Office for Education Policy

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Arkansas Early Care & Education

Key Indicators of Access, Quality & Workforce

Baseline Report, 2025

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Executive Summary

This brief summarizes baseline indicators for access (capacity, geography), quality (Better Beginnings levels), and workforce (wages) and is intended to highlight some key findings. The full report provides details about these and additional indicators.

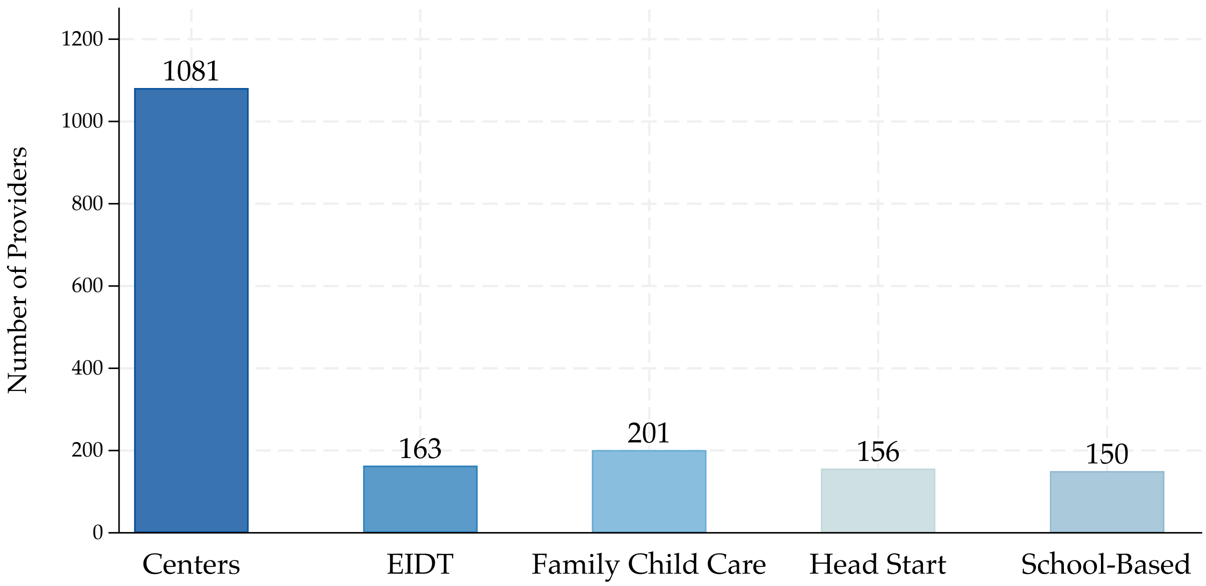
- Less than **44%** of income-eligible children are served by public ECE programs.
- Arkansas has **1,751 licensed providers**, yet capacity still falls short of potential demand for **about 137,400** children under age six with working parents.
- Geographic access is uneven: **two counties are classified as deserts** (slot-to-child ratio < 0.33), and seven more sit in the limited-access range.
- Infant care costs about **$9,600 per year**, near **16%** of median household income; high-quality care is higher.
- **78%** of providers participate in Better Beginnings, most at Levels **2–3**, relatively few at Levels **5–6**.
- Child care workers earn **about $27,000** in May 2023, preschool teachers **about $30,100**, both below the statewide median of **about $42,200** for all workers.

Key number: Less than **44%** of eligible children are served by public ECE.

Access

Arkansas relies on a diverse provider landscape, yet demand outpaces supply. Centers are the largest share of the **1,751** licensed providers, with Early Intervention Day Treatment (EIDT), family child care, Head Start, and school-based programs rounding out the system, see Figure 1.

Figure 1 – Licensed providers by type: centers, EIDT, family child care, Head Start and Early Head Start, and school-based programs



Sources: Arkansas Licensed Provider database (May 2025).

Publicly funded programs—Arkansas Better Chance, Head Start / Early Head Start, and School Readiness Assistance—served about **50,100** children in FY2024. Compared with the **113,146** children under age six living below 200% of the Federal Poverty Level (ACS 2023), this represents at most **44%** coverage, with the true share likely lower because enrollment counts are not deduplicated.

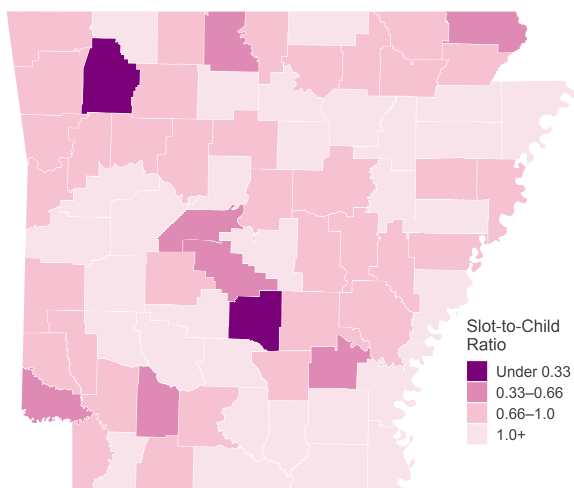
Definitions & Data

- **Eligible children:** Under 6, income-eligible based on program rules.
- **Child care desert:** Slot-to-child ratio < 0.33.
- **Access ratio:** Licensed capacity ÷ children with working parents (ACS 2023).
- **Quality metric:** Better Beginnings (Unrated, 1–6). CLASS rollout begins 2025.

Sources: ACS 2023; AR licensed provider database (May 2025); ABC and SRA enrollment rosters (July 2025); 2023 Arkansas Child Care Market Price Study (McKelvey et al., 2024).

Affordability is a statewide challenge. Full-time infant care in centers averages **about $9,600** a year (McKelvey et al., 2024), near **16**% of median household income. Even in lower-cost regions, typical families spend **12 to 15**% of income on care, above the **7**% federal benchmark.

Figure 2 – Licensed slot-to-child ratios by county: desert, limited, moderate, high access



Sources: ACS 2023; Arkansas Licensed Provider database (May 2025).

Geographic gaps remain even when measured against licensed capacity, which represents an "at best" scenario since not all providers operate at full enrollment. Two counties meet the child care desert definition (slot-to-child ratio < 0.33), and seven sit in the limited access range, see Figure 2. Looking statewide, slot-to-child ratios vary widely, from deserts at the bottom to counties with moderate or high licensed capacity coverage.

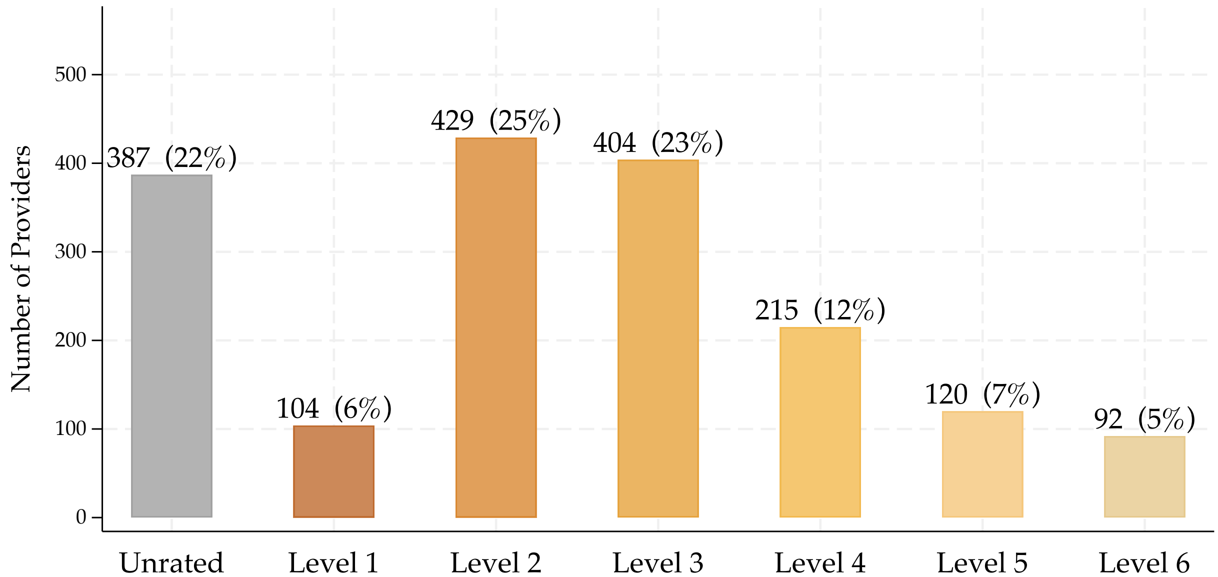
Quality

Participation in **Better Beginnings** is broad. Most rated programs are at Levels **2–3**, fewer are in the top tiers. Rural providers are more likely than urban providers to reach Levels **4–6**, though absolute numbers remain modest. The state plans to phase in **CLASS** observations to add a consistent lens on teacher–child interactions. See Figure 3, Figure 4, and Figure 5.

Figure 3 displays the number of providers in each level rating bin and that the most common levels are 2 and 3. Only the top 24% of providers obtained a level of 4 or higher. A small share, 6%, obtain a level 1 rating.

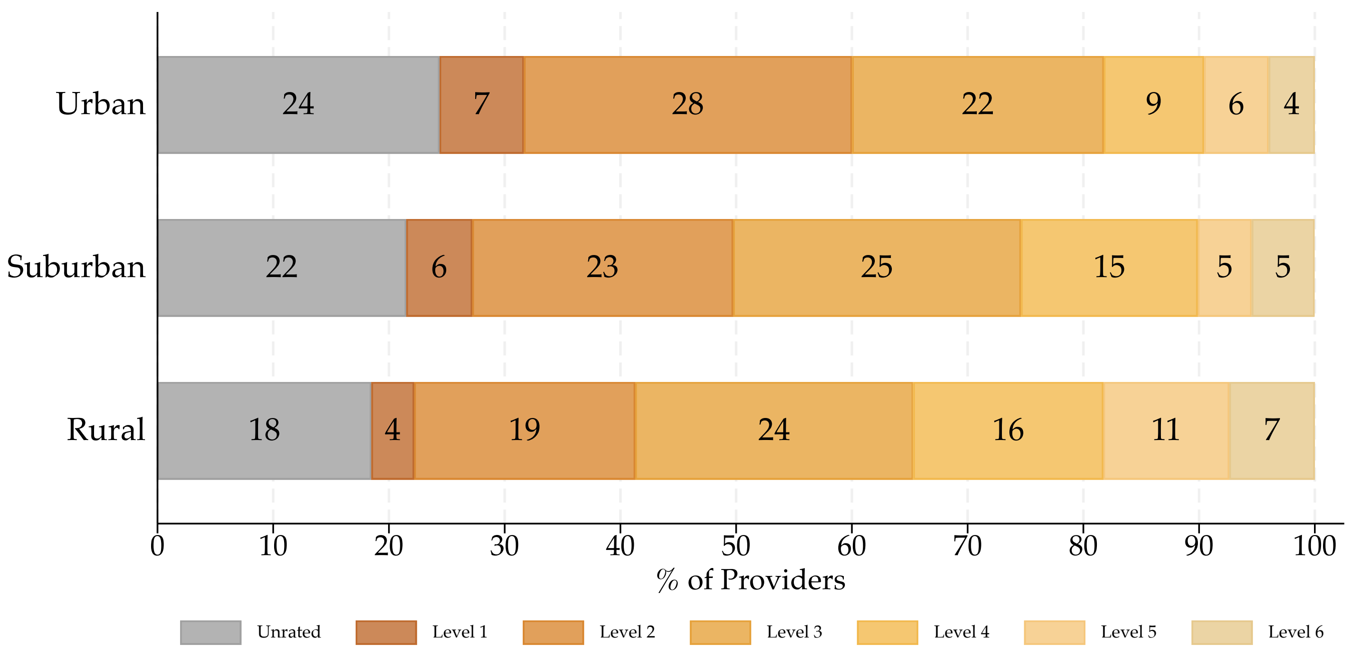
We further explore how provider's levels change across different parts of the state and across different provider types. Figure 4 shows that Urban, suburban, and rural providers show different distributions across Better Beginnings tiers. Figure 5 illustrates how quality ratings vary across provider types. Community-based centers make up the largest share of participants, followed by Early Intervention Day Treatment (EIDT) facilities, family child care homes, Head Start and Early Head Start programs, and school-based providers. The distribution of Better Beginnings levels differs across these groups, but interpretation should be cautious. Some of the unrated or lower-rated providers in Head Start and school-based settings may reflect data artifacts, since these programs generally meet stricter standards that should correspond to higher ratings.

Figure 3 – Distribution of Better Beginnings levels: Unrated and Levels 1–6



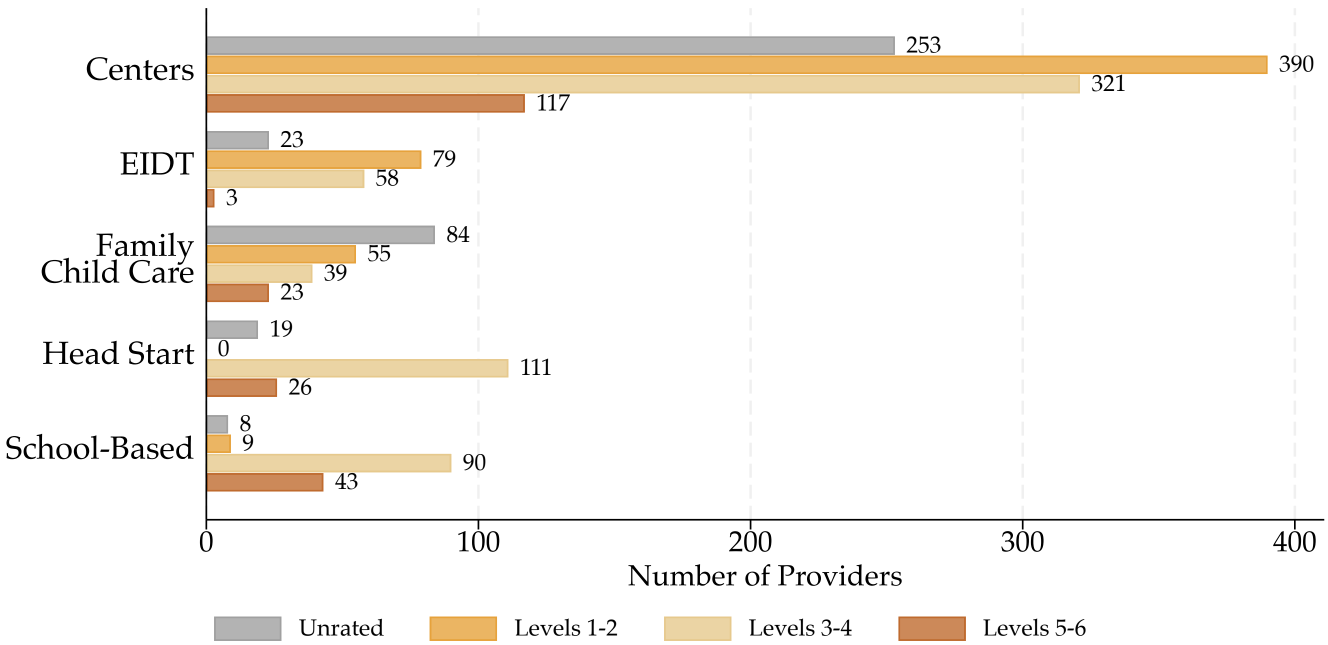
Sources: Arkansas Licensed Provider database (May 2025).

Figure 4 – Better Beginnings distribution by urban, suburban, rural



Sources: Arkansas Licensed Provider database (May 2025).

Figure 5 – Better Beginnings distribution by provider type: centers, EIDT, family child care, Head Start, and school-based



Sources: Arkansas Licensed Provider database (May 2025).

Workforce

Compensation is the central constraint. Child care workers earn **about $27,000**, preschool teachers **about $30,100**, compared with **about $42,200** for all workers. Workforce-wide hourly wages averaged about **$11.51** (in 2022 dollars), below a living wage in many counties. These low wages likely contribute to turnover and uneven staffing, especially in infant and toddler classrooms that require higher staff-to-child ratios. Some publicly funded programs, like ABC and Head Start, often offer stronger compensation than many private settings.

Limitations and Interpretation

- Capacity is licensed seats, not guaranteed availability; many programs likely operate below licensed capacity.
- Public program rosters may double-count children across programs; totals represent an upper bound.
- Coverage estimates use different eligibility thresholds by program, so participation rates are approximate, not exact.
- Costs reflect posted tuition; net price for families varies with subsidies and scholarships.
- Data gaps remain: no statewide waitlist reporting, no counts of private-pay enrollment, and no consistent workforce turnover measure.
- Quality ratings may contain data artifacts, especially for Head Start and school-based programs that should appear higher under their standards.

Policy Recommendations

1. **Expand public seats** in ABC, Head Start, and SRA to close the service gap, so more eligible children are reached. Pair this with **targeted affordability supports** for families just above current eligibility cutoffs (e.g., 200-300% FPL), who often face prices above the benchmark of 7% of household income.

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2. **Publish and link data systems**, by making waitlists publicly available (especially for ABC) and reducing double counting across programs. At the same time, build the capacity to **track workforce retention and turnover** statewide, so policymakers can target areas with the most acute staffing challenges.
3. **Stabilize the workforce** through wage enhancements, scholarships, and career ladders that extend beyond public programs to private centers and family child care homes, where turnover and shortages are often sharpest.
4. **Support quality improvement** by investing in coaching, high-quality instructional materials, and technical assistance that help providers move from Levels 2–3 into higher tiers of Better Beginnings, expanding access to high-quality seats.
5. **Integrate CLASS data** with Better Beginnings ratings to provide a fuller view of program quality, especially around teacher–child interactions. Report these data alongside QRIS tiers to inform statewide improvement.
6. **Address access gaps beyond enrollment counts**, including non-traditional work hour care, summer care, and the growing number of four-day school weeks that leave working families without coverage.
7. **Incorporate parent voice** through regular Arkansas-specific surveys to better reflect family priorities around hours, affordability, and trusted providers.