



CENTER FOR ECONOMIC AND
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT
VIRGINIA TECH.

WIOA Early Childhood Educator Workforce Development Evaluation

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January 31st, 2025



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Executive Summary:

The Ready SWVA Early Childhood Education Career Pathways program, implemented with EO, in conjunction with the New River/Mount Rogers Workforce Development Authority (NRVWDA), has successfully strengthened the region's early childhood education system by expanding the supply of childcare workers and providing essential support to operating childcare programs. As of November 2024, the program has exceeded its goal of adding 100 early childhood education teachers to the region, with 208 new hires. The program has facilitated 33 classroom expansions, enabling care for an additional 252 children. Through a combination of flexible online training, certification support, and business services, EO has enhanced operational capacity while improving the quality of early childhood education across Southwest Virginia.

Introduction

The primary objective of the EO Early Childhood Education Career Pathways program in Southwest Virginia was to strengthen the region's early childhood education (ECE) system. The stated goals of the program were to expand the supply of childcare, build and retain a skilled workforce, and provide essential back-office support to operating childcare programs. The program specifically aimed to add 100 early childhood education teachers to the region. By enhancing the skills and knowledge of early childhood educators, the program sought to improve the quality of care and education for young children, address workforce shortages, and ensure that training program participants are well-equipped to meet state and national early childhood education standards. These efforts were designed to foster a sustainable, high-quality early childhood education ecosystem in the region.

The program was supported by 4.03% of the federal U.S. Department of Labor Employment and Training Administration Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) award of \$1,240,316 made to Pulaski County on behalf of New River/Mount Rogers Workforce Development Area (NRMR WDA) by the pass-through entity, the Virginia Community College (VCC) System. The partnership between EO and NRMR WDA addressed the labor force gap in ECE and expanded access for families seeking to enter the workforce. EO supports early childhood education and development through a variety of other programs, including development assessments, matching families with childcare providers, and providing curriculum and teacher training in social-emotional skills for children. Altogether, EO's early childhood education workforce training programs strengthen the existing landscape of early childhood education support programs offered throughout the area.

This program complements the Virginia Ready Regions program, a state-driven initiative established to enhance early childhood development by creating a collaborative system that ensures children from birth to age five have access to high-quality early learning experiences. Launched in 2022, the program aims to improve coordination among local early childhood education providers, families, and community stakeholders to address regional needs and priorities. The program's key goals include improving access to and the quality of early learning programs. Ready Regions seek to prioritize quality measurement and improvement across all publicly funded early childhood classrooms in Virginia, including Head Start, public schools, private centers, and family day homes.

NRMRWDA contracted with Virginia Tech's Center for Economic and Community Engagement (CECE) to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of the effort. Beginning at project launch, economic and community specialists, evaluators and CECE graduate assistants have worked collaboratively with EO staff to collect, validate, and analyze program activities, milestones, outputs, and short and long-term outcomes. This evaluation effort sought to answer three main evaluation questions:

1. How was the overall program designed and executed?
2. What are the core outcomes of the program?
3. How has the project changed the landscape of early childhood education?

To answer these questions, the CECE team continually reviewed and verified program activity and output data, held regular meetings with EO staff to review project process, held interviews with ECE existing and new educators to understand their experience and outcomes, discussed program outcomes with childcare center operators, and validated outcomes via surveys to both providers and participants. Focus group discussions with the advisory group and critical reflection with staff enhanced findings with additional context and recommendations.

This evaluation report is divided into the following sections. First, we present a regional overview of Southwest Virginia, covering the population and demographics, income and unemployment, and commuting patterns. Next, we discuss specifically the childcare industry in Southwest Virginia, focusing on child and day services occupations. Together, the analysis of demographic, economic, and industry data trends in the region, its localities, the state, and nation help to better understand and compare historical trends and regional contexts that underlie the demographic and economic conditions that shape today's childcare industry. Second, we present a detailed description of the Ready SWVA program, highlighting the key project activities alongside goals and objectives. Third, we describe in greater detail the evaluation methods used to gather and validate data. Fourth, we move into the analysis, presenting the theory of change model for the program, and then beginning to answer each evaluation question in turn, starting with how the overall program was designed and executed, then discussing the core outcomes, before concluding with a presentation of how the program

changed the landscape of ECE in SWVA. Finally, we conclude with some recommendations for future programs seeking to enhance the supply and quality of ECE both in SWVA, and beyond.

Regional Overview of Southwest Virginia

The Southwest Virginia region presents unique demographic and economic characteristics that directly impact both the demand for and provision of early childhood education services. This section examines the key population trends, household compositions, income levels, and commuting patterns across the regions 17 counties and 4 independent cities. Understanding these regional dynamics is crucial for contextualizing the challenges and opportunities in strengthening the ECE system. The data reveals a region characterized by population decline, an aging demographic, lower household incomes compared to state averages, and distinctive commuting patterns that affect childcare needs.

Population & Demographics

The Southwest Virginia (SWVA) region includes the counties of Bland, Buchanan, Carroll, Dickenson, Floyd, Giles, Grayson, Lee, Montgomery, Pulaski, Russell, Scott, Smyth, Tazewell, Washington, Wise, and Wythe County, and the independent cities of Bristol, Galax, Norton, and Radford. SWVA is home to approximately 552,000 people as of 2022¹. The region experienced an approximate 4.6% decrease in population over the 10 years between 2012 and 2022². The region consists of 17 counties and 4 independent cities, with populations ranging from roughly 3,600 to 99,300 residents³.

Table 1: SWVA Regional Population 2012-2022

Year	Regional Population
2012	578,501
2017	571,036
2022	552,427

Source: ACS 5-year estimates, 2022

There are approximately 219,000 households across the region, with an average household size of 2.39⁴. Of these households, 8.7% have a child of 6 years of age or younger. This household size is slightly smaller than that of the state of Virginia at 2.55, and the United States at 2.50⁵. The region's average family size is 2.95, again lower than that of the state and nation at 3.14 and 3.11, respectively. Of all households in Virginia, 11.4% have a child under age 6, with a national average of 10.6%, both higher than the regional percentage⁶.

¹ U.S. Census Bureau. (2022). *American Community Survey, ACS 5-year Estimates Data Profiles*. Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov>.

² U.S. Census Bureau. (2012). *American Community Survey, ACS 5-year Estimates Data Profiles*. Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov>.

³ U.S. Census Bureau. (2022). *American Community Survey, ACS 5-year Estimates Data Profiles*. Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov>.

⁴ U.S. Census Bureau. (2022). *American Community Survey, ACS 5-year Estimates Data Profiles*. Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov>.

⁵ U.S. Census Bureau. (2022). *American Community Survey, ACS 5-year Estimates Data Profiles*. Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov>.

⁶ U.S. Census Bureau. (2022). *American Community Survey, ACS 5-year Estimates Data Profiles*. Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov>.

The racial and ethnic makeup of individual counties and cities within the region vary. All cities and counties have a majority white population, ranging from 97.7% in Dickenson County to 77.1% in Galax City⁷. Overall, the region has a 91.6% white population, with the next largest racial group being Black or African American at 3.4% of the total region. 2.4% of residents identify as Hispanic or Latino with 1.8% of residents over age 5 speaking Spanish only⁸. The region has a much higher percentage of those identifying as white alone compared to the state and nation at 63.5% and 65.9%, respectively⁹.

Income & Unemployment

There are approximately 467,000 people who are over the age of 16 in the region, representing 89.3% of the population. This is a higher percentage than the population of those over age 16 in Virginia and the United States as a whole, at 80.2% and 80.0% respectively¹⁰. However, the overall labor force participation rate of the Southwest Virginia region is 51.0%, which is much lower than the labor force participation rate of Virginia at 65.7% and the United States at 63.5%. This may be attributed to an older overall population: over 21.0% of all residents in the region are over age 65. In contrast, 17.4% of the US population and 16.8% of all Virginians are over age 65¹¹.

The region's overall unemployment rate rests at 4.6%, slightly higher than Virginia's unemployment rate of 4.4%. However, the United States' unemployment rate is marginally higher at 5.3%¹². The female labor force participation of the region is over 10% lower than that of both Virginia and the United States, which may correlate to inadequate supply of childcare facilities and professionals within the region.

⁷ U.S. Census Bureau. (2022). *American Community Survey, ACS 5-year Estimates Data Profiles*. Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov>.

⁸ U.S. Census Bureau. (2022). *American Community Survey, ACS 5-year Estimates Data Profiles*. Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov>.

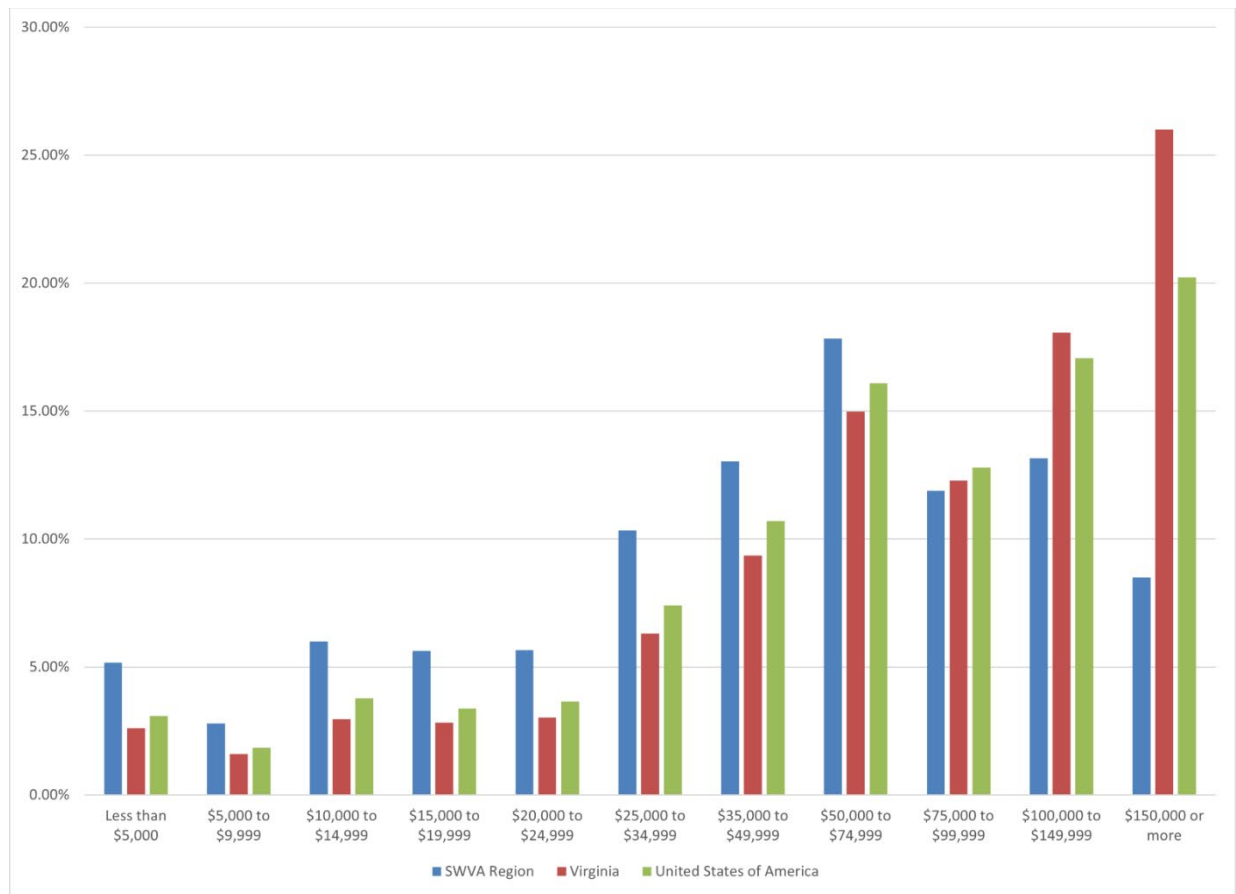
⁹ U.S. Census Bureau. (2022). *American Community Survey, ACS 5-year Estimates Data Profiles*. Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov>.

¹⁰ U.S. Census Bureau. (2022). *American Community Survey, ACS 5-year Estimates Data Profiles*. Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov>.

¹¹ U.S. Census Bureau. (2022). *American Community Survey, ACS 5-year Estimates Data Profiles*. Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov>.

¹² U.S. Census Bureau. (2022). *American Community Survey, ACS 5-year Estimates Data Profiles*. Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov>.

Figure 1: Distribution of Average Household Income



Source: ACS 5-year estimates, 2022

Overall, the median household income for the region is significantly lower than the state and nation. The median household income in the region is \$53,921, which is 32.9% lower than the median income in the US, and 47.2% lower than the median income of Virginia¹³. There are also notable differences in the distribution of average household income, with a significantly lower percentage of households earning over \$150,000 in Southwest Virginia as compared to Virginia and the United States as a whole.

Initial research found that average childcare costs can range from roughly \$13 an hour to \$18 an hour^{14,15}, which equates to over \$25,000 for full-time employees, or approximately 50% of the median household income level without additional support. While childcare costs may be lower compared to state and national averages, so are income levels.

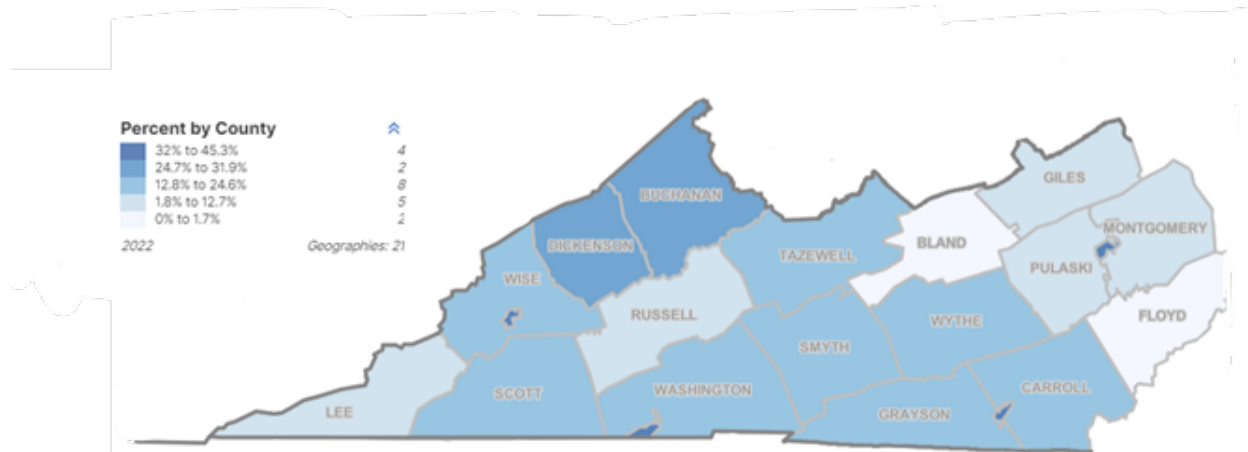
¹³ U.S. Census Bureau. (2022). *American Community Survey, ACS 5-year Estimates Data Profiles*. Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov>.

¹⁴ Care. (n.d.). How much does child care cost in Bristol, Va?. Care.com. <https://www.care.com/cost/child-care/bristol-va>

¹⁵ Care. (n.d.). How much does child care cost in Radford, Va?. Care.com. <https://www.care.com/cost/child-care/radford-va>

Due to lower earnings, a significant percentage of the population had incomes below the poverty level within the past year, especially those with children under the age of 5. Table 3 illustrates that numerous counties and cities had high percentages of households with children under the age of 5 that had household income below the poverty line. Many counties and cities had much higher percentages than that of the US and Virginia averages at 12.8% and 10.2%, respectively¹⁶. Thus, many households in the region may be unable to afford childcare due to economic distress.

Figure 2: Families with children under the age of 5 with household incomes below the poverty line in the previous year



Source: ACS 5-year estimates, 2022

Commuting Patterns

Of those in the Southwest Virginia region, 80.7% commute by driving alone to work, with 6.2% working remotely or from home¹⁷. 98.0% of workers in the region have access to at least one vehicle, signaling overall reliance on private automobiles rather than public transit in commuting, which is typical of rural regions. 62.6% of workers in the region over age 16 work within their county of residence with an overall mean commute time of 23.7 minutes among all workers. Those who commute are largely traveling to Blacksburg (Montgomery County), Dublin (Pulaski County), and Abingdon (Washington County)¹⁸. Within the region, 23.0% of workers begin their commute between 9:00am and 11:59pm¹⁹ representing workers who may work non-traditional hours outside of a “typical” 9-5 job, where commuting would begin before 9am. These workers may be unable to access childcare, as their working schedule may not align with the traditional operating hours of childcare centers or childcare workers.

¹⁶ U.S. Census Bureau. (2022). *American Community Survey, ACS 5-year Estimates Data Profiles*. Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov>.

¹⁷ U.S. Census Bureau. (2022). *American Community Survey, ACS 5-year Estimates Data Profiles*. Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov>.

¹⁸ Lightcast™. (2023). [2014-2023 Southwest Virginia Regional Report]. Retrieved from <https://analyst.lightcast.io/>

¹⁹ U.S. Census Bureau. (2022). *American Community Survey, ACS 5-year Estimates Data Profiles*. Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov>.

These regional characteristics provide both challenges and opportunities for the ECE sector in SWVA. The combination of lower median household income, higher than average poverty rates among families with young children, and notable workforce participation gaps suggests that affordable, accessible childcare is crucial for economic development. While the region’s reliance on personal vehicles and diverse work schedules necessitates flexible childcare options, the strong community ties and established local networks provide a foundation for building a more robust ECE system. Understanding these regional dynamics has been essential for developing targeted interventions that address the specific needs of SWVA families and childcare providers. Against the backdrop of regional characteristics and economic conditions, examining the childcare industry reveals how these factors directly influence the provision and sustainability of ECE businesses in SWVA.

Southwest Virginia Childcare Industry

The childcare industry operates within a complex landscape of economic constraints, workforce challenges, and regulatory requirements. This section examines key industry metrics including employment trends, wage patterns, and business operations across the region’s childcare providers. By comparing regional data with state and national benchmarks, we can better understand the unique challenges and opportunities affecting the sector. The analysis reveals significant disparities in worker compensation, and highlights the economic pressures affecting both childcare providers and their employees.

The childcare industry encompasses many different childcare service offerings. For instance, the general NAICS code for Child Day Care Services (624410) encompasses nursery schools, preschool centers, child day care centers, head start programs, and babysitting services. This industry is classified separately from those offering kindergarten educational programs, which are classified in code 611110, Elementary and Secondary Schools. Table 3 compares childcare jobs, earnings and payrolled businesses across the region, state, and nation.

Table 2: Comparing US, Virginia, and SWVA Child Day Care Services Jobs and Earnings (NAICS: 624410)

Item	Southwest Virginia	Virginia	United States
2018 Jobs	1,509	39,892	1,589,310
2023 Jobs	1,377	40,800	1,626,263
2018-2023 Change	(132)	908	36,953
2018-2023 % Change	(9%)	2%	2%
Avg. Earnings Per Job	\$25,324	\$29,903	\$28,440
2023 Payrolled Business Locations	71	1,754	78,134

Source: Lightcast 2018-2023 Southwest Virginia, Virginia, Nationwide Industry Reports

The region noticed a significant decline in the childcare industry throughout the previous 5 years as compared to the state and the nation. Year-to-year, the region saw a decline in childcare industry jobs from 2018-2020, an increase from 2020-2022, and a subsequent decrease in 2022-2023²⁰. Average annual earnings of those in the childcare industry are 72.17% lower than the median annual income of the region, \$53,921. The average annual earnings per job are equivalent to an hourly salary of \$12.13, assuming a full-time work schedule. This hourly salary is nearly equivalent to the state minimum wage of \$12.00. The living wages in the region vary by county and city but are all within the range of \$18 to \$20 an hour for a single adult with no children²¹. As such, those who are employed full-time in the childcare industry are likely earning below a living wage and may face higher rates of poverty as a result. When adjusted for the Cost of Living Index in the area (96.2), the adjusted Average Earnings per Job are \$26,324.

Table 3 also illustrates statewide data on the childcare industry. The Cost of Living Index for Virginia is 102.3, resulting in an Average Earnings per Job of \$29,903. The Average Earnings per Job are 12.7% higher in the state than the region when controlling for the associated cost of living differences. Childcare workers in the Southwest region are making lower average wages compared to their cost of living than at the statewide level²². Compared to the United States as a whole, Virginia's cost of living is 2.3% higher, though average earnings per job in childcare are 5.0% greater²³, indicating that childcare workers throughout the state are, on average, making higher wages compared to their cost of living than the nationwide level.

Child and Day Care Services Occupations

Childcare workers are a central occupation within the childcare industry, with the sector encompassing various roles and professions including early childhood educators, babysitters, nannies, teachers, and administrators. The term "Childcare Worker" (SOC 39-9011) typically includes individuals responsible for the care or education of young children under the age of 5, while "Daycare Administrators" (SOC 11-9031) may refer more specifically to those who support the business functions of daycares and childhood education centers.

The Median Annual Earnings vary greatly from those classified as Childcare Workers to those who are Administrators within the region, though all Median Annual Earnings across these occupations are less than the median salary of the region (\$53,971).

²⁰ Lightcast™.(2023). [2014-2023 Southwest Virginia Child Day Care Services Industry Report]. Retrieved from <https://analyst.lightcast.io/>

²¹ MIT. (n.d.) Living wage calculation, MIT.com. <https://livingwage.mit.edu/counties>

²² Lightcast™.(2023). [2014-2023 Southwest Virginia Child Day Care Services Industry Report]. Retrieved from <https://analyst.lightcast.io/>

²³ Lightcast™.(2023). [2014-2023 Virginia Child Day Care Services Industry Report]. Retrieved from <https://analyst.lightcast.io/>

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Table 3: SWVA Childcare Worker Overview

SOC	Description	2018 Jobs	2023 Jobs	2018-2023 Change	2018- 2023 % Change	Median Annual Earnings	COL Adjusted Median Annual Earnings
39-9011	Childcare Workers	2,235	1,305	(930)	(42%)	\$26,145	\$27,178
11-9031	Preschool/Daycare Admins	38	53	15	39%	\$50,701	\$52,703
25-2011	Preschool Teachers, except Special Education	649	596	(53)	(8%)	\$35,176	\$36,566

Source: Lightcast 2018-2023 Southwest Virginia Occupation Report

When adjusted for the overall higher cost of living in the state of Virginia, childcare industry workers in the Southwest region make relatively equivalent median annual salaries to that of the State. The largest pay disparity across the industry is Virginian Preschool/Daycare Administrators that have a median salary 3.5% higher when adjusted for Cost of Living than those of the Southwest Virginia region²⁴.

Table 4: Virginia Childcare Worker Overview

SOC	Description	2018 Jobs	2023 Jobs	2018-2023 Change	2018- 2023 % Change	Median Annual Earnings	COL Adjusted Median Annual Earnings
39-9011	Childcare Workers	47,460	41,028	(6,432)	(14%)	\$28,018	\$27,388
11-9031	Preschool/Day care Admins	1,762	2,066	304	17%	\$55,842	\$54,586
25-2011	Preschool Teachers, except Special Ed.	14,157	14,107	(50)	0%	\$37,238	\$36,401

Source: Lightcast 2018-2023 Virginia Occupation Report

From 2018 to 2023, the Southwest Virginia region, Virginia, and the United States all saw a decline in Childcare Workers, while Preschool/Daycare Administrators and Preschool Teachers increased. However, the Southwest Virginia region saw a much greater percentage decline of Childcare Workers compared to the state and nation²⁵.

²⁴ Lightcast™.(2023). [2014-2023 Virginia Childcare Occupation Report]. Retrieved from <https://analyst.lightcast.io/>

²⁵ Lightcast™.(2023). [2014-2023 Virginia Childcare Occupation Report]. Retrieved from <https://analyst.lightcast.io/>

Table 5: United States Childcare Worker Overview

SOC	Description	2018 Jobs	2023 Jobs	2018-2023 Change	2018-2023 % Change	Median Annual Earnings	COL Adjusted Median Annual Earnings
39-9011	Childcare Workers	1,854,441	1,609,852	(244,589)	(13%)	\$28,338	\$28,338
11-9031	Preschool/Da ycare Admins	70,488	90,189	19,701	28%	\$51,673	\$51,673
25-2011	Preschool Teachers, except Special ed.	527,200	557,715	30,515	6%	\$36,506	\$36,506

Source: Lightcast 2018-2023 United States Virginia Occupation Report

One of the most critical aspects of ensuring that families across Virginia have access to high-quality, affordable child care is the ability to attract and retain passionate and talented individuals in the industry. Early childhood care professionals are required to complete specific training before they are permitted to lead a classroom. As of 2021, all child care professionals in Virginia must complete the Virginia Preservice Training for Child Care Staff course within 90 days of starting their employment. Additionally, staff are required to complete the Virginia Health and Safety Update Training annually.²⁶

Child care professionals must also:

- Be CPR certified.
- Complete Medication Administration Training (MAT) if administering medication
- Participate in 16 hours of ongoing professional development each year.
- For those working in programs serving individuals with special needs or therapeutics, an additional 4 hours of training is required annually.²⁷

²⁶ Virginia Department of Education. (n.d.). *Training and professional development for child care providers*. Virginia Child Care. <https://www.childcare.virginia.gov/providers/training-and-professional-development>

²⁷ Virginia Administrative Code. *Title 8. Education, Agency 20. State Board of Education, Chapter 780. Regulations Governing the Review and Approval of Education Programs in Virginia, Section 245*. Virginia Law. <https://law.lis.virginia.gov/admincode/title8/agency20/chapter780/section245/>

Program directors face even more requirements to ensure they are well-prepared to manage child care facilities effectively. These requirements can be reviewed in the appendix.²⁸

This data paints a clear picture of a childcare industry facing significant challenges in SWVA. While the region has experienced a decline in childcare jobs over the last five years, the challenges exist beyond workforce numbers. The combination of lower-than-living wages for workers, limited ability for centers to increase compensation, and higher costs relative to regional income levels creates a complex set of barriers to industry growth and stability. These industry conditions, coupled with the broader regional economic context, underscores the critical importance of workforce development and business support initiatives in strengthening the ECE system. The next section introduces the program in further detail, describing the core strategies, deliverables, program activities, and participant types.

Program Overview

The EO-implemented Ready SWVA ECE training program represents a comprehensive initiative to strengthen SWVA's ECE system through workforce development, operational support, and industry collaboration. Supported by federal funding through WIOA, the program addresses critical regional needs by expanding the supply of qualified childcare workers, enhancing the skills of existing educators, and providing essential business support to childcare centers. This section outlines the program's core strategies, deliverables, and activities.

Strategies

To achieve these objectives, EO employed a multifaceted approach. Key strategies included conducting a Regional Childcare Gap Analysis to identify needs and opportunities and increasing engagement with the K-12 education system to build a pipeline of future early childhood education workers. The program also launched a Regional Shared Services Alliance to provide operational efficiencies for childcare providers, while offering back-office support to streamline administrative tasks. Additionally, the program assists childcare operators in recruiting, training, and hiring new workers and offers training and professional development opportunities to upskill existing childcare workers. Collaboration with local early childhood education centers, ongoing mentorship, and a focus on sustainable workforce development are core components of these strategies.

²⁸ Virginia Administrative Code. *Title 8. Education, Agency 20. State Board of Education, Chapter 780. Regulations Governing the Review and Approval of Education Programs in Virginia, Section 190.* Virginia Law. <https://law.lis.virginia.gov/admincode/title8/agency20/chapter780/section190/>

Deliverables

The program's deliverables aimed to create a robust and sustainable early childhood education workforce and enhance childcare services across Southwest Virginia. These deliverables included:

Reports

Labor Shortage Report: A comprehensive analysis of the current labor shortage in early childhood education to identify existing gaps in the hiring and retention of the early childhood education workforce.

Early Childcare Career Pathway Report: A detailed report outlining potential career pathways within early childhood education, aimed at guiding current and future workers into sustainable, long-term careers in the sector.

Recruitment & Hiring

Recruitment Dashboard: A dynamic tool on EO's website to track recruitment efforts, including metrics on job placements, retention rates, and recruitment sources.

Outreach Campaign Development and Implementation: A targeted outreach campaign to raise awareness of career opportunities in early childhood education, including digital and community-based efforts.

Sponsor 20 Hiring Events: Sponsor events at community colleges, high schools, and community events to connect childcare centers with qualified candidates.

Training Program Development

Early Childhood Education Career Pathway Program: Develop a structured program to guide individuals through the various stages of early childhood education careers, from entry-level positions to leadership roles.

100 K-12 Teachers Providing Career Pathway Instruction: Provide 100 K-12 teachers with special instruction and resources to educate students on career pathways in early childhood education, fostering early interest in the field.

Work-Based Learning Opportunities: Facilitate 250 students' participation in work-based learning opportunities within early childhood education, offering hands-on experience in classrooms and centers.

Incumbent Worker Training: Provide professional development and upskilling opportunities for 250 incumbent childcare workers to enhance their skills and retain them in the workforce.

Business Support

Business Support for Incumbent Worker Training: Serve 50 local childcare businesses by delivering targeted incumbent worker training programs that address specific workforce needs.

Shared Service Alliance Participation: Engage 100 local childcare businesses in the Shared Service Alliance (SSA), a collaborative initiative designed to improve operational efficiency and reduce costs through shared resources.

Business Workshops and Roundtables: Sponsor 30 workshops, roundtables, and surveys to engage local businesses, encourage collaboration, and share best practices for improving early childhood education services.

These deliverables are designed to strengthen the childcare workforce, create career pathways, improve business operations, and ensure the sustainability of early childhood education services throughout Southwest Virginia.

Core Program Activities

To accomplish the deliverables above, the program was divided into several core program activities. A description of each of these activities is provided below:

Outreach Campaign

To encourage program participation and emphasize the program to potential interested students, EO launched an outreach campaign that included video testimonials, social media outreach, a podcast series, thought leadership articles, a television commercial, and billboard advertisements in Southwest Virginia. These efforts primarily engaged new participants who did not currently work in the early childhood education industry, and alerted early childhood education centers in the area to the program. The majority of incumbent participants learned of the program directly through their employer.

Shared Services Alliance

The program launched a Regional Shared Services Alliance (SSA) aimed at providing operational efficiencies for local childcare providers. This initiative allows businesses to pool resources, such as administrative support, staff training, and procurement, reducing costs and improving service delivery. These services help providers reduce costs, maximize profits, operate at full capacity, and redirect their resources to employee salaries and benefits. Figure 3 introduces the shared service model, and the benefits associated with each tier.

Figure 3: EO's Three-Tier Shared Services Model

SERVICES	TIER 1	TIER 2	TIER 3
Technology: Director's Academy	✓	✓	✓
Human Resources: Onboarding Tools/Orientation for New Hires, Coordination for CPR Training, First Aid, & Background Checks	✓	✓	✓
Virtual Support: Private Facebook Group & Monthly Support Calls	✓	✓	✓
Professional Development: Workshops & Trainings	✓	✓	✓
Bulk Ordering of Supplies	✓	✓	✓
Compliance Support: Subsidy Enrollment/Processing, Licensing, & CACFP Navigation	✓	✓	✓
Virginia Shared Services Network (VSSN) Membership	✓	✓	—
Business Templates: Hundreds of Resources for Download (VSSN)	✓	✓	—
Cash-Back Discount Program (VSSN)	✓	✓	—
Health: Dental & Vision Plans, Telehealth Coverage (VSSN)	✓	✓	—
Job Tools: Access to VA Childcare/ECE Job Hub & Job Candidate Screenings (VSSN)	✓	✓	—
Technology: Childcare Management Software	✓	—	—
Office Support: Enrollment/Waitlist Management	✓	—	—
Finance/Accounting: Billing & Collections for Tuition/Fees, Bookkeeping Services, Financial Reports	✓	—	—
1-on-1 Business Coaching	✓	—	—
Office Support: Payroll Processing	✓	—	—
Human Resources On-Call	✓	—	—

All tiers of the Shared Services Model are offered at no-cost to centers. Depending on the center’s desired level of support and their physical location, centers are eligible for different tiers of membership.

Originally, Tier 1 levels of membership were limited to Grayson, Russell, Smyth, and Washington counties as the primary service area for the funder in creation of the SSA. With additional funding, EO increased the Tier 1 service area to include providers from the cities of Bristol and Norton, and Buchanan, Dickenson, Lee, Scott, Tazewell, and Wise Counties. Tiers 2 and 3 are open to all 21 localities in the service area.

Hiring Events

As part of its efforts to address the childcare workforce shortage, EO organized hiring events throughout Southwest Virginia to connect childcare centers with qualified candidates. EO primarily partnered with local educational institutions to recruit students interested in joining the workforce though also worked with county-wide career fairs designed to attract both new workers and experienced professionals. Some hiring events specifically targeted the early childhood education sector, including an ECE day for New River Valley Students in October

2023. While not directly considered “hiring events,” EO also held several events with K-12 schools to expose children to early childhood education as a future career path, helping to strengthen the pipeline of interested workers.

Through these efforts, EO increased the overall visibility and awareness of early childhood education as a career and recruited people interested in joining the workforce. From these hiring events, some students went on to interview directly with childcare providers, while others first completed the virtual training program to become more qualified to enter the industry.

Business workshops

A central component of the program is the organization of business workshops and roundtables, designed to support the growth and sustainability of early childhood education providers. These sessions provided early childhood education directors with valuable insights into best practices in areas such as financial management, staff recruitment and retention, marketing strategies, and regulatory compliance. The workshops fostered a collaborative environment where providers exchanged ideas and shared challenges. These events also facilitated networking among providers, creating a supportive community of peers committed to strengthening the early childhood education system in Southwest Virginia.

Training Opportunities – Google Classroom

The program offers training opportunities designed to support the professional growth of early childhood educators and introduce new workers to the industry. A key feature of the training program is the use of Google Classroom, a flexible online platform that allows for continuous asynchronous learning. Through Google Classroom, participants access approximately 20 hours of training material prepared by EO and complete modules at their own pace.

Professional Development for Incumbent Workers – For current childcare workers, the Google Classroom module provides opportunities for workers to obtain state-required professional development hours and refresh skills related to classroom management and early childhood development.

Training for New Industry Entrants – For those new to the field, the Google Classroom modules help develop foundational skills required for working in the early childhood education sector. Modules explaining child behavior, safety and health standards, and creating productive learning environments ensure that new employees are well-prepared to enter the industry. Interested new industry entrants may complete this training program to become a more qualified candidate during their job search, or may complete the program as an onboarding training when hired by a center.

Training Opportunities – Certification Training

EO coordinates Medication Administration Training (MAT) and Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation (CPR) certification classes to childcare centers across Southwest Virginia, ensuring that childcare workers are equipped with essential health and safety skills. By offering these trainings directly at the centers, the program makes it easier for providers to meet regulatory requirements and ensure their staff is prepared for emergencies. MAT training covers safe medication administration practices, including proper dosages, storage, and emergency procedures, while CPR certification teaches life-saving techniques for infants, children, and adults experiencing cardiac arrest. These training sessions help improve the quality of care, increase staff confidence in handling medical situations, and contribute to a safer environment for both children and caregivers. EO staff visited centers to provide this training as requested, providing a cost savings to centers that typically rely upon third-party providers for the training.

School Partnerships

Throughout the program, strong partnerships with both K-12 schools and community colleges allowed students of all ages to gain exposure to the early childhood education industry and complete training modules offered through EO. New River Community College and Southwest Community College both offer the training program as an integrated part of Childhood Development (CHD) 120: Intro to Early Childhood Education, and New River Community College also offers it through Health 135: Child Health and Nutrition. Through these classes, students complete the training program as a graded requirement for course completion.

K-12 students at Radford, Pulaski, Blacksburg, Grundy, Honaker, and Virginia High School and Washington and Giles County Career and Technical Education Programs participate in EO programs through Early Childhood Education and Teachers of Tomorrow Programs. In these settings, students may complete a portion of the Google Classroom training offered through EO's full program or may receive additional training directly from EO staff.

Participant classifications

For tracking and targeted engagement purposes, EO classified program participants as *emerging, new, or incumbent*. Each of these participant types is explained in detail below:

Emerging

Emerging participants are K-12 or community college students who are exploring early childhood education as a potential career path. They may gain practical experience by working in the childcare industry during summer breaks, providing them with early exposure to the field. While they may not complete the full online training program, finishing specific modules qualifies as program completion for these participants.

New

New participants are not currently enrolled in school and have not yet entered the childcare industry. They may be seeking a career change or looking to enter or re-enter the workforce. The program helps them gain foundational knowledge and skills needed to pursue a career in early childhood education and connects them with childcare centers seeking new employees. Participants who complete EO's program during their onboarding process at a childcare center are also classified as new participants.

Incumbent

Incumbent participants are individuals already employed in the childcare industry who are looking to enhance their professional development. These participants use the program as professional development, both to hone classroom management and safety skills, and fulfill state-required professional development hours.

Through its multifaceted approach combining training, business support, and educational programs, the Ready SWVA program has created a framework for sustained improvement in SWVA's ECE sector. The program's structure reflects a deep understanding of regional needs, incorporating flexible learning options, direct support services, and targeted engagement strategies for different participant groups. The complexity and scope of these program elements necessitated a comprehensive evaluation approach to track implementation progress and measure outcomes. The following section details the evaluation methodology and data sources used to assess the program's effectiveness in increasing ECE capacity in SWVA.

Evaluation methods and data sources

The evaluation of EO's Ready SWVA program utilized a collaborative approach between EO's internal program team and external evaluators from CECE. This partnership enabled comprehensive data collection and analysis through multiple channels, combining EO's direct program implementation data with CECE's independent assessment methods. The evaluation design incorporated both quantitative and qualitative approaches to measure program activities, outputs and outcomes, while maintaining rigorous data verification processes. Through regular meetings and strategic coordination between internal and external evaluators, the team developed and implemented data collection tools that could effectively capture both immediate program outputs, and also longer-term systemic changes in the regions early childhood education landscape. This section describes the key data sources and methodology used to gather and analyze the data.

Data Collection

The evaluation of this program drew from two complementary and integrated data collection approaches. First, EO's internal program team maintained detailed implementation records through participant tracking sheets, monthly ProjectHub reports, and standardized intake surveys. This monitoring data provided continuous insights into program activities and immediate outputs. CECE conducted independent primary data collection through surveys and interviews with providers and participants.

Monitoring data collected and reported by EO

To track participant engagement, EO employed multiple data collection tools and reporting mechanisms. These sources provide a comprehensive view of participant progress, program utilization, and overall impact. The methodology incorporates data from various stages of participant interaction with the program, enabling an analysis of both short-term and sustained engagement.

Intake survey

An intake survey was administered to all participants at the start of their engagement with the program. This survey collected baseline data on participant needs, goals, and expectations. It also provided critical information for tailoring program offerings and measuring progress against initial conditions. The standardized format ensured consistency across responses, enabling comparisons across participant groups.

Excel participant tracker

Follow-up retention checks were conducted at 90-days, 6 months, and 1 year post-program completion with centers. These follow ups were a way to assess participant outcome and employment status changes. However, the data collection faced some limitations, including participant response bias. These challenges may have affected the representativeness and reliability of the follow-up data, particularly for longer-term outcomes. EO collected this data directly and reported collected data in a participant tracking sheet, updated monthly.

Monthly reports from ProjectHub on participation numbers

Throughout the project's lifecycle, EO created monthly reports to document progress towards deliverable goals. These reports tracked participation numbers, including the number of participants who both enrolled in and completed the Google Classroom training program, centers serviced by the SSA, and recruitment events held. EO also submitted monthly reports to NRMW WDA for their review, which included additional information regarding monthly program challenges and successes, and upcoming events. The team aggregated these reports in ProjectHub, an online database, for organization and easy tracking throughout the project.

Provider monitoring data

Monthly participation data was updated through ProjectHub, a centralized tracking platform. These reports provided quantitative insights into overall program engagement, including the number of active participants, session attendance rates, and completion statistics. It also tracked recruitment and training events. This served as the central location to capture the quantitative data based on metrics captured by the EO team.

External primary data collection

While this monitoring data provided crucial insights into program activities and participant progress, additional primary data collection was needed to fully understand program outcomes and impacts. The external evaluation team at CECE designed and implemented surveys and interviews to gather detailed feedback about program effectiveness and identify opportunities for improvement.

Provider Survey

The Ready SWVA Program Provider Survey was developed to gather feedback from early childhood education center directors and providers regarding training offerings, program effectiveness, and future needs. Of 51 providers served, the survey received 30 responses, 17 of which were fully completed, for an overall response rate of 33%. The results provide valuable insights into the benefits of the training program for childcare providers and highlight areas for future improvement.

Participant Survey

The Program Participant Survey was developed to gather feedback from participants on their perspectives regarding the training program and its impact on their experiences in the early childhood education sector. The survey aimed to highlight trends in employment status, job satisfaction, career interests, and factors influencing employee retention and success. Participants included those who completed Google Classroom training or CPR/MAT certification. The survey was created via QuestionPro and distributed via email to participants in the program. Additionally, follow-up emails were sent to remind participants to take part in the survey before it closed, and phone calls to participants sought to increase response rates. Of the 632 participants served, the survey received 75 responses with 60 responses being fully completed for response rate of just under 10%.

Provider Interviews

Providers were interviewed to collect qualitative data on how the training program impacted their employees and whether it contributed to workforce retention. These interviews focused on the perceived benefits of the training, such as improvements in employee skills, job performance, and confidence in their roles. Providers were also asked to reflect on whether the

training addressed specific workforce challenges, including employee turnover or gaps in expertise. The team was able to interview 7 providers and collect their feedback.

Participant interviews

Participants were interviewed to collect qualitative data aimed at gaining a deeper understanding of their experiences in the training program. These interviews explored their feelings, challenges, and successes, as well as the impact the program had on their personal and professional growth. Participants were encouraged to share their perspectives on the program's structure, relevance, and the effectiveness of its curriculum. The interviews also provided an opportunity to identify any barriers to success or areas for improvement, offering valuable feedback to enhance future iterations of the program.

These were conducted via a volunteer basis from previous participants. The interviews last between 20-30 minutes and the team conducted 5 interviews. Interviewees received an incentive gift valued at approximately \$35 for their time and participation.

Data limitations

Some limitations to data collection included lower than ideal response rates from participants, and higher than expected drop-off rates for the surveys. The evaluation team sought to increase these response rates by calling participants and emailing them directly to encourage participation. Additionally, surveys from participants may have a positive response bias, as those who dropped out of the program or decided not to pursue ECE as a career may not have been as motivated to respond despite the evaluation teams efforts to reach them. Beyond the limitations in survey response rates, the overall response rate to the interview requests to participants was similarly low. Though an in-depth discussion with participants about their experiences enhanced our understanding of the quantitative data, more interviews, especially with participants who are not currently employed in ECE could have provided valuable information about retention challenges.

The combination of EO's program monitoring data with CECE's independently gathered interview and survey data created a rich dataset capturing both implementation processes and challenges, as well as program outcomes. Monthly tracking data documented program activities and participant progress, while surveys and interviews provided deeper insights into impact and experiences. This collection of data required systematic analysis to effectively assess program performance and identify key findings. The following section details how the evaluation team analyzed and synthesized the data to generate conclusions about the programs effectiveness in strengthening the ECE landscape in SWVA.

Analysis

Analysis of program monitoring data together with triangulation of survey and interview data, coupled with regular critical reflection with EO staff provided a coherent pictures of program implementation successes and challenges. The evaluation team used the program logic model, created and validated at the beginning of the project, to identify key themes and causal linkages within the program.

Quality Checks of Monitoring Data:

To ensure database accuracy and quality, the external evaluation team reviewed the monthly changes to the database and monitored it for any discrepancies. If discrepancies arose the project team met with the EO team to understand why they existed and resolve them. These figures provided the basis of the data used to evaluate the quantitative impacts to the program.

Triangulation of survey and interview data

Qualitative survey and interview data was coded deductively based on the elements of the logic model (shown below). Using the survey and interviews alongside the data provided by EO (quantitative) the research team was able to identify key themes by comparing codes between evaluators, and then by triangulating from the different data sources to identify trends and impacts of the program. By integrating these data sources, the research team was able to cross-validate findings, ensuring greater reliability and depth in analysis. This approach allowed the team to identify patterns that might not have been apparent through a single data source, such as connections between participant satisfaction and completion or the relationship between provider feedback and workforce retention.

Critical reflection with EO staff

In an effort to ensure transparency and accuracy throughout the evaluation process, the project team regularly met with EO staff for feedback, clarification, and reflection. These meetings focused on reviewing both quantitative and qualitative data findings. This often involved examining monthly reports to verify accuracy and resolve any discrepancies from month to month.

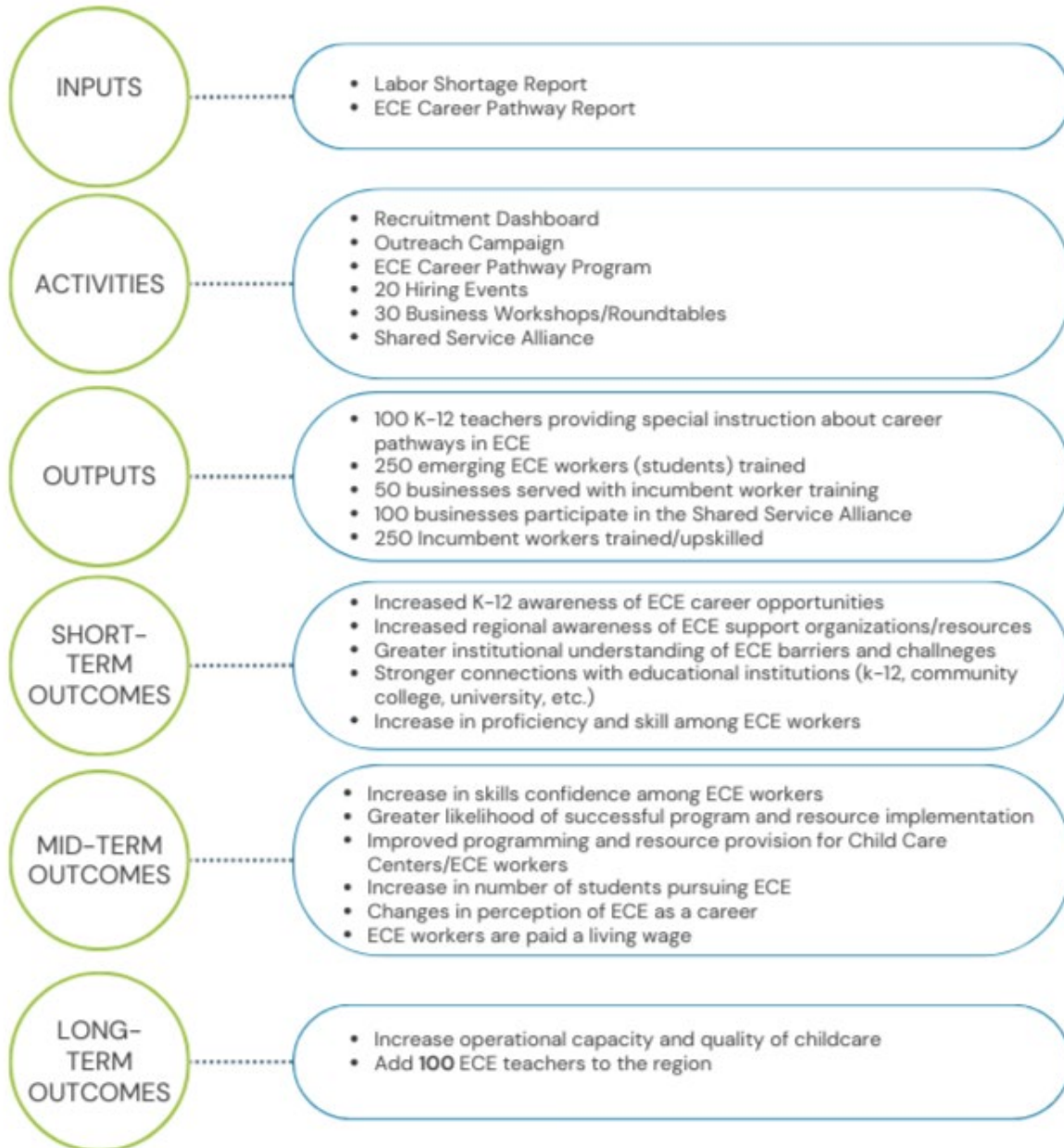
The project team also worked collaboratively on the logic model and other evaluation tools, tailoring them to effectively evaluate the most significant aspects of EO's work. Integrating feedback was a key component of this process, ensuring alignment and consistency throughout the life of the project.

Logic Model

To provide a broad overview of key activities and expected outcomes, the following logic model provides a visual representation of the program's structure, activities, and outputs. This model

guides further understanding of how initial inputs and resources impact the accessibility and quality of childcare within the region.

Figure 4: Ready SWVA Logic Model



Methodological Assumptions and Adjustments

The evaluation framework initially operated under the assumption that the training program would lead to greater early childhood education teacher retention through improved self-confidence and self-efficacy. This assumption suggested that the program would increase fulfillment and satisfaction with early childhood education as a career opportunity. However, as

the evaluation progressed, center directors consistently reported that the program did not significantly impact overall teacher retention. Directors noted that employees continued to leave for various reasons, including seeking jobs with higher pay, less emotional stress, and greater healthcare benefits.

This discovery required the evaluation team to adjust their analytical approach. While the training program successfully increased employee feelings of confidence within their job, the evaluation needed to identify separate program completion metrics from retention outcomes. The high completion rate among enrollees did not necessarily correlate to retention or continued employment. This realization led the team to focus more deeply on analyzing the structural barriers to retention that existed beyond the scope of the training program.

The strength of this evaluation approach lay in its ability to leverage both teams' expertise and access to different stakeholder groups. While EO's internal team maintained detailed participant tracking and monthly reporting through ProjectHub, CECE provided independent verification and deeper analysis through surveys and interviews with providers and participants. The provider survey and participant survey achieved response rates of 33% and 10% respectively, supplemented by in-depth interviews with 7 providers and 5 program participants. This dual approach to data collection and analysis helped ensure both accuracy and objectivity in assessing program outcomes. Despite some limitations in long-term follow-up data collection, especially in light of unforeseen challenges in participant retention post-placement, the collaborative evaluation method provided a robust framework for understanding both the immediate and broader impacts of the program on SWVA's early childhood education landscape. The findings in the subsequent sections reflect this comprehensive approach and are structured according to the elements of the logic model.

Core Program Outputs and Outcomes

The Ready SWVA program achieved significant results while navigating the complexities of early childhood education. The program exceeded several key deliverable targets, including training 252 incumbent workers against a goal of 250 and facilitating the hiring of 208 new educators, surpassing the original target of 100. These quantitative achievements were accompanied by meaningful qualitative outcomes, including increased operational capacity at childcare centers, improved confidence among early childhood educators, and stronger regional collaboration through the Shared Services Alliance. Following the logic model presented in Section 3, these initial outputs led to short-term outcomes such as increased knowledge sharing amongst educational institutions, which in turn supported medium-term outcomes including enhanced workforce skills and shifting perceptions of early childhood education as a career path.

Outputs

Outputs are a type of program metric that signifies that an activity is underway or has been completed. Outputs can include metrics such as reports or deliverables completed, the number of participants or businesses served through a program, or the number of participants receiving a certification. Throughout the project, EO tracked monthly progress against their targeted deliverable areas. As of November 2024, EO completed 9 of 12 deliverable goals (Table 7), notably exceeding the deliverable goals of training 250 incumbent workers and providing 250 students with work-based learning opportunities. These goals reflect the initial project timeline from July 2023 to September 2024, though the program received a funding extension to operate through March 2025.

Table 6: Core Program Deliverables and Outputs

Deliverable area	Outputs
Provide a Labor Shortage Report	Completed in July 2023
Provide an Early Childcare Career Pathway Report	Completed by Virginia Tech Center for Economic and Community Engagement in 2024 as a Career Lattice
Create a Recruitment Dashboard	Completed in March 2024
Develop an Outreach Campaign	Completed in March 2023
Implement an Outreach Campaign	Fully Launched September 2023
Sponsor 20 Hiring Events	35 Events Held
Develop Early Childhood Education Career Pathway Program	Completed in April 2023
Provide 250 Students with Work-Based Learning Opportunities	412 students enrolled / 380 program completions
Train 250 Incumbent Workers	311 students enrolled / 252 program completions
50 Businesses Served with Incumbent Worker Training	51 Businesses served
100 Businesses participate in the Shared Service Alliance	53 Businesses Enrolled (102 receiving a form of back-office support)
Sponsor 30 Business Workshops/Roundtables/Surveys	26 Completed

While not directly tracked as a deliverable goal, 57 participants completed Medication Administration Training (MAT), and 107 completed Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation (CPR) training as of December 2024. These participants include both new and incumbent workers in the industry. Several providers noted that having EO offer these lifesaving trainings at no-cost to centers provided cost savings to the center.

An analysis of program outputs indicates that EO was successful in meeting or exceeding all of its initially developed program goals.

Short-Term Outcomes

The evaluation identified several significant short-term outcomes resulting from the program's initial outputs and activities. Short-term outcomes represent the immediate changes in skills, attitudes or knowledge that occur after program activities are completed. For Ready SWVA, these included: enhanced knowledge sharing through the SSA, strengthened connections with educational institutions, and increased proficiency among early childhood education workers.

Increased Knowledge Sharing through Shared Service Alliance

Directors also benefited from an increase in regional awareness of support available to early childhood education centers, primarily from the Shared Service Alliance (SSA). As of November 2024, 53 businesses joined the alliance, receiving support ranging from technical business operation assistance to professional development and business coaching. Certain tiers of the SSA also allowed for centers to join the Virginia Shared Services Network at no-cost, giving centers access to low-cost telehealth, dental, and vision benefits.

One center director from a newly created ECE center stated the SSA “helped tremendously” in providing start-up support. The director participated in a business challenge program and received a \$10,000 award to assist in purchasing new equipment and learning materials. Centers also had the opportunity to collaborate with other centers in the area and suggest new ideas for classroom management, recruitment strategies, and employee management. The director also noted that her professional network grew significantly as a result of participating in the SSA. When the center began exploring participation in a United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) food program, the director offered that they received significant guidance from another member of the SSA that currently used the program. Participation in the SSA increases knowledge sharing, in addition to the technical operational support the program provides.

Connections with Educational Institutions

To foster an early interest in early childhood education, EO partnered with several local school districts to provide information and exposure to the early childhood education career pathway to students in the area. High school students in 6 different high schools and two county-wide career & technical education programs participated in certain modules of EO's training program directly through their schools. As of December 2024, 34 high school students completed portions of the Google Classroom training program in partnership with EO and their school. Center providers noted that high school students occasionally work at centers during school breaks, and some return to work for centers full-time upon graduation. During an interview, a center director noted that EO's program helped high school students to see if they “would be interested in a career” in the area. That director employed a high school student who used the position at the childcare center to fulfill internship hours required by their high school. Creating

partnerships between early childhood education institutions and local high schools can build pipelines of interested students and create clear pathways for high school students to build a career in the industry.

EO also hosted booths at various hiring events throughout the area, several of which included career fairs at local high schools and community colleges. 8 of these hiring events were directly affiliated with area high schools, with an additional 4 events directly affiliated with local community colleges. In total, 66 participants enrolled in the program directly through hiring events, though the amount affiliated with educational institution-affiliated events was not directly tracked.

Increase in Proficiency and Skill Among ECE workers

Prior to EO's training program, ECE directors relied upon in-house trainings, which required additional staff support and presented a cost burden to centers. However, EO's training is flexible and asynchronous, allowing new and emerging employees to learn without the direct guidance of center directors and supervisors. EO's training program, based upon best practices and Virginia state standards, allowed these employees to learn required skills and allowed center directors to continue directing attention to daily operations and staff management.

New and emerging participants reported that the Google Classroom training was "engaging", "held [their] attention" and prepared them for "the worst-case scenarios" they may experience in a classroom". Participants also noted that they had the flexibility to complete training outside of traditional working hours and could complete training at their own pace. Extensive focus on emergency preparedness, including natural disasters and medical emergencies ensured that participants felt confident in addressing unexpected situations with confidence.

Factors influencing short-term success

Ease of Training

Providing training is a time-consuming process: prior to EO's training program, center directors or lead teachers may need time away from supervising their classrooms to provide training to new hires. Thus, directors planned hiring and training periods strategically around staff vacations. With asynchronous training modules, center directors have greater flexibility surrounding staff onboarding throughout the year. One participant noted in an interview that they completed EO's training during their initial application and interview process to an early childhood education center, preparing them to start shadowing professionals in the center immediately upon being hired. Similarly, a

"The help of EO is magic stuff . Whenever we call them: 'here we've got it. With their help, we are not finding it difficult to get either MAT training, CPR and first aid done.'" - Provider

center director stated that EO's flexible training means that the center is "not solely [relying] on one teacher to provide support for the various areas" of the business.

Personal Relationships

By the very nature of this program, EO staff were highly visible to the community, appearing at career fairs, hosting business roundtables and workshops, and facilitating CPR and MAT training to centers. Through this visibility, EO staff formed close relationships and partnerships with several centers throughout the region. A mid-sized center director shared that they called EO

"I was about to hire a staff and we've put in the application for the past three weeks, but we are not able to get the way I saw that we were expecting and with the help of EO office I was able to get the result...So far so good, they're trying their best when we send them a message or when we are meeting of anything they do attend to us as soon as possible." - Provider

staff directly to request training surrounding interpersonal relationships and overall professionalism in the workplace. That sort of training may be outside of the traditional scope of training offered through the program but speaks to the overall strength of support offered by EO and their direct relationships. Other center directors discussed recruitment needs directly with EO staff and received referrals for interested employees from this relationship. Through greater partnerships directly with EO, center directors had an outside resource for technical and interpersonal support.

Because personal relationships were important to the program's success, several providers mentioned that

EO staff were "spread too thinly" across the region. One director noted that while their EO representative "used to come by once a week," increased geographic coverage meant less frequent visits. This suggests that the program's impact might be constrained by staffing limitations.

These short-term outcomes demonstrate how the program's initial outputs translated to meaningful changes. The combination of improved business collaboration, stronger educational partnerships, and enhanced workers skills created a foundation for system-wide improvement. These set the stage for examining how these early changes evolved into broader mid-term outcomes.

Mid-Term Outcomes

The evaluation revealed several mid-term outcomes from the program, reflecting deeper changes that happened as a result of successfully implementing the various program activities. Mid-term outcomes represent sustained behavioral changes across program participants, as well as shifts in skills, attitudes, or knowledge among those not directly participating in program activities. For this program, the changes manifested in three key areas: enhanced confidence

among educators, improved implementation of programs and resources at centers, and evolving perceptions of ECE as a viable career path. However, these positive changes in capabilities and attitudes occurred against a backdrop of persistent compensation challenges that affected long-term retention.

Skills Confidence

Participants learned and improved skills relating to their overall job performance, strengthening self-confidence in their positions. In a survey response, a provider noted that students who completed the training have “a better understanding of quality care” and have a high level of “responsibility and respect” for their positions. The self-paced nature of the training videos allowed students to self-assess their skills and review content for further knowledge reinforcement as needed. During an interview, a program participant also advised that the trainings prepared them to “jump right in” to the position with confidence, feeling equipped to address child safety concerns and promote child development. Similarly, a program provider of a religious exemption early childhood education provider observed that completing the program lessens the “initial feeling of panic” that new employees experience when first starting in their position.

"I feel like I was pretty much ready to jump right in. I mean, it took me a day or two just to familiarize myself with the kids, but I do feel like I was able to jump right in and do what was expected of me because of the training." - Participant

The training program utilizes videos so participants both learn and visualize the potential scenarios discussed- participants build skills relating to classroom management, hygiene practices, safety, and medical emergencies through engaging content designed to prepare students for what they may experience in their positions.

The training program especially serves to prepare workers for challenging situations before they occur. One provider noted that the training "empowers employees on what to expect in certain situations" and might have “promote safe sleeping practices." This proactive approach to training helps build confidence before critical situations arise.

Several participants noted that they would like to return to the google classroom and review their notes after having been placed in a childcare center: "Maybe it should be required of me to go back and take another quiz or something like just to reinforce maybe some of the things that I've learned and see where they're applying now that I've started cause, I had to take this all before starting in my position". This would also serve to enhance educator’s confidence in their skills.

Greater Likelihood of Successful Program/Resource Implementation

Centers utilized EO’s services in a variety of ways to improve overall center operations and efficiency. Center directors have integrated the training program in different ways to match

their needs. Some use it exclusively for new hires, others for all staff professional development, and some combine it with their existing training systems. As one director noted, "Prior to the EO program, did training through computer but participants had to come in to the center to do it; this saves employee time, also lets the prospective employee complete the training much quicker."

Some centers hired new employees directly from EO, employees who may have already completed EO's Google Classroom training to become a highly qualified applicant for ECE positions. The director of a large center serving over 50 children reported that they hired "two staff members directly from [EO's] program" who began working as high school students, and now "have their own classroom" as lead teachers.

Other centers incorporate the training program seamlessly into new employee training, which helps directors establish "cohesion and consistency". Prior to EO's training, many centers lacked the time and resources to effectively train individual new employees. One provider observed that since many centers have "new teachers starting all year round, there need to be trainings to meet the requirements [offered] year round". The flexibility of this training program allowed newly hired employees to complete the program upon being hired so employees could start in their position more quickly than if centers offered training from supervisors or directors.

Several providers noted that the training program serves as an effective screening tool for potential employees. As one director observed, "some people drop out of the program before they complete the training, but these were people who probably would not have succeeded in the position." This suggests the program helps centers identify committed candidates early in the hiring process.

Current ECE employees are required to complete professional development hours as mandated by the state of Virginia. Thus, many center directors also encouraged or required their current employees to complete EO's Google Classroom trainings. Other center directors contacted EO directly to offer specific subject-area training to current employees. Above all, the program "allows [centers] to customize based on [their] present needs... [and] identify the gaps in [their] teacher preparation" (ECE provider survey).

[Changes in Perception of ECE as a Career](#)

Many providers noted that early childhood education is inherently an industry with a high rate of turnover. Providers suspected that this turnover could be attributed to a variety of factors, including the stress of the job, and lower wages or benefits compared to other industries or positions in the area. Thus, some believed that early childhood education is viewed as a stepping-stone to other positions or professions, rather than a long-term career. However, as one provider noted in a survey response, EO's program has "educated [people] on child care being a career opportunity" that offers long-term fulfillment and growth opportunities.

EO staff occasionally provided individual support and mentorship to students going through the program who demonstrated aptitude and interest in their positions- from their encouragement, EO staff noted that at least 15 former students of the training program have gone on to complete further training in early childhood education through local community colleges. While individual center directors or supervisory staff may not have the time or resources to devote to individual employee mentoring, EO provided further opportunities and informal career counseling, allowing students to advance their positions within their center.

Furthermore, 87% of program participants surveyed about their experience reported that they were interested or may be interested in career advancement and professional development opportunities, indicating an overall positive attitude towards further training and skill improvement opportunities among existing participants.

Some participants remain skeptical about ECE as a career pathway, both in terms of salary growth, and also in terms of the changing role of educators in the classroom. One participant who returned to the classroom after 27 years away from the field, expressed: "I do feel like it's harder to teach kids just because of the rules of teaching kids... I like some self led activities, but I do feel like that they sometimes need to be led by the teachers into the activities and seems like that's taken a step back."

Factors influencing mid-term impacts: wages and retention

Throughout the course of the project, factors external to the program provided additional challenges. One of the stated program goals was to "build and retain" the early childhood education workforce- while center directors observed that EO's program built and trained the workforce, the training program did not significantly impact retention. One center director observed that the training program "hasn't really impacted the retention of employees" at their business, largely because the director observed their employees were "there to get a paycheck" and compensation was the largest determinant of their retention. Of those surveyed, 73% remained employed at their initial childcare center; of those who left, 68% found employment in other industries.

While the program provided valuable training for employees, providers were often unable to provide any additional compensation for their current employees that completed the program. 81% of surveyed participants reported no earnings increase after completing the training program. Furthermore, only 15% receive health related benefits and 21% receive retirement benefits. When surveyed regarding how their current position could be improved, 70% of participant respondents provided an answer directly related to compensation or benefits. Among respondents who completed training but no longer work in the early childhood education industry, 40% cited that higher pay may have retained them in their former position.

The program's provision of required certifications like MAT and CPR training represented significant operational cost savings for centers. As one Montessori director noted, it "has helped save a lot of money to have that provided by EO." However, these savings were not sufficient to address the fundamental wage constraints centers face. A director for a private

“We were finding that even folks who are straight out of high school were expecting \$15.00 an hour. And that’s really hard when we have credentialed teachers we can barely pay \$15.00 an hour –
Center Director

center stated that they had "no way [to offer educational opportunities through community colleges] and say 'hey, you know if you take this class I can reward you by upping your pay.'" This challenge is rooted in centers' existing financial structure - with 70-75% of tuition revenue already allocated to staff salaries according to one Montessori facility director, centers have little flexibility to increase wages even when staff complete additional training. Multiple

directors confirmed that staff wages constitute their largest expense category, creating a structural barrier to improving compensation despite cost savings in other areas.

Early childhood education centers face significant cost constraints, preventing centers from offering compensation competitive to other industries in the area. Centers typically do not adjust their tuition rates following an employee completing additional trainings or education credentials, meaning that centers are not increasing their revenue and thereby unable to increase expenses by providing additional compensation for employees. According to the participant survey, 40% of participants who left employment in the early childhood education industry stated that higher pay or compensation would have retained them in their previous position- early childhood education workers feel underpaid for their work, and many do not have a clear pathway to receiving additional compensation through additional training or upskilling.

Furthermore, early childhood education employees face a high degree of stress in their job due to high levels of responsibility. Participants frequently discussed that their job duties can lead to excessive stress, as employees are responsible for the health, safety, and well-being for several children. The majority of survey respondents stated that their center does not offer mental health support or time off for mental health related concerns, with approximately 10% saying that mental health support or time off allowed for mental health concerns would improve their job satisfaction. One additional reason cited by participants as their reason for leaving in addition to low wages, were management concerns including overall center management, and peer-to-peer interactions, which mirror the challenges faced in many workplaces.

Finally, participants identified several key factors in their decision to stay in ECE:

- Love for working with children (most frequently cited reason)

- Workplace environment and coworker relationships
- Mission alignment (particularly in faith-based centers)
- Benefits like free childcare for employees

These mid-term outcomes demonstrate how the program's initial outcomes evolved into more substantial changes. The combination of increased worker confidence, improved center operations, and shifting career perceptions suggests the program successfully influenced both individual and organizational practices. However, the lack of corresponding improvements in compensation and retention highlights a critical gap between enhanced capabilities and sustainable career pathways. This tension between improved professional development and persistent economic challenges provides important context for understanding the programs' broader impact on the region, which is explored below.

Long-term Outcomes: Increased Operational Capacity and Quality

Early childhood education in Southwest Virginia operates within a broader national context of evolving policies, workforce challenges, and increasing demand for affordable, quality childcare. While many of the fundamental challenges facing the sector – such as wage constraints and broader economic pressures – extend beyond the scope of any single program, Ready SWVA has demonstrably strengthened the region's early childhood education landscape through multiple interconnected improvements. The program enhanced operational capacity by providing standardized online training and certification support, reducing the time centers must dedicate to employee training and allowing directors to focus on other critical aspects of business operations. Additionally, recruitment initiatives, including career fairs and hiring events, created a reliable pipeline of interested workers, streamlining the hiring process for centers. Perhaps most notably, the program fostered a cultural shift in how centers interact with each other, moving away from competition for qualified employees towards greater collaboration and knowledge sharing through the Shared Services Alliance. This improved regional cooperation, combined with enhanced operational efficiencies, has enabled significant growth in the sector. As of November 30, 2024, 33 centers have expanded their operations, creating capacity to serve an additional 252 children in the region. These results demonstrate that the program has not only met but exceeded its goals in both expanding workforce capacity and improving operational quality, creating lasting positive changes in Southwest Virginia's early childhood education system.

Systemic Barriers influencing long-term success

While the Ready SWVA program successfully addressed operational barriers through program flexibility and relationship building, several systemic challenges persist that are largely outside of the scope of individual training programs. Industry-wide compensation challenges, including persistently low wages and limited benefits, continue to drive turnover despite improved

training and support. Structural barriers to career advancement, such as center's inability to financially reward additional certifications or training, create a disconnect between professional development and compensation. Additionally, regional economic constraints such as lower median household wages and high poverty rates, limit centers' ability to raise tuition to support these higher wages. The program's experience demonstrates that while workforce development initiatives can increase operational capacity and teacher preparedness, sustainable transformation of the industry requires policy efforts to address deep-rooted economic and structural challenges.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Ready SWVA program has made measurable improvements to Southwest Virginia's early childhood education landscape through two primary channels: enhanced operational capacity of existing centers and significant workforce expansion. The program surpassed its workforce development goals, adding 208 new teachers to the region and facilitating 33 center expansions that created spaces for an additional 252 children. These achievements, coupled with innovative solutions like flexible online training and strong personal relationships with centers, demonstrate the program's success in addressing immediate workforce and operational needs.

However, the evaluation reveals that systemic challenges continue to affect the sector's long-term stability. Despite improved training resources and operational support, centers still struggle with employee retention due to persistent low wages and limited opportunities for compensation increases. The inability of centers to financially reward additional certifications or training creates a disconnect between skill development and career advancement. These findings suggest that future workforce development initiatives must address compensation alongside training and operational support through coordinated efforts among regional partners. While EO's program has successfully strengthened Southwest Virginia's early childhood education system, sustainable transformation of the landscape will require continued collaboration to address these fundamental economic challenges.

Recommendations for future efforts to strengthen the quality and availability of affordable childcare in SWVA exist at both the program level, and policy level. Participants consistently mention pay and benefits, professional development opportunities, mental health support, flexible scheduling and additional training opportunities as areas of further improvement. At the program level, providers and participants suggest maintaining ongoing access to training materials for post-completion review, especially for teachers who are entering the classroom for the first time, or re-entering after time away. The relationships formed between EO staff and center directors were very beneficial, meaning that when new centers are added and staff attention is diverted, their absence is felt by directors. Increased staff capacity would enhance

future programming. Strengthening partnerships between centers and high schools was also recommended by providers.

For the workforce system, strategies need to be developed to better communicate the complexity of ECE work for potential employees. Providers note that many applicants “used to babysit kids or something and they don’t understand how much more complex childcare is”. Additionally, clearer pathways for compensation increases tied to additional training would be important. As one Montessori director noted, there’s currently “no way to offer educational opportunities through community colleges and say “hey, you know if you take this class I can reward you by upping your pay””. At a regional level, we recommend greater continued collaboration between centers to reduce perceived competition and increase understanding of EO’s supportive role in the ECE landscape. Testimonial videos and success stories can build trust between centers, as suggested by one provider, as a way to strengthen relationships.

Finally, at the structural level, organizations and individuals can continue to advocate for broader childcare affordability initiatives. Multiple providers emphasized that affordability remains a critical barrier, with one noting that “childcare affordability is the largest hurdle in the childcare sector right now”.

Appendix A. - Provider Survey

1. Based on your experience, how has the program impacted early childcare in the region?
Scale of 0 – 100 rating
 - a. Hiring qualified workers
 - b. Expanding the supply of early childcare
 - c. Expanding the quality of early childcare
 - d. Retaining qualified workers
 - e. Perception of childcare as a career
2. What are some other ways the program has impacted early childcare in the region? *Free response*
3. Based on your experience sending employees to training, what are some ways training could be enhanced? *Free response*
4. Do your employees get paid while they attend training?
 - a. Yes, full-pay
 - b. Yes, partial pay
 - c. No
5. How does this program compare to other similar employee training programs you've participated in? *Free response*
6. Imagine this program did not exist- what would be the current state of your business without it? *Free response*
7. What changes would you like to make to the program to improve its impact? *Free response*
8. How frequently do you talk with local businesses about their childcare needs?
 - a. Never
 - b. Once a year
 - c. Two-three times per year
 - d. Every other month
 - e. Monthly or more
9. What are some ways you connect with local area businesses who may have employees needing childcare? *Free response*
10. Do you have special relationships or arrangements with area employers to provide childcare for their employees?
11. Would you like to participate in a follow-up focus group or interview to discuss the program? If so, include your email here

Appendix B. - Provider Survey Summary

The Ready SWVA Program Provider Survey was developed to gather feedback from early childhood education center directors and providers. The survey gathered feedback on training offerings, program effectiveness, and future needs. The survey received 30 responses in total, 17 of which were fully completed. The average time for survey completion was 4 minutes. The data provides insight into how the training program benefits childcare providers and areas of future improvement.

Participants generally expressed positive outcomes regarding overall program impact. Among five focus areas, respondents indicated that the program has been most impactful in expanding the quality of early childcare. Participants also indicated a variety of ways that the program has impacted the early childhood education space within the region, specifically by offering operational support to directors with a variety of resources and quality trainings. Key benefits mentioned include access to CPR and First Aid training for teachers, the ability to offer a comprehensive training package that reduces the division between staff members with and without specialized certifications, and the increased cohesion among staff as a result.

For many respondents, the early childhood education training program was their first experience with an outside training provider. For those that had utilized other employee training programs, directors noted that EO's program had a high degree of flexibility compared to other programs. Without EO's program, directors largely noted that their facilities would experience a longer hiring process and experience difficulties in training potential hires. One respondent specifically noted that EO's Google Classroom trainings allow for "year round" continuous training.

Respondents suggested a variety of improvements to further strengthen the training program, largely focusing on expanding the current training offerings. Current trainings are largely based on a virtual platform, and respondents indicated that expanding to include more in-person trainings could improve employee learning outcomes. Respondents may also benefit from greater organization of EO's services to better understand the comprehensive menu of services offered.

Overall, respondents viewed the READY SWVA as a valuable resource for childcare providers in the region, helping them meet training requirements, improve the quality of care, and support staff development. However, there is a recognized need for continued expansion of training opportunities, more organization of program offerings, and further support in areas such as recruitment and retention of staff. With some targeted improvements, the program could have an even greater impact on the early childhood education landscape in Southwest Virginia.

Appendix C. - Participant Survey

1. Are you currently employed by the same childcare center as your initial hire date?
 - a. Yes
 - i. What are the main reasons you stay in your position? *Free response*
 - ii. What about your job could be improved? (E.g. pay and benefits, certification assistance and professional development opportunities, flexible scheduling, mental health support, etc.) *Free response*
 - iii. Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: “My earnings increased after training with the ECCE Career Pathway Program”
 1. Strongly disagree
 2. Disagree
 3. Neutral
 4. Agree
 5. Strongly agree
 - iv. If you are comfortable sharing, what was your salary before the training program? Please give your response in a similar format as the following example, ex. \$29,000 / year *Free response*
 - v. If you are comfortable sharing, what was your salary after the training program? Please give your response in a similar format as the following example, ex. \$29,000 / year *Free response*
 - vi. What further training would help you succeed in your job? *Free response*
 - vii. What employment benefits does your employer offer? *Select all that apply*
 1. Retirement savings and/or planning benefits
 2. Health-related benefits
 3. Flexible hours
 4. Paid time off
 5. Free or reduced childcare
 6. Professional and career development benefits
 7. Other
 - viii. Are you interested in childcare as a long-term career path?
 - ix. Are you interested in career advancement opportunities?
 - x. Name
 - xi. Email Address
 - xii. Would you be willing to do a one-on-one interview or focus group on early childhood education?
 - b. No

- i. Are you currently working elsewhere?
 1. Where do you work? What industry?
- ii. What was your main reason for leaving your childcare position?
- iii. If the childcare center could have done one thing to retain you, what would it be?
- iv. Are you interested in pursuing childcare as a career in the future? Why or why not?

Appendix D. - Participant Survey Summary

The Program Participant survey was developed to gather feedback on program participants' perspectives on the training program and how the program has impacted their experience working in the early childhood education sector. Program participants are defined as those who took part in either Google Classroom training or CPR/MAT certification. Participants were divided into two groups representing *new* participants (those who have not previously worked in early childhood education) and *upskill* participants who worked in early childhood education prior to the launch of the training program, using the program as a means of professional development. The survey highlights trends related to employment status, worker satisfaction, career interests, and factors influencing employee retention and success.

The survey received 75 responses in total, 60 of which were fully completed. This is an 80% response rate. The average time for completion of the survey was 3 minutes. The majority of respondents are currently employed in early childhood education roles, with 75% indicating that they are still employed at the childcare center of their initial hire date, with 25% no longer employed with the childcare center of their initial hire date. Of those who have changed positions, 66.7% are working elsewhere, the majority in hospitality, home health, or retail fields.

When asked about their reasons for leaving their childcare roles, participants provided a variety of responses. The most common reasons include low wages and poor management. Several respondents reported dissatisfaction with the low pay and poor management practices, including lack of respect from superiors, high stress, and insufficient support for employees. Other participants left due to personal and health concerns. Some reported emotional stress, physical health problems, or unsafe working conditions, such as dealing with misbehaving children and inadequate mental health support. Others cited career growth opportunities as a factor, with several individuals leaving for better-paying opportunities in fields such as hospitality and home health. One participant shared that they left due to a fear for their personal safety caused by aggressive behavior in children, which led to heart palpitations and

mental health issues. Another noted that they had to leave because they could not complete their required student teaching semester while working in childcare.

When asked what could have helped them stay in their positions, the most common suggestions were higher pay and better benefits. Many participants indicated that an increase in wages and the introduction of benefits like healthcare, paid time off (PTO), and retirement plans would have made a significant difference in their decision to stay. Improved management was another key factor mentioned. A lack of understanding from management regarding the challenges faced by staff was a recurring issue, and participants suggested more training for directors, better mental health support, and improved communication between management and staff.

The survey also explored participants' future career interests in early childhood education. Of respondents employed at the center of their original hire date, 62.5% of participants expressed interest in pursuing childcare as a long-term career path, 33.33% responded that they may be interested, and 4.17% of respondents stated they are not interested in early childhood education as a long-term career. When asked specifically about future career advancement opportunities, 56.25% of these participants showed interest in advancement, with many expressing a desire for more professional development and career growth. However, 12.5% were not interested in advancement, and 31.25% were uncertain.

Among those who remain in their current roles, the primary motivators for staying are their love for working with children and a positive work environment. Many participants cited a strong emotional connection with the children as the most important reason for remaining in the field. They also appreciate the support from coworkers and enjoy the work environment. Some highlighted childcare benefits offered by their employers, such as free or reduced childcare for employees, as another reason for staying. However, respondents also pointed out several areas for improvement. Many participants feel their pay is insufficient for the demands of the job, and stated that benefits, including healthcare, paid leave, and retirement savings would improve their position. They also mentioned the need for additional training opportunities and support to improve their skills and certifications. Furthermore, a significant portion of respondents expressed the need for better mental health resources to cope with the stress and emotional demands of working in childcare.

Regarding salary changes after completing the Early Childhood Career Pathway Program, 35% of participants reported that their earnings did not increase significantly after training. A small number indicated a slight increase in hourly wages or salary, but for many, the improvements were minimal. 15% percent of participants agreed that the training led to an increase in earnings, while 15% strongly disagreed.

The survey results reveal both the challenges and rewards of working in early childhood education. While many participants love their jobs and are dedicated to helping children, they face significant challenges related to pay, benefits, stress, and lack of career advancement opportunities.

Appendix E. - Provider Interview Protocol

Purpose/Goal	Main Question	Probing Question
Understand childcare landscape	Describe your childcare business	
"Expanding the supply of childcare"	How has this program impacted your hiring or training procedures?	
"Building the workforce"	What are the main qualities of successful ECE employees?	How has this program supported or not supported these qualities? What employee skills has this program helped to strengthen? How are you supporting workplace culture?
"Retaining the workforce"	How has this program impacted retention?	
Program longevity	Do you believe this program will have sustained long term impact?	What does sustained long term impact look like to you? What could EO do to sustain this impact? Do you envision any barriers to long-term program success? What are they?

Appendix F. - Participant Interview Protocol

Purpose/Goal	Main Question	Probing Question
Build participant skills	What specific skills did you develop through this training?	How will these skills improve your job performance?

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Understand participant experiences in program	Describe your experience in the training program	<p>What did you think of the training materials? Were they engaging?</p> <p>How did you interact with other participants during the training?</p>
Professional Development	How did the program support your career goals?	<p>Did this training prepare you for what to expect in your childcare job?</p> <p>Do you feel confident implementing the skills you learned into your daily job?</p>
Program longevity	If you could change one thing to improve the program, what would you change?	