licensing data as children aged birth–18 months; toddlers as 18–36 months; and preschoolers as 30–72 months. The toddler and preschool categories overlap in the licensing database, which differs from program standards. For centers, categories are: birth–18 months (infants), 18–36 months (toddlers), 2.5–3 years (preschoolers), 4 years (not used), and 5 years and above (not used). For ABC programs, categories are: birth–18 months (infants), 18 months–3 years (toddlers), and 3–5 years (preschoolers). For Head Start, categories are: 0–36 months (infants and toddlers), 3 years (preschoolers), and 4–5 years (school-aged, not shown). N reflects the number of providers reporting usable staffing data for that age group. Totals do not sum to 1,751 because not all providers serve every age group or report staffing data consistently, and because toddler and preschool categories overlap in the licensing database. Because not all providers serve every age group and some records had missing data, the numbers of providers (N) shown in Table 6 are smaller than the total provider universe.

Among providers rated through the Better Beginnings system, observed staffing patterns generally align with required ratios. For toddlers and preschoolers, nearly all Level 4–6 programs report ratios that meet or exceed their level-specific standards. However, infant classrooms remain a challenge: at Levels 4 and 5, average infant ratios slightly exceed the maximum allowed. By contrast, Level 6 programs consistently meet requirements across all age groups, reflecting strong implementation of the most rigorous quality benchmarks.

When viewed by provider type, most center-based programs operate comfortably within basic licensing limits. School-based programs—likely operating under ABC standards—report preschooler ratios that fall below the maximum allowed and may also meet infant and toddler standards, though data for those age groups are suppressed due to small sample sizes. Head Start programs, closely aligned with federal standards, report average ratios that hover just above the limits for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. These small overages may reflect reporting variation or rounding, but they may also indicate areas where additional support could help programs maintain compliance.

It is important to interpret these findings in light of several limitations. Observed ratios reflect average self-reported staffing patterns drawn from licensing data in May 2025. They represent point-in-time estimates and may not capture within-day or within-week fluctuations in classroom staffing. In addition, comparisons across programs and regulatory standards should be made cautiously due to differences in how age groups are defined. In the licensing data used here, infants are defined as birth to 18 months, toddlers as 18 to 36 months, and preschoolers as 30 to 72 months—categories that overlap and do not fully align with those in ABC, Better Beginnings, or Head Start standards. As a result, observed differences across programs should be viewed as indicative patterns rather than precise compliance determinations.

Overall, KPI Q2 suggests that Arkansas’s tiered regulatory structure is functioning as intended: higher-quality programs and school-based settings generally maintain stronger staffing, while infant classrooms and some Head Start classrooms remain near or just over federal limits. Tracking

these patterns over time will be important to ensure that the state’s quality standards translate into consistent classroom practice and that staffing challenges in the most resource-intensive settings, such as infant care, are addressed.

Curriculum Use (KPI Q3)

Curriculum implementation is a foundational aspect of quality in early childhood education. Research consistently shows that intentional use of a structured, evidence-based curriculum is associated with stronger child outcomes, particularly in areas such as in language, early literacy, and math.⁴¹ Arkansas maintains a list of approved comprehensive curricula, updated most recently in January 2025 as an interim list based on newly established criteria.⁴² These criteria require that curricula (1) address multiple domains in Arkansas’ Early Learning Standards, (2) include a structured developmental scope and sequence, and (3) be readily available for purchase or open access. KPI Q3 tracks whether Arkansas providers are implementing such curricula and whether their practices align with the state’s evolving guidance.

Overview of Curriculum Use by Provider Type

Table 7 summarizes curriculum use across provider types, showing both the percentage and number of providers who reported using an approved curriculum, any curriculum (regardless of approval status), or no curriculum at all.

Table 7.

Approved Curriculum Use by Provider Types

Provider Type	% Approved	N Approved	N Any Curric.	N Total Providers
Center Based	79.60	441	554	1081
EIDT	95.24	40	42	163
FCC Homes	82.81	53	64	201
Head Start	98.28	114	116	156
School Based	90.00	90	100	150

Notes. FCC = Family Child Care. % Approved” refers to the percentage of providers who reported using at least one curriculum that appears on the Arkansas state-approved comprehensive curriculum list (2023 or 2025). “N Approved” is the number of providers using at least one approved curriculum. “N Any Curric.” is the number of providers who reported using any curriculum, regardless of approval status. “N Total Providers” reflects the full count of licensed

⁴¹ National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2024). A new vision for high-quality preschool curriculum (Chapter 3). In High-quality preschool curriculum: Report brief. The National Academies Press. <https://nap.nationalacademies.org/read/27429/chapter/4>.

⁴² Arkansas Division of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE). (2023). Approved pre-K curriculum list (November 9, 2023). Retrieved from https://dese.ade.arkansas.gov/Files/Approved_PreK_Curriculum_11_9_23_OEC.pdf; Arkansas Division of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE). (2025). Approved pre-K curriculum interim list (January 2025). Retrieved from https://dese.ade.arkansas.gov/Files/AR_ECE_curriculum_list_Jan.2025_OEC.pdf.

providers in each category, including those who did not report curriculum use. Data reflect self-reported curriculum information from the state’s licensing database that was web scraped in May 2025.

As shown in Table 7, curriculum use is widespread across provider types, and most providers who report using a curriculum are using one that appears on the state’s 2023 approved list. Alignment is especially strong in publicly funded settings: 98% of Head Start providers, 95% of EIDT programs, and 90% of school-based providers reported using at least one approved curriculum. Rates are slightly lower among family child care homes (83%) and center-based programs (80%).

It is important to note that not all licensed providers reported curriculum information in the licensing database. For example, 51% of center-based providers (n=554), 26% of EIDT providers (n=42), and 32% of family child care homes (n=64) reported using at least one curriculum. Reporting was higher among Head Start programs (74%, n=116) and school-based providers (67%, n=100). Because this analysis is limited to providers that reported using a curriculum, percentages should be interpreted as rates among reporting providers—not the full licensed provider population. Future analyses aim to increase reporting rates to better capture the full landscape of curriculum use across provider types.

Use of Specific Curricula by Provider Type

To better understand how curriculum use varies across provider types, Appendix B, Table B1 summarizes the most commonly reported curricula among providers who indicated using at least one comprehensive curriculum. These data reflect self-reported use from the state licensing database and include curriculum titles from the 2023 Arkansas approved list. Titles that also appear on the interim 2025 approved list are marked with an asterisk (*). Providers could report more than one curriculum, so percentages do not sum to 100.

Across all provider types, the most widely used curriculum is Adventures in Learning—reported by 41% of center-based providers, 71% of EIDT programs, 66% of family child care homes, and 43% of school-based providers using any curriculum. Although Adventures in Learning was included on the 2023 approved list, it does not appear on the 2025 interim list. Its continued widespread use likely reflects the fact that curriculum use is effectively grandfathered during the transition period at least until a final list is adopted. Providers may also require time and support to review and shift to updated options once the interim list becomes formal policy.

In center-based programs, other frequently used curricula include Creative Curriculum (13.5%), Core Knowledge (4%), Letter People (4%), Experience Curriculum (3%), and Montessori (3%). Of these, Creative Curriculum, Core Knowledge and Experience (Mother Goose Time) are included on the 2025 interim list, suggesting that while Adventures in Learning remains dominant, many center-based providers are using curricula that align with new state guidance.

In Head Start and Early Head Start programs, Creative Curriculum is used by 86% of providers reporting any curriculum—highlighting strong alignment with federal Head Start Program Performance Standards, which require programs to implement a developmentally appropriate, research-based, and comprehensive curriculum that aligns with the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework (ELOF). Curriculum selection in these settings is driven primarily by federal requirements.⁴³ While Arkansas’s 2025 interim list also includes Creative Curriculum, its prevalence in Head Start settings likely reflects adherence to federal guidance. Very few other curricula are reported in these programs, suggesting a high degree of consistency across federally funded sites.

In family child care homes, use is again concentrated around Adventures in Learning. A small number of providers report using Creative Curriculum, Carol’s Affordable Curriculum, Experience Curriculum, or Montessori, though most of these appear in fewer than 2% of reporting homes.

Among school-based providers, Adventures in Learning (43%) and Investigator Club (17%) are the most common, followed by Creative Curriculum (11%). Notably, Investigator Club is more frequently used in school-based settings than in any other provider type and remains on the 2025 interim list.

EIDT programs, while fewer in number, show a strong preference for Adventures in Learning (71%). Very few EIDT providers reported use of curricula from the 2025 list, suggesting that additional support may be needed as curriculum guidance evolves for these specialized settings.

It is important to note that this analysis does not distinguish between age groups served or curriculum age targeting. For example, Curiosity Corner is approved only for pre-K but may be reported by providers serving infants and toddlers. Similarly, Launchpad Foundational Literacy Curriculum—a literacy supplement newly added to the 2025 list—is not included here, as it was not part of the 2023 list and is not considered a comprehensive curriculum.

These findings suggest that while many providers are using curricula aligned with the 2025 interim list, a substantial share, particularly those reporting use of Adventures in Learning, which is no longer included, are likely operating under transitional allowances while the state finalizes its list of approved options. It is also possible that providers are supplementing Adventures in Learning with additional curricula that do appear on the interim list, especially in multi-age settings. The continued use of now-unlisted curricula likely reflects the state’s decision to allow programs time to adjust while giving guidance to programs who are currently shopping for curricula.

Looking ahead, as Arkansas moves toward full implementation of a final curriculum approval process, state agencies may consider offering additional supports, such as training, funding, or

⁴³ Curriculum requirements for Head Start are outlined in the Early Childhood Curriculum Resources provided by the Office of Head Start accessed at <https://headstart.gov/curriculum/article/early-childhood-curriculum-resources>.

guidance, to help providers evaluate and adopt curricula that meet the updated standards. Tracking curriculum use remains an important quality indicator, as it reflects both alignment with state and federal expectations and the extent of support providers may need to transition toward approved, research-based options. Alongside curriculum adoption, Arkansas is also expanding its use of classroom observation tools to assess quality more directly, which is the focus of the next indicator.

Future Quality Measures: Classroom Observations (KPI Q4)

In addition to Better Beginnings, Arkansas has begun implementing the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS)⁴⁴ to assess classroom quality. CLASS is a nationally validated observation tool that focuses on teacher–child interactions across domains such as emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support. At present, higher Better Beginnings levels require programs to undergo external observations using established tools such as the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale–Revised (ECERS-R), the Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale–Revised (ITERS-R), or the Family Child Care Environment Rating Scale–Revised (FCCERS-R). These tools focus primarily on the physical environment, materials, and structural features of care.

Annual data collection is expected to be fully implemented in 2025 for providers receiving public funding, including those participating in ABC, Head Start, and SRA programs. The state’s goal for the 2026-27 school year is to observe each classroom of these providers once in the fall and once in the spring. Once statewide data are available, CLASS scores will provide a classroom-level perspective on quality, complementing structures like ratios and curriculum use. Future versions of this report will include CLASS data to support ongoing tracking of classroom-level quality indicators in Arkansas. This addition will strengthen KPI Q4 by expanding the state’s ability to monitor quality in ways that go beyond structural compliance and capture the day-to-day experiences of children in classrooms.

VI. Early Care and Education Workforce

The early childhood workforce is the backbone of Arkansas’s early care and education system, yet persistent challenges in stability, compensation, and qualifications shape the capacity of programs to serve children and families. To establish a clear baseline, the workforce indicators summarized in Table 8 provide an overview of turnover, wages, and teacher qualifications using the best available data. Together, these measures capture three dimensions of workforce conditions: (1) workforce stability, using proxy turnover estimates derived from the state’s professional development registry; (2) compensation, drawing on wage data from multiple national and state sources to benchmark early educator pay against living-wage standards and K–12 salaries; and (3)

⁴⁴ Pianta, R. C., La Paro, K. M., & Hamre, B. K. (2008). Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) manual: Pre-K. Paul H. Brookes Publishing.

qualifications, based on licensing rules, program requirements, and federal Head Start standards. While each measure comes with important caveats, taken together they create a foundational picture of the Arkansas ECE workforce. The following subsections examine each of these indicators in greater detail, providing context for how workforce conditions shape quality and capacity across the state.

Table 8.*Overview of Workforce KPIs, Baseline Measures, and Data Sources*

KPI	Indicator	Baseline Measure	Sources
W1	Annual turnover and first-year retention rates among early childhood educators, disaggregated by provider type and region	Proxy estimate from workforce registry: Among educators with recent updates (≤ 26 months), 46% classified as “recent turnover” (14–26 months) and 54% “currently active” (≤ 13 months). Historical profiles (> 26 months since last update) were excluded.	Arkansas Professional Development Registry (2025 extract)
W2	Workforce compensation (median hourly wages and annual earnings), disaggregated by role and provider type	Child care workers (2023): \$13.45/hour (\$28k FT). Preschool teachers (2023): \$14.47/hour (\$30.1k FT). All occupations (AR, 2023): \$18.78/hour (\$39.1k FT). Early educators (CSCCE 2022, 2023\$): \$11.51/hour. Living wage (single adult, 2025→2023\$): \$18.25/hour. Elementary/middle school teachers (2022→2023\$): \$28.62/hour. Head Start teachers (AR, 2021–22 PIR, 2023\$): \$15.00/hour (\$31.2k), rising to \$15.70/hour (\$32.6k) with BA. ABC district-administered classrooms : lead teachers may be on certified salary schedule, boosting pay relative to private child care.	Bureau of Labor Statistics (2023 OES); CSCCE Workforce Data (2022); Urban Institute (2024); MIT Living Wage Calculator (2025)
W3	Workforce qualifications, including credential attainment and annual professional development hours, disaggregated by role and provider type	Licensing : Center staff ≥ 18 years, HS diploma/GED, 15 hours PD annually. Directors: ≥ 21 years + degree/credential pathway + PD. ABC : Lead teachers = ECE license or BA in ECE/child development; associate degree required in multi-classroom sites; CDA for infant/toddler teachers; paraprofessionals = CDA/technical certificate. Head Start : Preschool teachers = AA or BA in ECE/child development (50% BA nationally); assistant teachers = CDA or enrolled in CDA/degree; infant/toddler teachers = CDA with IT focus; home visitors = CDA or equivalent coursework.	Arkansas Minimum Licensing Requirements (2020); Arkansas Better Chance Program Guide (2024–25); Head Start Program Performance Standards (2007, as amended)

Notes. FT = Full Time; CSCCE = Center for the Study of Child Care Employment; AA = Associate of Arts/Science; BA = Bachelor of Arts/Science; MIT = Massachusetts Institute of Technology; CDA = Child Development Associate; ECE = Early Childhood Education; GED = General Educational Development diploma; IT = Infant/Toddler; PD = Professional Development; ABC = Arkansas Better Chance. This table summarizes the baseline measures used for the Workforce KPIs. KPI W1 tracks turnover and first-year retention using proxy measures from the state’s workforce registry, which rely on the timing of educator profile updates and should be interpreted cautiously. KPI W2 presents compensation data, including median hourly wages and annual earnings, disaggregated by role and provider type where available. KPI W3 outlines minimum educational qualifications and professional development requirements for educators across licensing, ABC, and Head Start programs. Together, these indicators establish a baseline for understanding the stability, compensation, and preparation of Arkansas’s early care and education workforce, providing a starting point for assessing challenges and tracking progress over time.⁴⁵

Workforce Stability (KPI W1)

Arkansas, however, currently lacks a unified statewide system for tracking educator turnover and retention across all provider types. In the absence of direct measures, this analysis used update patterns in the state’s workforce registry as a proxy for employment change. While informative, these data should be interpreted with caution, as registry records depend on self-report and may lag behind actual workforce exits or job transitions.

Among 87,022 educator records analyzed, 19% had been updated within the past year, 16% within 14–26 months, and 65% more than 26 months ago. To create a reasonable proxy, the analysis excluded “historical” records older than 26 months and compared recent updates: educators active

⁴⁵ Sources referenced in Table X include the following: Arkansas Department of Education, Office of Early Childhood. (2025). Arkansas licensed provider database (workforce registry, May 2025); U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2024). May 2023 State Occupational Employment and Wage Estimates: Arkansas. “Childcare Workers,” “Preschool Teachers, Except Special Education,” and “All Occupations.” https://www.bls.gov/oes/2023/may/oes_ar.htm; Center for the Study of Child Care Employment. (2024). Early Childhood Workforce Index 2024: Arkansas state profile. <https://cscce.berkeley.edu/workforce-index-2024/states/arkansas/>; Office of Head Start. (2024). Program Information Report (PIR), 2023–24. <https://headstart.gov/program-data/article/program-information-report-pir>; Arkansas Department of Education, Office of Early Childhood. (2025). 2024–2025 Arkansas Better Chance (ABC) Program Guide. https://dese.ade.arkansas.gov/Files/ABC_Program_Guide_Final_2024-2025_20250108163755.pdf; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start. (2024). 45 CFR §1302.91 Staff qualifications and competency requirements; §1302.92 Training and professional development. <https://headstart.gov/policy/45-cfr-chap-xiii/1302-91-staff-qualifications-competency-requirements>; Arkansas Department of Human Services, Division of Child Care and Early Childhood Education. (2020). Minimum Licensing Requirements for Child Care Centers. https://dese.ade.arkansas.gov/Files/2020-CCC-Clean-Copy_20230506115600.pdf; Arkansas Department of Human Services, Division of Child Care and Early Childhood Education. (2020). Minimum Licensing Requirements for Licensed Child Care Family Homes. https://dese.ade.arkansas.gov/Files/2020-CCFH-Clean-Copy_20230506115827.pdf; Arkansas Department of Human Services, Division of Child Care and Early Childhood Education. (2020). Minimum Licensing Requirements for Registered Child Care Family Homes. https://dese.ade.arkansas.gov/Files/2020-RCCFH-Clean-Copy_20230506120624.pdf.

within the past year versus those who last updated between 14–26 months ago. Within this analysis sample of roughly 30,000 educators, about 46% appear to have exited or changed roles, while 54% remained active.

These figures suggest substantial instability, but several limitations temper interpretation. Registry updates may not reflect actual employment changes, since some educators remain employed but do not regularly update their profiles. Conversely, some “recent” updates may reflect administrative actions rather than workforce mobility. The 26-month cutoff is somewhat arbitrary, chosen to balance recency with a sufficient sample size. Most importantly, this method captures only a proxy for turnover, not true annual retention rates, which remain unmeasured statewide.

The bottom line is that turnover pressures in Arkansas’s ECE workforce are likely high, consistent with national research and local accounts of staffing challenges. Without stronger data systems, however, the state cannot precisely quantify annual turnover or first-year retention. Developing a more consistent, longitudinal workforce data infrastructure will be essential to accurately track stability and to guide policies that strengthen the early childhood workforce.

Workforce Compensation (KPI W2)

The stability and compensation of the early childhood workforce are essential factors influencing the quality and availability of ECE.⁴⁶ As of May 2023, Arkansas child care workers had a median hourly wage of \$13.45 (about \$28,000 annually if full time) and preschool teachers had a median hourly wage of \$14.47 (about \$30,100 annually).⁴⁷ For context, the median hourly wage across all occupations was \$18.78 in 2023 (about \$39,100 annually if full time).⁴⁸ These wage levels likely contribute to challenges in recruiting and retaining qualified educators.

The BLS occupational categories (“child care workers” and “preschool teachers”) provide one benchmark, but UC Berkeley’s Center for the Study of Child Care Employment’s (CSCCE) workforce-wide data capture a wider set of roles, including many not reflected in BLS coding. In

⁴⁶ Bratsch-Hines, M. E., Carr, R., Zgourou, E., Vernon-Feagans, L., & Willoughby, M. (2020). Infant and toddler child-care quality and stability in relation to proximal and distal academic and social outcomes. *Child Development*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13389>; Cassidy, D. J., Lower, J. K., Kintner-Duffy, V. L., Hegde, A. V., & Shim, J. (2011). The day-to-day reality of teacher turnover in preschool classrooms: An analysis of classroom context and teacher, director, and parent perspectives. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 25(1), 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02568543.2011.533118>; Doromal, J. B., Weisner, K., & Bassok, D. (2022). Staffing Challenges at Virginia Child Care Centers: Differences by Centers’ Subsidy Participation Status. https://bit.ly/see_partnerships_staffing_va_CCSP; Whitebook, M., & Sakai, L. (2004). By a Thread: How Child Care Centers Hold On to Teachers, How Teachers Build Lasting Careers. In *By a Thread: How Child Care Centers Hold On to Teachers, How Teachers Build Lasting Careers*. <https://doi.org/10.17848/9781417524457>

⁴⁷ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2024). May 2023 State Occupational Employment and Wage Estimates: Arkansas. “Childcare Workers,” “Preschool Teachers, Except Special Education,” and “All Occupations.” Retrieved from https://www.bls.gov/oes/2023/may/oes_ar.htm.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

2023 dollars,⁴⁹ CSCCE estimates show that the median hourly wage for Arkansas early educators fell from \$11.86 in 2019 (\$24,700 annually) to \$11.51 in 2022 (\$23,900 annually), a 3% decrease. A living wage for a single adult in Arkansas in 2025 translates to \$18.25 per hour (\$37,900 annually) in 2023 dollars.⁵⁰ By comparison, early educators earned \$11.51 per hour (\$23,900 annually) in 2022, which is 37% lower than the living wage, or a shortfall of about \$6.75 per hour (\$14,000 annually). By comparison, elementary and middle school teachers earned \$28.62 per hour (\$59,500 annually) in 2022 (in 2023 dollars), while early educators were earning 60% less and were about four times more likely to live in poverty.⁵¹

Compensation is higher in some publicly funded settings. Head Start classroom teachers in Arkansas averaged about \$15.00 per hour (\$31,200 annually) in 2023 dollars, and those with a bachelor's degree averaged about \$15.70 per hour (\$32,600 annually), based on analyses of recent Head Start data.⁵² In Arkansas Better Chance (ABC) programs administered by school districts, lead teachers typically must hold an early childhood teaching license, and district-administered ABC classrooms may place lead teachers on the public-school certified salary schedule, which can improve pay relative to private child care settings.⁵³ ⁵⁴ Even with these advantages, variation across settings remains substantial, and many educators outside public-school or Head Start settings face comparatively low wages and limited benefits. This keeps the ECE workforce as a whole well below K–12 compensation levels, reinforcing turnover pressures and limiting long-term stability.

Taken together, the patterns in workforce stability (KPI W1) and compensation (KPI W2) point to a reinforcing cycle. Low wages relative to both living-wage benchmarks and K–12 pay scales likely contribute to persistent turnover pressures, while high turnover undermines program stability. Without more competitive compensation, programs struggle to recruit and retain qualified educators; without stability, the profession may not be as attractive compared to outside employment options. Addressing these twin challenges will require sustained investment in both

⁴⁹ All dollar values were adjusted to constant 2023 dollars using the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics Consumer Price Index for All Urban Consumers (CPI-U). These data are available from the Bureau of Labor Statistics at <https://www.bls.gov/cpi/>. Annual average CPI-U values were 255.657 (2019), 292.655 (2022), 305.201 (2023), and 326.000 (2025, projected). For example, the 2022 CSCCE early educator median wage of \$11.04 was multiplied by $(305.201 \div 292.655) = 1.043$, yielding \$11.51 in 2023 dollars. Similarly, the 2025 living wage estimate of \$19.49 was multiplied by $(305.201 \div 326.000) = 0.936$, yielding \$18.25 in 2023 dollars.

⁵⁰ Living Wage Institute. (2025, February 10). Living wage data for Arkansas. Living Wage Calculator. Retrieved September 17, 2025, from <https://livingwage.mit.edu/states/05>.

⁵¹ Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (CSCCE). (2024). Early Childhood Workforce Index 2024: Arkansas state profile. Retrieved from <https://cscce.berkeley.edu/workforce-index-2024/states/arkansas/>.

⁵² The Urban Institute. Center on Labor, Human Services, and Population. (2024, March). Head Start and Early Head Start Workforce Salaries: A State-by-State Glance. Retrieved from https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/2024-03/Head_Start_and_Early_Head_Start_Workforce_Salaries.pdf.

⁵³ Arkansas Department of Education, Office of Early Childhood. (2025). 2024–2025 Arkansas Better Chance (ABC) Program Guide. Retrieved from https://dese.ade.arkansas.gov/Files/ABC_Program_Guide_Final_2024-2025_20250108163755.pdf.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

tracking systems and compensation reforms so Arkansas can move toward a stronger, more stable early care and education workforce.

Teacher Qualifications (KPI W3)

Teacher qualifications directly shape the experiences of children in early learning environments and are therefore important elements of workforce quality. At present, Arkansas does not collect detailed, statewide teacher data across all providers, but both minimum licensing requirements and program requirements provide insight into the standards that guide much of the state's early childhood workforce. Minimum licensing establishes the baseline expectations for center-based care and family child care homes, while ABC and Head Start set higher standards for staff in publicly funded classrooms. SRA providers must participate in Better Beginnings at Level 2 or higher and meet additional health and safety training requirements for staff, however there are no additional staff degree or credential requirements beyond state licensing or any applicable program rules like ABC or Head Start.^{55 56}

ABC Teacher Qualifications

The ABC Program Guide sets role-specific minimum qualifications for classroom staff. Lead teachers must either hold an Arkansas Educator License in Early Childhood Pre-K or have a bachelor's degree in early childhood education, child development, or a related field with at least twelve hours in early childhood or child development coursework. Teachers assigned to additional classrooms in multi-classroom sites are required to hold at least an associate degree in early childhood education or child development. Infant and toddler teachers must hold a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential with an infant/toddler focus. Paraprofessionals may qualify with a CDA, a Certificate of Proficiency, a Technical Certificate, a Birth–PreK Credential, or an associate degree, including a non-ECE degree with at least twelve hours in early childhood or child development coursework. In practice, these requirements often mean that licensed teachers fill lead teacher roles in district-administered programs, while bachelor's-level early childhood specialists fill these roles in community-based centers. All ABC lead teachers, classroom teachers, and infant/toddler teachers must complete at least thirty hours of approved professional

⁵⁵ Arkansas Department of Human Services. Division of Child Care and Early Childhood Education. (n.d.) Better Beginnings: Tiered Quality Rating and Improvement System. Retrieved from <https://humanservices.arkansas.gov/wp-content/uploads/Final-Filing-Public-Notice-Better-Beginnings-Quality-Rating-Improvement-System.pdf>.

⁵⁶ Arkansas Department of Human Services. (2020). Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) Program Participant Agreement. Retrieved from https://dese.ade.arkansas.gov/Files/CCDF_Participant_Agreement_2020_20230507104710.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

development annually. Paraprofessionals must complete fifteen hours, and directors or coordinators must complete fifteen hours.⁵⁷

ABC also operates in family child care homes. In these settings, the teacher must hold a CDA and file a Staff Qualification Plan committing to completion of a bachelor's degree in early childhood education or child development. If more than ten children are enrolled, an additional staff member with a CDA must be present.

In addition to center- and home-based classrooms, ABC funds home visiting models, including Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY) and Parents as Teachers (PAT). HIPPY coordinators must hold a bachelor's degree in a relevant field (or 12 hours of ECE coursework under a Staff Qualification Plan), while home educators must hold a high school diploma or GED and a CDA. PAT coordinators must complete PAT Institute training and earn a Parent Educator or Administrator Certificate, and parent educators must also be certified through the PAT Institute.

Head Start Teacher Qualifications

Federal Head Start rules also set clear minimums by role. Early Head Start (infant/toddler) center-based teachers must hold a CDA (or comparable credential) with training focused on infant/toddler development. Preschool lead teachers must hold an associate or bachelor's degree in early childhood education or child development (or equivalent coursework), and nationally at least 50% of preschool lead teachers must hold a bachelor's degree. Assistant teachers must have a CDA (or state-awarded equivalent) or be enrolled in a degree or CDA program to be completed within two years of hire. Family child care providers must enroll in a Family Child Care CDA or degree program before beginning service and complete it within 18 months. Home visitors must hold a home-based CDA (or comparable credential) or equivalent coursework as part of an associate or bachelor's degree. Head Start also requires a minimum of 15 hours of professional development each year.⁵⁸

Minimum Licensing Requirements

Arkansas distinguishes between registered and licensed family child care homes. In registered homes, the primary caregiver must be at least eighteen years old and hold a high school diploma or GED. In licensed homes, the primary caregiver must be at least twenty-one, with secondary

⁵⁷ Arkansas Department of Education, Office of Early Childhood. (2025). 2024–2025 Arkansas Better Chance (ABC) Program Guide. Retrieved from https://dese.ade.arkansas.gov/Files/ABC_Program_Guide_Final_2024-2025_20250108163755.pdf.

⁵⁸ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start. (2024). 45 CFR §1302.91 Staff qualifications and competency requirements; §1302.92 Training and professional development. Retrieved from <https://headstart.gov/policy/45-cfr-chap-xiii/1302-91-staff-qualifications-competency-requirements>.

caregivers at least eighteen, and all caregivers must also hold a high school diploma or GED. At least one caregiver with current infant and child CPR and First Aid certification must be on site at all times. Both registered and licensed homes require orientation for new caregivers, completion of state-approved training within the first six months, and at least fifteen hours of ongoing professional development annually.^{59 60}

Arkansas licensing rules require that child care center directors be at least twenty-one years old and meet one of several educational pathways, ranging from a bachelor's degree in early childhood or child development to a combination of professional credentials and years of experience. Directors must also complete orientation and leadership training within the first six months of employment and earn fifteen hours of approved professional development annually. Staff members in centers must be at least eighteen years old, with limited exceptions for younger staff working under direct supervision and must hold a high school diploma or GED. Staff who work directly with children are required to complete at least fifteen hours of approved early childhood training each year, geared to the age group they serve.⁶¹

Table 9 summarizes the minimum qualification and professional development requirements across Arkansas ECE programs, including licensing standards for centers and family child care homes, as well as program requirements for ABC (center-based, family home, and home visiting models) and Head Start. Together, these standards show that ABC and Head Start set higher expectations for teacher preparation than minimum licensing alone.

⁵⁹ Arkansas Department of Human Services. Division of Child Care and Early Childhood Education. (2020). Minimum Licensing Requirements for Licensed Child Care Family Homes. Retrieved from https://dese.ade.arkansas.gov/Files/2020-CCFH-Clean-Copy_20230506115827.pdf.

⁶⁰ Arkansas Department of Human Services. Division of Child Care and Early Childhood Education. (2020). Minimum Licensing Requirements for Registered Child Care Family Homes. Retrieved from https://dese.ade.arkansas.gov/Files/2020-RCCFH-Clean-Copy_20230506120624.pdf.

⁶¹ Arkansas Department of Human Services. Division of Child Care and Early Childhood Education. (2020). Minimum Licensing Requirements for Child Care Centers. Retrieved from https://dese.ade.arkansas.gov/Files/2020-CCC-Clean-Copy_20230506115600.pdf.

Table 9.*Minimum Teacher Qualifications in Arkansas ECE Programs*

Role	Minimum Licensing	ABC Program	Head Start Program	Professional Development
Lead Teacher	Centers: HS diploma/GED (≥18 yrs; limited exceptions). Registered FCCs: ≥18 w/HS diploma/GED. Licensed FCCs: Primary ≥21, Secondary ≥18, HS diploma/GED.	Educator License (P–4) OR BA in ECE/CD/related field (≥12 hrs ECE/CD)	AA/BA in ECE/CD (≥50% BA nationally)	Licensing: 15 hrs/yr. ABC: 30 hrs/yr. Head Start: ≥15 hrs/yr.
Assistant Teacher / Paraprofessional	Centers: Same as lead: HS diploma/GED. All FCCs: Same as lead: HS diploma/GED.	CDA, Certificate, Technical Certificate, Birth–PreK Credential, OR AA (≥12 hrs ECE/CD)	CDA or equivalent, or enrollment in CDA/degree program (to complete in 2 yrs)	Licensing: 15 hrs/yr. ABC: 15 hrs/yr. Head Start: ≥15 hrs/yr.
Infant/Toddler Teacher	Centers: HS diploma/GED. All FCCs: Same as lead.	CDA with infant/toddler focus	Early Head Start: CDA with infant/toddler focus.	Licensing: 15 hrs/yr. ABC: 30 hrs/yr. Head Start: ≥15 hrs/yr.
Family Child Care Provider	Centers: N/A. Registered FCCs: ≥18 w/HS diploma/GED. Licensed FCCs: Primary ≥21, Secondary ≥18, HS diploma/GED.	ABC Family Homes: CDA + Staff Qualification Plan (must complete BA in ECE/CD); if >10 children, an additional CDA staff required	Enrolled in Family Child Care CDA/AA/BA program (must complete CDA in 18 mos)	Licensing: 15 hrs/yr. ABC: 30 hrs/yr. Head Start: ≥15 hrs/yr.
Home Visitor / Home Educator	N/A	HIPPY: HS diploma/GED + CDA (home educator); BA or 12 hrs ECE (coordinator). PAT: Certified Parent Educator/Coordinator (PAT Institute).	Home-based CDA or equivalent AA/BA coursework	Licensing: N/A. ABC: 30 hrs/yr (progress toward BA for coordinators). Head Start: ≥15 hrs/yr.
Coordinator (Home Visiting)	N/A	HIPPY: BA or SQP. PAT: Certified Parent Educator/Coordinator.	N/A	Ongoing PD/certification per model

Notes. ABC = Arkansas Better Chance; CDA = Child Development Associate Credential; ECE = Early Childhood Education; EHS = Early Head Start; FCC = Family Child Care; GED = General Education Development/Diploma; HIPPY = Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters; HS = High School; PAT = Parents as Teachers; PD = Professional Development; SQP = Staff Qualifications Plan. This table summarizes the minimum educational and credential requirements for staff in Arkansas’s major ECE programs. Licensing requirements are from the *Arkansas Minimum Licensing Requirements for Child Care Centers and Family Child Care Homes* (2020); ABC requirements are from the *Arkansas Better Chance Program Guide (2024–25)*; and Head Start requirements are from the *Head Start Act and Program Performance Standards*. ABC and Head Start establish higher qualification benchmarks than basic licensing alone. Providers participating in SRA must be at least Better Beginnings Level 2 and complete additional health and safety training, but SRA does not impose additional degree or credential requirements beyond licensing or program rules.

KPI W3 focuses on the qualifications of the ECE workforce, which directly influence program quality and children’s experiences.⁶² Current standards show that Arkansas’s publicly funded classrooms, particularly those in the ABC and Head Start programs, set higher expectations for staff preparation than basic licensing. As the state expands data collection to include private-pay and SRA-funded centers and family child care homes, tracking qualifications alongside compensation (KPI W2) will help identify where targeted supports (e.g., scholarships, coaching, or professional development) are most needed. Going forward, consistent workforce data across all provider types will be essential to ensure that qualifications and compensation are aligned, and that quality can be strengthened across the full ECE system.

VII. Next Steps & Recommendations

The 2025 Arkansas KPI Baseline Report identifies critical areas for strategic action and continued data improvement within the state’s early care and education system. Findings include the gap between the estimated eligible population and the children served by publicly funded programs, persistent affordability challenges, and several data blind spots that limit a comprehensive understanding of the ECE landscape. Progress will depend on addressing system-level barriers in capacity, data infrastructure, affordability, workforce stability, and quality measurement. At the same time, ensuring that parent perspectives are brought into decision-making will be essential for long-term improvements to the system.

To address the identified challenges and advance the ECE system, the following recommendations are proposed:

Expand Publicly Funded ECE Capacity and Streamline Access

Publicly funded programs such as ABC, Head Start, and SRA remain central to meeting the needs of children with working parents. Yet current estimates suggest that about 60% of eligible children are not enrolled, stressing a fundamental supply-demand imbalance. Expanding the number of slots is essential to narrowing this gap. At the same time, families continue to face challenges navigating fragmented eligibility rules across programs. A more coordinated, streamlined enrollment process could reduce barriers created by the “eligibility cliff” and ensure that children who qualify for services are able to access them.

⁶² Institute of Medicine, & National Research Council. (2015). Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation (L. Allen & B. B. Kelly (eds.); Issue April). National Academies Press. https://www.nap.edu/resource/19401/BirthtoEight_brief.pdf; Ackerman, D. J. (2008). The impact of teacher education on outcomes in center-based early childhood education programs. NIEER. <https://nieer.org/research-library/impact-teacher-education-outcomes-center-based-early-childhood-education-programs>.

Address Child Care Affordability

Affordability remains one of the most persistent barriers for Arkansas families. Families earning between 200 and 300% of the Federal Poverty Level often earn too much to qualify for subsidies but not enough to comfortably afford market-rate care. Developing targeted subsidy programs or tax credits for this group could relieve financial strain. Other states, such as Vermont, have demonstrated how significant, sustainable public investment can reduce family costs and stabilize the ECE sector. Continued analysis of regional cost burdens, particularly where lower absolute costs are offset by even lower median incomes, will also be essential to ensure affordability strategies are responsive to local conditions.

Address Access Gaps

Families' needs extend beyond the standard school year and week. The shift to four-day school weeks in some districts has created new gaps in coverage that existing child care options are not always prepared to fill. Summer care for school-age children, particularly in rural areas, remains another persistent challenge. Developing flexible partnerships and expanded programming for these periods would help prevent families from experiencing recurring shortages tied to school schedules.

Leverage Quality Assessment Tools

The implementation of the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) provides Arkansas with a new tool to strengthen quality measurement through direct observation of teacher–child interactions. As these data become available, integrating CLASS results into future KPI reports will complement existing measures such as Better Beginnings participation.

Strengthen the ECE Workforce

Low wages remain a defining challenge for the ECE workforce, driving turnover and limiting program stability. Implementing policies to raise compensation, particularly in private-pay settings, is critical to narrowing the wage gap between early educators and K–12 teachers. Expanding professional development opportunities and offering incentives for credential attainment can also support workforce advancement, building on frameworks such as Better Beginnings. Without systemic improvements in pay and professional growth, workforce shortages will continue to undermine access and quality.

Enhance ECE Data Infrastructure

A stronger data system is critical to understanding demand, enrollment, and utilization across the full ECE sector. Current gaps include the lack of statewide waitlist data for ABC programs, limited information on private-pay enrollment, and the risk of double-counting children served by multiple

funding streams. Addressing these issues will require the consistent collection and publication of waitlist data, accelerating the child count initiative to capture private-pay enrollment, and developing systems that allow for integrated reporting across programs. Filling these gaps will make it possible to target resources more effectively and to measure progress over time with greater precision.

Incorporate Parent Voice

Families' perspectives are central to building an ECE system that works in practice as well as in theory. State-specific parent surveys could provide valuable insights into child care preferences, barriers, and priorities, complementing national evidence such as the RAPID Survey Project. Gathering this information will help ensure that policies reflect the real needs of Arkansas families, particularly around affordability, flexible hours, and trusted providers.

Taken together, these steps provide a roadmap for strengthening Arkansas's ECE system. Expanding access, improving affordability, supporting the workforce, and building better data systems will require sustained investment and cross-sector collaboration. With coordinated action, Arkansas can continue to strengthen an early childhood system that is accessible, high quality, and responsive to the needs of children, families, and the state's workforce.

VIII. Conclusion

The 2025 Arkansas KPI Baseline Report sets a starting point for understanding where the state's early care and education system stands today. The indicators show progress in some areas but also point to persistent challenges. Large gaps remain between the number of children eligible for public programs and the number actually served. Child care costs continue to place a heavy burden on families, and compensation for much of the workforce lags far behind both living-wage benchmarks and K–12 educators. Quality measures reveal uneven participation in Better Beginnings, with some providers advancing through the system while others remain unrated, and new tools like CLASS are only beginning to be implemented. At the same time, important data gaps, such as the absence of statewide waitlist information and incomplete coverage of private-pay enrollment, limit a full picture of unmet need.

Overall, the findings show both strengths and vulnerabilities of Arkansas's ECE system. Tracking these KPIs over time will allow stakeholders to identify where targeted supports are most needed and track the system's progress. By returning to this baseline each year, Arkansas can measure not only whether more children are being served, but also whether care is becoming more affordable, higher quality, and supported by a stronger, more stable workforce. Building on this foundation offers the opportunity to move toward an early care and education system that fully meets the needs of children, families, and educators across the state.

Appendix A

RUCA Classification Methodology for Early Childhood Providers

To classify early care and education (ECE) providers in Arkansas by geographic context (urban, suburban, or rural), we used the Rural–Urban Commuting Area (RUCA) classification system, which assigns codes to U.S. Census tracts based on population density, urbanization, and commuting patterns (U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service [USDA ERS], 2020). We followed a multi-step process described below.

Geocoding Provider Addresses

First, provider addresses were collected from the Arkansas licensed provider database as of May 2025. We used a two-step geocoding approach to assign each provider to a 2020 Census tract:

The primary tool was the U.S. Census Bureau’s Geocoding Services (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.), which supports batch address submission and returns Census geography including tract and block codes.

Addresses that failed to return valid geography using the Census tool, often due to formatting issues, were geocoded using the Google Maps Geocoding API, accessed via the ggmap R package (Kahle & Wickham, 2013). The returned latitude and longitude coordinates were then submitted to the Census Geocoder’s “Find Geographies Using Coordinates” tool to retrieve the corresponding 2020 Census tract. This process ensured that all providers were assigned valid 2020 Census tract FIPS codes, enabling consistent geographic classification.

Merging with RUCA Codes

We merged the geocoded tract data with the 2010 RUCA code crosswalk from the USDA Economic Research Service (USDA ERS, 2020). Although 2020 Census tracts were used for geocoding, the 2010 RUCA codes remain the most recent version available and are widely used in health and policy research.

RUCA-Based Urbanicity Classification

RUCA codes were collapsed into three categories for the purpose of this report: Urban: RUCA code 1; Suburban: RUCA codes 2 or 4; and Rural: All other RUCA codes (3, 5–10). These categories were applied at the provider level.

Appendix B

Methods Summary: Measuring Child Care Access and Affordability

To assess access and affordability of licensed child care in Arkansas, we combined data from the Arkansas Department of Human Services, the UAMS Market Price Study, and the American Community Survey. Our county-level indicators provide a snapshot of licensed capacity, enrollment, and affordability burdens, with attention to national benchmarks and local implementation context. These indicators are designed to help policymakers identify geographic gaps in supply and affordability and target resources accordingly.

Licensed Capacity and Enrollment

We distinguish between:

3. Licensed capacity: The total number of child care slots a provider is licensed to serve, regardless of actual enrollment.
4. Enrollment: The number of children actually enrolled in licensed care, based on administrative data.

Some providers reported current enrollment counts for each age group, but these data were incomplete or inconsistently reported, with many records showing zero or missing values. As such, we used licensed capacity (available for over 99% of providers) as the most reliable proxy for supply when calculating county-level access metrics and identifying child care deserts.

Affordability Metrics

Affordability is assessed using the UAMS Market Price Study, which reports daily tuition rates for infants, toddlers, and preschool-aged children. We convert these daily rates into annual tuition estimates (daily rate $\times$ 5 days/week $\times$ 52 weeks/year), then compare them to each county's median household income:

5. Affordability burden = (Annual tuition $\div$ Median household income) $\times$ 100
6. Care is flagged as “unaffordable” if the burden exceeds 7%, consistent with federal benchmarks used in subsidy policy and national studies.

Child Care Desert Definition

To identify areas where the supply of licensed child care may not meet likely demand, we apply a commonly used national benchmark to flag potential child care deserts. Specifically, a county is considered a desert if it has fewer than 33 licensed child care slots for every 100 children under

age 6 with all parents in the labor force. This corresponds to a slot-to-child ratio below 0.33, or roughly one licensed slot for every three children who likely need full-time care.

This threshold is widely used by early childhood researchers and policy analysts (e.g., Malik et al., 2018) and is intended as a conservative screening tool. It helps flag areas where licensed child care options may be especially limited and where further attention, investment, or data collection may be warranted. It does not capture all aspects of child care need or availability, but it offers a useful starting point for identifying gaps in the system.

To calculate the child care desert metric, we divided the total number of licensed child care slots in each county by the number of children under age 6 with all parents in the labor force:

7. Licensed capacity was drawn from a May 2025 scrape of the Arkansas Licensed Provider database. As described earlier, licensed capacity represents the maximum number of children a provider is approved to serve and is used here as a proxy for potential supply. The count includes center-based, family child care, Head Start, school-based, and EIDT providers with non-missing capacity data.
8. Child population estimates come from the 2023 American Community Survey (ACS Table B23008), which provides county-level counts of children under age 6 with all parents in the labor force. This population is commonly used to approximate the number of children who likely need full-time care in order for parents to work.

These figures offer a point-in-time snapshot of structural capacity, not a full picture of access. For example:

9. Many providers operate below their licensed maximum due to staffing shortages, facility limitations, or funding constraints.
10. Some families may not seek licensed care, even when slots are available.
11. The supply of care may not align with when or where families need it, especially in rural areas.

As a result, the slot-to-child ratio may overstate availability in some places and understate need in others. Still, it provides a consistent and comparable metric across counties, useful for identifying where access is likely to be a concern. Future analyses will incorporate more detailed data on enrollment, staffing, and quality to provide a fuller understanding of unmet need.

Table B1.*Childcare Access by County in Arkansas*

County	Access Category	Licensed Capacity	Child Population	Access Ratio
Madison	Desert	233	869	26.8%
Grant		260	911	28.5%
Marion	Limited Access	346	630	54.9%
Perry		195	352	55.4%
Nevada		230	408	56.4%
Clay		440	735	59.9%
Little River		323	538	60.0%
Lincoln		333	537	62.0%
Saline		4138	6544	63.2%
Hempstead	Moderate Access	602	897	67.1%
Prairie		155	229	67.7%
Monroe		300	435	69.0%
Cross		712	1020	69.8%
Miller		1407	1895	74.2%
Washington		9569	12695	75.4%
Polk		576	756	76.2%
Van Buren		439	573	76.6%
Crittenden		2430	3086	78.7%
Howard		663	831	79.8%
Lonoke		3062	3835	79.8%
Faulkner		4726	5861	80.6%
Sebastian		5399	6522	82.8%
Baxter		1267	1502	84.4%
Cleveland		195	226	86.3%
Franklin		617	707	87.3%
Arkansas		694	784	88.5%
Crawford		2005	2264	88.6%
Jefferson		2886	3255	88.7%
Izard		255	286	89.2%
Sharp		653	729	89.6%
Columbia		1126	1256	89.6%
Lawrence		580	642	90.3%
Boone		1231	1351	91.1%
Johnson		898	982	91.4%
Benton		13131	14312	91.7%
Newton		202	220	91.8%
Randolph		699	758	92.2%
White		2717	2859	95.0%

County	Access Category	Licensed Capacity	Child Population	Access Ratio
Lee		316	331	95.5%
Sevier		655	686	95.5%
Greene		1878	1949	96.4%
Garland		3762	3862	97.4%
Pope		2493	2559	97.4%
Ouachita		714	725	98.5%
Hot Spring	High Access	964	946	101.9%
Jackson		706	688	102.6%
Yell		926	901	102.8%
Craighead		5763	5547	103.9%
St. Francis		1064	1023	104.0%
Poinsett		1047	1006	104.1%
Mississippi		2404	2293	104.8%
Ashley		804	765	105.1%
Independence		1913	1815	105.4%
Scott		378	357	105.9%
Carroll		877	824	106.4%
Union		1974	1836	107.5%
Logan		861	797	108.0%
Pike		381	352	108.2%
Stone		279	257	108.6%
Clark		941	841	111.9%
Woodruff		325	275	118.2%
Lafayette		174	140	124.3%
Montgomery		220	177	124.3%
Searcy		228	179	127.4%
Pulaski		24989	19301	129.5%
Drew		875	664	131.8%
Phillips		1099	825	133.2%
Desha		816	602	135.5%
Calhoun		153	111	137.8%
Conway		938	674	139.2%
Cleburne		916	626	146.3%
Dallas		438	298	147.0%
Chicot		525	346	151.7%
Bradley		503	291	172.9%
Fulton		442	239	184.9%

Appendix C

Table C1.

Use of Approved Comprehensive Curricula Among Licensed Providers

Center-Based Providers			
<u>Approved Comprehensive Curriculum Name</u>	<u>% Using Curriculum</u>	<u>N Using Curriculum</u>	<u>Total N Using Any Curriculum</u>
Adventures in Learning/Toddlers	40.61	225	554
Connecting with Infants	4.33	24	554
Buttercups, Fireflies, and FunShine*	1.44	8	554
Carol's Affordable Curriculum	0.18	1	554
Connect4Learning*	0.18	1	554
Core Knowledge*	4.51	25	554
Creative Curriculum*	13.90	77	554
Curiosity Corner*	0.36	2	554
DLM Early Childhood Express	0.18	1	554
Experience Preschool/Toddler/Baby Curriculum*	3.43	19	554
Frog Street Pre-K*	1.08	6	554
High Reach Learning Curriculum	0.72	4	554
HighScope*	0.36	2	554
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt PreK Education	1.99	11	554
Investigator Club*	0.18	1	554
Letter People - Comprehensive Preschool Program	3.61	20	554
Montessori	3.07	17	554
Opening the World of Learning	0.00	0	554
Pebble Soup	0.00	0	554
Project Approach	0.18	1	554
Reggio Emilia Inspired	1.26	7	554
Scholastic Early Childhood Curriculum	0.36	2	554
EIDT Providers			
<u>Approved Comprehensive Curriculum Name</u>	<u>% Using Curriculum</u>	<u>N Using Curriculum</u>	<u>Total N Using Any Curriculum</u>
Adventures in Learning/Toddlers	71.43	30	42
Connecting with Infants	2.38	1	42
Buttercups, Fireflies, and FunShine*	0.00	0	42
Carol's Affordable Curriculum	0.00	0	42
Connect4Learning*	0.00	0	42
Core Knowledge*	0.00	0	42
Creative Curriculum*	0.00	0	42
Curiosity Corner*	0.00	0	42
DLM Early Childhood Express	0.00	0	42
Experience Preschool/Toddler/Baby Curriculum*	0.00	0	42
Frog Street Pre-K*	0.00	0	42
High Reach Learning Curriculum	0.00	0	42
HighScope*	0.00	0	42
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt PreK Education	2.38	1	42
Investigator Club*	2.38	1	42
Letter People - Comprehensive Preschool Program	0.00	0	42
Montessori	0.00	0	42
Opening the World of Learning	0.00	0	42
Pebble Soup	0.00	0	42
Project Approach	0.00	0	42
Reggio Emilia Inspired	0.00	0	42
Scholastic Early Childhood Curriculum	0.00	0	42

Family Child Care Homes

Approved Comprehensive Curriculum Name	% Using Curriculum	N Using Curriculum	Total N Using Any Curriculum
Adventures in Learning/Toddlers	65.63	42	64
Connecting with Infants	1.56	1	64
Buttercups, Fireflies, and FunShine*	0.00	0	64
Carol's Affordable Curriculum	6.25	4	64
Connect4Learning*	0.00	0	64
Core Knowledge*	0.00	0	64
Creative Curriculum*	1.56	1	64
Curiosity Corner*	0.00	0	64
DLM Early Childhood Express	0.00	0	64
Experience Preschool/Toddler/Baby Curriculum*	1.56	1	64
Frog Street Pre-K*	0.00	0	64
High Reach Learning Curriculum	0.00	0	64
HighScope*	0.00	0	64
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt PreK Education	1.56	1	64
Investigator Club*	0.00	0	64
Letter People - Comprehensive Preschool Program	0.00	0	64
Montessori	1.56	1	64
Opening the World of Learning	0.00	0	64
Pebble Soup	0.00	0	64
Project Approach	0.00	0	64
Reggio Emilia Inspired	1.56	1	64
Scholastic Early Childhood Curriculum	0.00	0	64

Head Start and Early Head Start

Approved Comprehensive Curriculum Name	% Using Curriculum	N Using Curriculum	Total N Using Any Curriculum
Adventures in Learning/Toddlers	9.48	11	116
Connecting with Infants	3.45	4	116
Buttercups, Fireflies, and FunShine*	0.00	0	116
Carol's Affordable Curriculum	0.00	0	116
Connect4Learning*	0.00	0	116
Core Knowledge*	0.00	0	116
Creative Curriculum*	86.21	100	116
Curiosity Corner*	0.00	0	116
DLM Early Childhood Express	0.00	0	116
Experience Preschool/Toddler/Baby Curriculum*	0.00	0	116
Frog Street Pre-K*	0.00	0	116
High Reach Learning Curriculum	0.00	0	116
HighScope*	0.00	0	116
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt PreK Education	0.00	0	116
Investigator Club*	0.00	0	116
Letter People - Comprehensive Preschool Program	0.00	0	116
Montessori	0.00	0	116
Opening the World of Learning	0.00	0	116
Pebble Soup	0.00	0	116
Project Approach	0.00	0	116
Reggio Emilia Inspired	0.00	0	116
Scholastic Early Childhood Curriculum	0.00	0	116

School-Based Providers

Approved Comprehensive Curriculum Name	% Using Curriculum	N Using Curriculum	Total N Using Any Curriculum
Adventures in Learning/Toddlers	43.00	43	100
Connecting with Infants	0.00	0	100
Buttercups, Fireflies, and FunShine*	0.00	0	100
Carol's Affordable Curriculum	0.00	0	100
Connect4Learning*	0.00	0	100
Core Knowledge*	3.00	3	100
Creative Curriculum*	9.00	9	100
Curiosity Corner*	0.00	0	100
DLM Early Childhood Express	0.00	0	100
Experience Preschool/Toddler/Baby Curriculum*	0.00	0	100
Frog Street Pre-K*	0.00	0	100
High Reach Learning Curriculum	0.00	0	100
HighScope*	0.00	0	100
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt PreK Education	2.00	2	100
Investigator Club*	15.00	15	100
Letter People - Comprehensive Preschool Program	0.00	0	100
Montessori	1.00	1	100
Opening the World of Learning	1.00	1	100
Pebble Soup	0.00	0	100
Project Approach	0.00	0	100
Reggio Emilia Inspired	1.00	1	100
Scholastic Early Childhood Curriculum	4.00	4	100

Notes. Curricula marked with an asterisk (*) appear on the interim 2025 Arkansas state-approved curriculum list. This list was updated from the November 2023 version used as the basis for this analysis. Approved curricula on the 2025 list must (1) address multiple domains in Arkansas' Early Learning Standards, (2) include a structured scope and sequence aligned with developmental progressions, and (3) be currently available for purchase or open source. This analysis does not distinguish between curricula intended for different age groups or between providers serving infants/toddlers versus preschool-aged children. For example, Curiosity Corner is approved only for pre-K, but providers serving only infants and toddlers may still be included in the denominator. As a result, the percentages shown here should not be interpreted as exact measures of age-specific curriculum alignment. Additionally, the 2025 interim list includes Launchpad Foundational Literacy Curriculum as an approved literacy supplement. Because it does not appear on the 2023 approved list and is not a comprehensive curriculum, it is excluded from this analysis. Data reflect self-reported curriculum use based on licensing records web scraped in May 2025. Some providers reported use of more than one curriculum.

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