UNDERSTANDING 'POST-PANDEMIC' FAMILY CHILD CARE PROVIDERS

Survey of New Entrants and Those Who Left the Field

Kimberly D. Lucas[a]**, Wendy Wagner Robeson**[b]**, Haein Kim**[b]**, Alyssa Lima**[b]**, Khaing May Oo**[a]**, Sandra Madu**[a]**, Noely Irineu Silva**[b]**, Innocentia Ashai**[a]**, and Constance Pagan Salazar**[b]

[a] Northeastern University, [b] Wellesley College

Northeastern University
School of Public Policy
and Urban Affairs

Wellesley Centers for Women

Massachusetts Early Childhood Funder Collaborative

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the early childhood (child care) sector nationwide faced a massive loss of skilled early educator talent. For family child care providers (FCCs), this crisis pre-dates the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.[1] This attrition rate has been a double edged sword, both raising to national consciousness how the lack of attention to system-building has produced a child care sector in deep need of reform–and also raising to field-level consciousness just how undervalued early educators are, highlighting for those in the field as well as those considering entering the field the low pay, few benefits, and lack of recognition that most early educators receive.

Massachusetts has fared no better than the rest of the country,[2] and the early childhood field has identified attrition as a major issue within the Commonwealth. Massachusetts' EC101[3] highlights a vision of the future that includes "qualified early childhood professionals who receive com-petitive, family-sustaining wages and benefits, and have access to career and compensation advancement through multiple pathways." And The Early Childhood Agenda[4] has demonstrated a groundswell of statewide support for "explor[ing] options and organiz[ing] around a specific course of action to ensure early childhood professionals across multiple sectors have access to compet-itive wages and an affordable benefits package (health care, paid leave, retirement, child care) including operational grants, state-funded ben-efits, an opt-in group health plan, unionization, and premium assistance programs."

These efforts demonstrate the shared recognition that Massachusetts' early educators are the lifeblood of the Commonwealth's economy and its communities.

Despite the onslaught of attrition and widespread coverage of the simultaneous low compensation and high price of child care, there is a silver lining: Massachusetts still saw new family child care providers enter the field in the years following 2020. These new entrants, who have decided to begin their careers in early childhood at one of the most difficult times to enter the field, may offer insight into the field's value–what makes it worthwhile to enter the field? And what are some of the challenges that persist–challenges that veterans of the field have long-faced and that new entrants are quick to pick up on? To surface these insights, we developed a two-part, mixed methods study that addresses the question: **How can the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care (EEC) and other statewide partners strengthen and improve the recruitment and retention experiences for family child care providers (FCCs) as we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic?**

Funded by the Massachusetts Early Childhood Funders Collaborative (ECFC) and designed in partnership with EEC, our team designed a mixed-methods research study that both examined the motivations and challenges that this unique group of FCCs experienced as well as explored the experiences of FCCs who left the field in this same time period.

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1   For example, between December 2017 and March 2020, Boston lost 14 percent of its FCC programs and seats. Further details can be found in Campbell, F.Q, Pratima A. Patil, P. and Kristin McSwain. 2020. "Boston's Child-Care Supply Crisis: What a Pandemic Reveals." Boston, MA: The Boston Foundation.

2   Nationally the number of family child care programs has declined for decades with a 52% decline in licensed family child care programs between 2005 and 2017 (National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance. 2020. "Addressing the decreasing number of family child care providers in the United States." Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/new-occ/resource/files/addressing_decreasing_fcc_providers_revised_march2020_final.pdf). In other words, in this time period, the nation saw a loss of 90,000 licensed family child care homes (National Association for Regulatory Administration Child Care Licensing Programs and Policies Survey. Unpublished.).

3   https://www.earlychildhood101.org/our-vision

4   https://earlychildhoodagenda.org/

KEY FINDINGS

Through our survey with New FCC Entrants and through our focus groups with FCCs Who Left the Field during the January 2020 - August 2023 time period, we learned quite a few things about the experience of family child care providers who either started working in the field or left the field in the immediate wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Findings from New FCC Entrants Survey	Findings from FCCs Who Left the Field Focus Groups

1. The early childhood field in Massachusetts continues to attract individuals who are ideal early educators: New FCC Entrants are coming in with both informal and formal experience caring for young children, are excited to use their skills and expertise to address several of the field's needs, and many intend to stay in the field.	1. In a relational field, relational tensions continue to exist:
	  a. Families are both the reason that FCCs Who Left the Field stayed in the field as long as they did–and some families also clearly and knowingly disregarded family child care providers' policies and rules.
	  b. FCCs Who Left the Field sought support and improvement from their licensors, but sometimes experienced approaches that reprimanded them rather than taught them.
	  c. FCCs Who Left the Field wanted to follow regulations and policies–and had to operate within regulations, policies, and/or implementation of these regulations and policies that did not center their experience or needs.

2. Not only are New FCC Entrants ideal individuals to attract to the field, but they also find the field attractive to enter into. Many find the amount of workplace autonomy and possibility for economic mobility attractive.	2. Some FCCs Who Left the Field were not fully prepared for the business aspects of running a family child care.
3. New FCC Entrants learn about family child care and gain support navigating the FCC licensing process through trusted relationships with friends, family, and current FCCs.	3. Some FCCs Who Left the Field could no longer make ends meet due to low compensation. An economic shock, such as sudden medical bills or a sudden gap in income, can throw low-wage workers like FCCs out of the field entirely.

4. While many New FCC Entrants faced few challenges during the licensing process, most New FCC Entrants encountered challenges that can be addressed. These include:
  a. Improving the digital user experience for New FCC Entrants, and
  b. Strengthening specific supports already offered, such as clearer communication and/or simplification of the licensing process as well as increased visibility of, increased access to, and tailored provision of business support.
	4. The emergency roll out of EEC's COVID-19 pandemic policies provided many lessons learned:
	  a. Policies need to be feasibility-tested and grounded in the reality of implementation.
	  b. Policies require time for information to be disseminated, digested, and implemented.
	  c. A single source of truth that highlights changes in policies is necessary for clear communication.
	  d. Physical and mental health of our essential workers and their families must be kept at the forefront.

5. New FCC Entrants' most pressing sources of stress are centered on compensation, business support, and navigating and balancing the demands of the job. The majority of New FCC Entrants are seeking resources and support that address these areas of concern. They also report that addressing these sources of stress would make the work more attractive and tenable for them to stay in the field in the long-run.	5. FCCs Who Left the Field–and likely current FCCs as well–know the challenges they faced well and suggest solutions that are feasible and implementable.
6. There are resources and supports that at least some New FCC Entrants know about and access. These include food program assistance, trainings and workshops, networking, programmatic support, and substitute FCCs.	

RECOMMENDATIONS

Stemming from the collective findings from our New FCC Entrants survey and focus groups with FCCs Who Left the Field, we offer twelve recommendations that may serve to retain current family child care providers in the field and may even attract additional new entrants into the field. These are divided into recommendations for EEC specifically, as well as recommendations for other key actors in the early childhood ecosystem:

EEC-Focused Recommendations	Recommendations for Key Actors in the Early Childhood Ecosystem
1. EEC should create a family child care provider task force or working group to re-examine current policies, inform new policies, connect family child care providers, and identify ways to recognize family child care providers and their work.	8. Key actors in the early childhood field should explore and pilot initiatives that focus on providing family child care providers with health care, retirement, and other benefits.
2. EEC should continue to provide Commonwealth Cares for Children (C3) and other business support funds.	9. Key actors in the early childhood field should support EEC in its efforts to communicate about and provide locally-relevant, tailored business support, both during the licensing process and beyond.
3. EEC should expand communication and provision of business support, both during the licensing process and beyond.	10. Key actors in the early childhood field should work with EEC to strengthen and deliver digital literacy support to all family child care providers.
4. EEC should support an opt-in family child care mentoring program that connects veteran family child care providers with new entrants.	11. Key actors in the early childhood field should work with families to better understand the prevalence and reasoning behind actions that disregard family child care providers' rules.
5. EEC should develop and widely communicate a user-friendly single source of truth with up-to-date information for family child care providers.	12. Key actors in the early childhood field should create space for family child care providers–New FCC Entrants, FCCs Who Left the Field, and everyone in between–to come together to identify and craft structural and cultural interventions that can be employed to address challenges related to building and maintaining relationships with families.
6. EEC should create alignment and consistency across licensors by first asking licensors about their own experiences, challenges, and recommendations.	
7. EEC should actively cultivate trusting relationships between licensors and family child care providers.	

CONCLUSION

Whether they've been in the field for a year or thirty years, family child care providers continue to experience the joys of working directly with young children and families–and the challenges of low compensation, the digital divide, navigating tensions within and beyond work relationships, and the need for more business support. Amidst these challenges, however, family child care providers find strong support from their friends and family–and from each other. Through this project we learned that FCCs Who Left the Field don't just have stories about what went right or wrong during their tenure, but they hold innovative and implementable solutions to recruitment and retention issues that continue to challenge the field. And their experience through the COVID-19 pandemic serves to provide us with some practical preventive changes that can be implemented now to protect us from an ever-changing and unknown future.

These grassroots ideas in collaboration with the grasstops momentum already underway with EEC and other key actors in the field provide us with a concrete road map to better supporting and retaining family child care providers in the field– and attracting additional New FCC Entrants who are just as inspired and excited to support young children, their families, and their communities.

INTRODUCTION

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the early childhood (child care) sector nationwide faced a massive loss of skilled early educator talent. For family child care providers (FCCs), this crisis pre-dates the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.[1] This attrition rate has been a double edged sword, both raising to national consciousness how the lack of attention to system-building has produced a child care sector in deep need of reform–and also raising to field-level consciousness just how undervalued early educators are, highlighting for those in the field as well as those considering entering the field the low pay, few benefits, and lack of recognition that most early educators receive.

Massachusetts has fared no better than the rest of the country,[2] and the early childhood field has identified attrition as a major issue within the Commonwealth. Massachusetts' EC101[3] highlights a vision of the future that includes "qualified early childhood professionals who receive competitive, family-sustaining wages and benefits, and have access to career and compensation advancement through multiple pathways." And The Early Childhood Agenda[4] has demonstrated a groundswell of statewide support for "explor[ing] options and organiz[ing] around a specific course of action to ensure early childhood professionals across multiple sectors have access to competitive wages and an affordable benefits package (health care, paid leave, retirement, child care) including operational grants, state-funded benefits, an opt-in group health plan, unionization, and premium assistance programs." These efforts demonstrate the shared recognition that Massachusetts' early educators are the lifeblood of the Commonwealth's economy and its communities.

Despite the onslaught of attrition and widespread coverage of the simultaneous low compensation

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2   Nationally the number of family child care programs has declined for decades with a 52% decline in licensed family child care programs between 2005 and 2017 (National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance. 2020. "Addressing the decreasing number of family child care providers in the United States." Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/new-occ/resource/files/addressing_decreasing_fcc_providers_revised_march2020_final.pdf). In other words, in this time period, the nation saw a loss of 90,000 licensed family child care homes (National Association for Regulatory Administration Child Care Licensing Programs and Policies Survey. Unpublished.).

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and high price of child care, there is a silver lining: Massachusetts still saw new family child care providers enter the field in the years following 2020. These new entrants, who have decided to begin their careers in early childhood at one of the most difficult times to enter the field, may offer insight into the field's value–what makes it worthwhile to enter the field? And what are some of the challenges that persist–challenges that veterans of the field have long-faced and that new entrants are quick to pick up on? Funded by the Massachusetts Early Childhood Funders Collaborative (ECFC) and designed in partnership with the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care (EEC), our team designed a research study that examined the motivations and challenges that this unique group of FCCs experienced.

As we considered the design of this study, we also realized that FCCs who left the field in this same time period may also offer insight on alleviating, addressing, or preventing attrition–what, if it had been in place, would have made it worthwhile to stay in the field? To surface these insights, we developed a two-part, mixed methods study that addresses the question: **How can EEC and other statewide partners strengthen and improve the recruitment and retention experiences for family child care providers (FCCs) as we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic?** Our study is focused on the concrete actions that statewide and local actors in the field can do to improve the experience of entering into and remaining in the early childhood field in Massachusetts. We identified EEC as a key actor in supporting both of these experiences, since, through MGL c.15D § 2,[5] the agency is charged with:

> (k) seek[ing] to increase the availability of early education and care programs and services and encourage all providers of those programs and services to work together to create an array of options allowing families to select programs that fit with their schedules;

> (o) provid[ing] technical assistance and consultation to providers and potential providers of early education and care services;

> (p) facilitat[ing] the development of the early education and care workforce, and, when appropriate, provide for training programs and professional development for persons offering early education and care programs and services;

While EEC is formally required to complete the above tasks, we also recognize that EEC is not and cannot be solely responsible for supporting the early childhood workforce; as we have learned through the COVID-19 pandemic, other key actors within the field, including, but not limited to local governments, statewide and local non-profit support organizations, academia, and philanthropy, also play significant roles in creating "good jobs" for our early educators to enter, grow, and thrive in.[6]

To ensure that we were able to fully address our overarching research question, we formulated more specific sub-questions, namely:

- Why are new entrants attracted to the child care sector, and specifically being an FCC?
- What challenges to entering the field still exist?
- What supports do new FCCs find most helpful in attaining licensure and starting their businesses?
- What support might be helpful as new FCCs seek to continue their work in the field?
- Why have some FCCs recently left the field?
- What would have supported those who left, such that they might have stayed in the field?

5   https://malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws/PartI/TitleII/Chapter15D/Section2
6   Campbell, F.Q, Pratima A. Patil, P. and Kristin McSwain. 2020. "Boston's Child-Care Supply Crisis: What a Pandemic Reveals." Boston, MA: The Boston Foundation.

RESEARCH DESIGN

As described, we developed a two-part, mixed methods study that focuses on two different groups of FCCs: New FCC Entrants and FCCs Who Left the Field. We used two different data collection methods to learn about each of these group's experiences.

New FCC Entrant Survey

The first group, New FCC Entrants, are defined as those who are entirely new to the early childhood field in Massachusetts (e.g., had never before been a licensed early educator in Massachusetts) during and immediately after 2020. New FCC Entrants were identified using administrative data obtained from EEC; ultimately there were 1354 New FCC Entrants between January 2020 and August 2023.[7] This population of New FCC Entrants between January 2020 and August 2023 were emailed a direct link to a survey that was translated into English, Spanish, and Portuguese (see Appendix B for survey in English); in addition, information was spread to all of our contacts, coaches, family child care systems, the Strong Start offices throughout Massachusetts, and through the 9:30 Call so that we might reach as many New FCC Entrants in the Commonwealth as possible.[8] After a week, non-respondents were called in English, Spanish, and Portuguese using a standard script.

For New FCC Entrants, we employed a survey to gain a broad understanding of the interests, challenges, and usefulness of support that they experience. Survey tools are biased in the sense that they rely on participant self-report, but can still offer valuable insights when the information sought is focused on the subjective experience of an individual. They also allow for scaled data collection that allow for the possibility of providing data that is generalizable to a larger population beyond the survey respondents.

Our survey was conducted using Qualtrics and was translated into English, Spanish,

and Portuguese (see Appendix B for English translation). The survey was live for the month of November 2023. On November 27, 2023, we extended the survey through December 6, 2023. Details about the survey methodology, implementation, and participant demographics can be found in Appendix A; findings from the survey are presented below.

FCCs Who Left the Field

The second group, FCCs Who Left the Field, are defined as those who left the early childhood field in Massachusetts during and immediately after 2020 and did not return (e.g., were not relicensed in Massachusetts during this same time period). FCCs Who Left the Field were identified using administrative data obtained from EEC; ultimately there were 1745 FCCs Who Left the Field between January 2020 and August 2023. The population of FCCs Who Left the Field between January 2020 and August 2023 were directly emailed an invitation to join a series of focus groups conducted by EEC Licensing Region (see Appendix C for focus group guide); in addition, information was spread to all of our contacts, coaches, family child care systems, the Strong Start offices throughout Massachusetts, and through the 9:30 Call so that we might reach as many FCCs Who Left the Field in the Commonwealth as possible. For FCCs Who Left the Field, word of mouth through as many networks as possible were particularly crucial because our direct contact information from EEC may have been out-of-date or no longer used and, therefore, a "hard-to-find" population.

For FCCs Who Left the Field, we employed focus groups to gain a deep understanding of the mechanisms underlying the reasons FCCs gave for leaving. Focus groups not only allowed us to probe the "hows" and the "whys" behind FCCs' decision to leave the field, but also provided space for FCCs to jog each others' memories as they shared their own experiences with one another. The small size of each focus group (6-8

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7   We requested data from EEC in August 2023, so our data do not cover the entire year for 2023, but instead the entire year up to the date of the data pull.

8   http://www.strategiesforchildren.org/930Call.html

people) does not allow us to generalize to the broader population, but instead allows us to draw on common experiences and themes that emerge from the group's collective discussion. These themes point us in the direction of where we might focus our work and support prioritization of areas of continued excellence or improvement. Finally, because of the "hard-to-find" nature of FCCs Who Left the Field, we deemed utilization of scaled method designs, such as surveys, ineffectual, as these methods require a robust response rate that we did not expect to get with such a "hard-to-find" population.

Our focus groups were conducted using a standard Focus Group Guide (see Appendix C). All focus groups were conducted in February 2024. Focus groups were divided by EEC Licensing Region[9] to ensure that participants would have similar experiences to one another, holding constant both geography and EEC Licensors. Interpreters were provided if participants expressed interest in having language interpretation. Details about the focus group methodology, implementation, and participant demographics can be found in Appendix A; findings from the focus groups are presented below.

Limitations

Research studies are limited by their design, time, resources, and more. This study is no exception. First, our mixed methods research design rests on self-selection.[10] All surveys are inherently opt-in, with those who choose to participate–and those who complete the survey–as an inherently self-selected group. For example, those who choose to participate may be more inclined to provide information to researchers, and those who complete the survey may have more time or resources to complete a survey than their non-completer peers. Our focus groups, too, are self-selected individuals who are not just interested in participating and sharing, but who have time

or can make time to spend 90 minutes with researchers.

Second, if we could have kept the survey live longer or had more than a month to conduct focus groups, we would have been more likely to increase our participant counts by at least a few. In addition, we may have been able to conduct more focus groups, allowing us to provide regional sub-analyses for this portion of the study; because of our small sample size, we are unable to generalize by region using focus group data.

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Finally, our overarching focus is on the FCC experience. This is because the aim of the project is to understand what has challenged–and what continues to challenge–FCCs in Massachusetts. We acknowledge that this is one perspective among many whose voices should be elevated when it comes to addressing the challenges that we have uncovered. Because we did not focus on families or licensors, these perspectives are not represented in this study, but experiences from these key actors should be elevated just as much as FCC experiences have been elevated in this research study.

See Appendix A for a complete methodology.

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9   Licensing regions were also obtained via correspondence with EEC administrators.

10   Among biases that may factor into survey results both generally and in this study are non-response bias, social desirability bias, and survivorship bias. Some of these biases are addressed directly in Appendix A. More on this topic can be found in Fowler, Floyd J. 1993. *Survey Research Methods,* 2nd Ed. Newbury Park: Sage Publications.

FINDINGS

In this section we present findings from some preliminary administrative data analysis as well as both parts of our mixed-methods study.

FINDINGS FROM EEC ADMINISTRATIVE DATA

Before we commenced data collection, we needed to better understand the populations that we were going to engage. As described above and in Appendix A, we obtained data for the population of New FCC Entrants and FCCs Who Left the Field between January 2020 and August 2023. These data included year of licensure or exit from the field, licensed capacity, primary language (which we calculated by combining two variables on language), and address (through which we cross-referenced and identified EEC licensing region). We provide more detailed analyses by primary language and EEC licensing region in both Appendix A and auxiliary research briefs. Here, we will share findings focused on year of licensure or exit from the field and licensed capacity.

Table 1. Population of FCCs Who Left the Field and New FCC Entrants Jan 2020 – Aug 2023, by Year
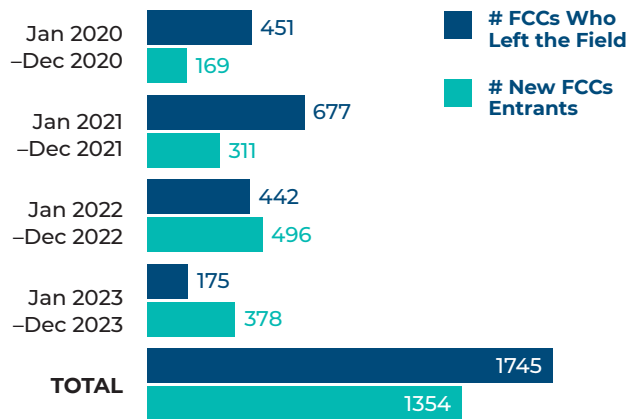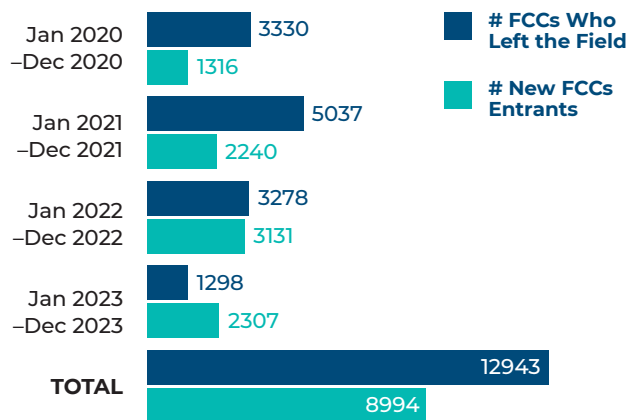
	# FCCs Who Left the Field	# New FCCs Entrants
Jan 2020 –Dec 2020	451	169
Jan 2021 –Dec 2021	677	311
Jan 2022 –Dec 2022	442	496
Jan 2023 –Dec 2023	175	378
TOTAL	1745	1354

Table 2. Licensed Capacity of FCCs Who Left the Field and New FCC Entrants Jan 2020 – Aug 2023, by Year

	# FCCs Who Left the Field	# New FCCs Entrants
Jan 2020 –Dec 2020	3330	1316
Jan 2021 –Dec 2021	5037	2240
Jan 2022 –Dec 2022	3278	3131
Jan 2023 –Dec 2023	1298	2307
TOTAL	12943	8994

These data demonstrate that 2020 was not the year of greatest attrition, but instead January–March and October-December of 2021 saw the largest rates of attrition from the field with 11.1% of the total leavers exiting the field in January-March of 2021 (primarily in February and March of that quarter) and 11.5% of the total leavers exiting the field in October-December of 2021 (primarily in October and November of that quarter). With regard to New FCC Entrants, we see a modest increase in July-September of 2021 from very low numbers, another modest increase in July-September of 2022, and then a much higher number (14.0% of all new entrants) in April-June of 2023. Particularly salient to these points in time is the fact that Commonwealth Cares for Children (C3) funds were announced in July 2021, with much of the funding distributed by Q4 of 2021.

FINDINGS FROM A SURVEY OF NEW FCC ENTRANTS TO THE EEC FIELD (2020–2023)

The first part of our study focused on learning more about the family child care providers who newly entered the field between January 2020 and August 2023 (see Appendix A for full methodology). Our survey (Appendix B) centered on the experience of becoming a family child care provider, present experience being a family child care provider, and future vision. While a total of 400 individuals attempted the survey, only 260 (65.0%) completed the survey. Full demographic data for the survey sample can be found in Appendix A. While we did run analyses by EEC licensing region, as well as year and language, we present findings in aggregate here for brevity.

Previous Employment

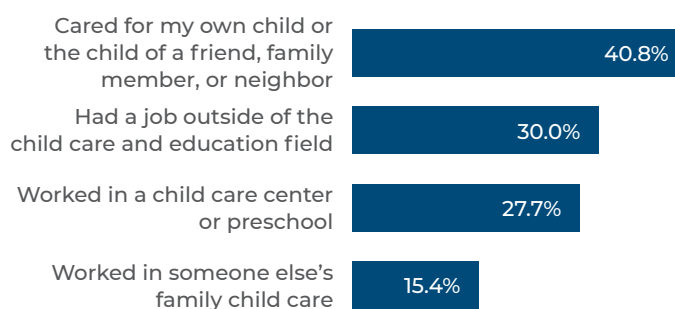We asked about employment prior to becoming an FCC (Table 1).

New FCC Entrants have informal experience in caring for young children. The first striking finding

is that a large percentage of respondents had previously cared for their own young child or the young child of a friend, family member, or neighbor.

New FCC Entrants are split in their previous work experience, with similar numbers working with a licensed child care provider and working outside of the child care field. When it comes to more formal experiences, 27.7% of the respondents had previously worked in a child care center and 15.4% of the respondents had previously worked with another family child care provider; thus a total of 43.1% respondents had previous experience working with a licensed child care provider. In addition, the next interesting finding is that 30.0% of our respondents also had prior experience outside of the child care field.

Because we asked respondents to "check all that apply," some respondents may have had only one of these experiences, and some may have had all. What we can feasibly conclude is that current New FCC Entrants to the field have some level of previous experience with young children, though it may not be more formal training in licensed early childhood-focused settings.

Table 3. Employment Prior to Becoming an FCC[11]

Employment	Percentage
Cared for my own child or the child of a friend, family member, or neighbor	40.8%
Had a job outside of the child care and education field	30.0%
Worked in a child care center or preschool	27.7%
Worked in someone else's family child care	15.4%

Learning About Family Child Care

New FCC Entrants learn about family child care through trusted relationships. The majority of respondents either learned about family child care through a friend of family member (38.1%) or through a current family child care provider (33.8%).[12] These findings suggest that learning

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11   We offered respondents more choices when asking respondents what other types of employment they experienced prior to becoming an FCC (see Appendix B), but fewer than 10% of respondents experienced any of the other offerings.

12   We offered respondents more choices when asking respondents how they learned about how to become an FCC (see Appendix B), but fewer than 5% of respondents learned about becoming an FCC through any of the other offerings.

Table 4. Reasons For Entering the Field

Most Important Reasons for Entering the Field[13]	Reasons for Entering the Field Where Respondents Were Split (equally Very Important v. Not Important)[14]	Least Important Reasons for Entering the Field[15]
• To be able to work with children (76.5%) • Because child care is important work (74.6%) • Because I am good at caring for children (72.3) • To be my own boss (66.5%) • To be able to work from home (65.0%) • To be home with my own children (64.6%) • To have a secure job (63.1%)	• To help my daughter/son/sister/cousin or other relative (29.6% v. 23.8%) • Because children should be cared for in someone's home (18.1% v. 19.6%) • Because it pays well (18.1% v. 15.8%)	• Because this was the only job I could find (57.7%)

about becoming an FCC is a very relational practice, meaning that individuals are very likely to learn about the prospect and the process of becoming an FCC through their personal networks rather than through an advertisement or through an organization or institution. Research has shown that family child care providers' experience in learning about the field through professional development is very much influenced by establishing relationships with others.[16]

Reasons for Entering the Field

We shared some of the typical reasons family child care providers enter the field and asked respondents to tell us if each reason was a very important, important, somewhat important factor to their entering the field. There were some reasons that overwhelmingly resonated with respondents as important, some reasons where respondents were split in their importance, and some reasons that were clearly not important to respondents. These data suggest a few key notions.

New FCC Entrants continue to enter the field to use their skills to address deep needs of the field. It is clear that primary drivers for entering the field are, first and foremost, the understanding that the work is important, that family child care providers are interested in working directly with children, and that New FCC Entrants feel like they are good at caring for children. Studies have highlighted these same reasons for entering the field going back to the 1970s.[17] These findings indicate goodness-of-fit between the worker and the work; research supports that those who are motivated to stay in the field (because they believe they are good at caring for children or otherwise) in fact have higher retention rates in the field.[18]

New FCC Entrants find workplace autonomy highly attractive. It seems that New FCC Entrants–a primarily women-driven workforce–are seeking jobs that allow them degrees of freedom: the ability to be their own boss, to work from their homes, to be with their children, and to have a

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13   We offered respondents more choices when asking respondents about their reasons for entering the field (see Appendix B), but fewer than 60% of respondents listed any of the other offerings.

14   We offered respondents more choices when asking respondents about their reasons for entering the field (see Appendix B), and highlight those where respondents were split in feeling that the choice was either very important or not important.

15   We offered respondents more choices when asking respondents about their reasons for entering the field (see Appendix B), but fewer than 50% of respondents listed any of the other offerings.

16   Lanigan, J.D. 2010. "Family child care providers; perspective regarding effective professional development and their role in the child care system: A Qualitative study." *Early Childhood Education Journal* 38: 399-409.

17   Zinssser, Caroline. 1991. *Raised in East Urban: Child Care Changes in a Working Class Community.* New York: Teachers College Press.

18   McDonald, Paula, Karen Thorpe, and Susan Irvine. 2018. "Low pay but still we stay: Retention in early childhood education and care." *Journal of Industrial Relations* 60: 647-668; Herman, Allison N., Tracy Dearth-Wesley, and Robert C. Whitaker. 2023. "The association between work as a calling and turnover among early childhood education professionals." *Early Childhood Education Journal* 52: 481-491. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-023-01450-6

secure job. New FCC Entrants seem to understand that this particular job in this particular sector is one that will provide all of these things to them at once. Juxtaposed to the finding that a majority of respondents do *not* believe that family child care is the only job they can find–meaning that New FCC Entrants understand that they can choose other professions or lines of work, it seems that a large portion of respondents are choosing to become family child care providers for these reasons of workplace autonomy.[19]

Economic mobility and ideological reasons played a role in choosing to enter the field for some New FCC Entrants. Reasons where respondents seemed split are also telling. Two of the reasons for which respondents are split are about economic mobility for oneself or one's kin: offering to support kin allows for family economic mobility while kin work, and for some individuals, the pay is better than the alternatives accessible to them. There is one reason that is split along somewhat ideological lines, with some believing that home-based child care is ideal (and others identifying this as less important). These types of ideological splits among family child care providers–suppliers of child care–mirror the diversity of needs and interests of families–demanders of child care. Massachusetts has always committed itself to a mixed-delivery system[20] for exactly this reason: because all families deserve to find child care that meets their needs and aligns with their values.

Experience of EEC During the Licensing Process

Respondents were asked about their experience of the Potential Provider Training: Part 1 (PPT1) as well as any challenges they experienced as they went through the licensing process.

Many New FCC Entrants faced few challenges during the licensing process. 40.0% of respondents were licensed either the same year or the year after they took the PPT1 course.[21] When presented with a list of potential challenges they may have encountered between taking the PPT1 and licensure, 35.0% of respondents reported not experiencing any of the challenges presented in the survey.

For most New FCC Entrants, challenges still persist. Coupled with the finding on time between PPT1 and licensure above, we can conclude that while the current process seems to work for many, the presence of challenges for 60-65% of respondents indicates areas of improvement.

There is a need to improve the digital user experience for New FCC Entrants. The EEC website, LEAD portal, StrongStart system are all of the digital systems a New FCC Entrant would encounter on their pathway to licensure. Access and navigation of these digital systems seems to be consistently difficult. As one respondent noted, "There are 3 different websites that we need to navigate through. It's very hard to keep track of what each use for. And not user friendly if you're not computer literate." In addition, 8.1% of respondents found that working with technology or accessing wifi was a challenge. Another respondent shared that, "Having internet and a working computer was challenging at times. As more and more becomes reliant on technology and com-
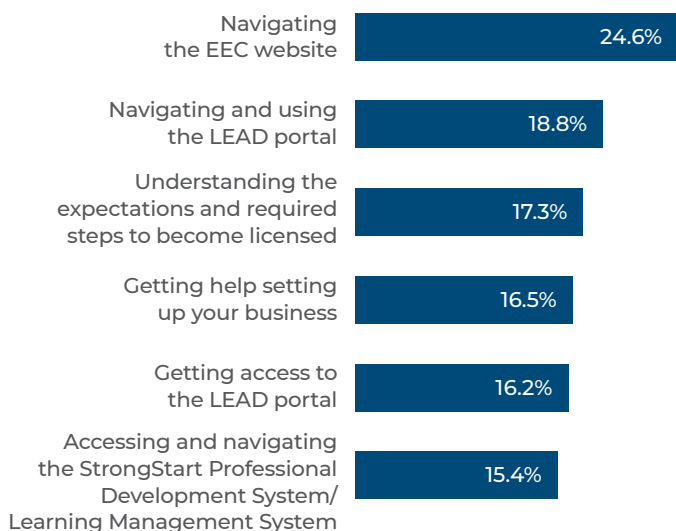
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19   Garner, Pamela W. and Graziella Pagliarulo McCarron. 2022. "Family child care providers' perceptions of competence, autonomy, and relatedness: implications for well-being and professional growth." *Community, Work & Family* 26(4): 492–506.

20   See MGL c.15D § 2(k), which mandates that EEC "seek to increase the availability of early education and care programs and services and encourage all providers of those programs and services to work together to create an array of options allowing families to select programs that fit with their schedules." https://malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws/PartI/TitleII/Chapter15D/Section2. In addition, research shows that mixed-delivery systems prioritize family choice by increasing the chances of a cultural, racial/ethnic, and/or language match between the family and child care provider (Chaudry, Ajay, Taryn Morrissey, Christina Weiland, and Hirokazu Yoshikawa. 2021. *Cradle to Kindergarten: A New Plan to Combat Inequality,* 2nd Edition. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.)

21   56.9% respondents not knowing, not remembering, or not answering when they were licensed in relation to the PPT1.

municating this way it can be a financial struggle to keep up to date with my technology." Together, these findings suggest that improvements made in supporting digital system navigation and offering either technology hardware and/or software assistance, increasing access to broadband, or both would address many of the challenges New FCC Entrants face as they seek licensure.

Table 5. Challenges Encountered by New FCC Entrants between Taking the PPT1 and Licensure[22]

Challenge	Percentage
Navigating the EEC website	24.6%
Navigating and using the LEAD portal	18.8%
Understanding the expectations and required steps to become licensed	17.3%
Getting help setting up your business	16.5%
Getting access to the LEAD portal	16.2%
Accessing and navigating the StrongStart Professional Development System/ Learning Management System	15.4%

There is a need to strengthen specific supports already offered, such as clearer communication and perhaps simplification of the overall process as well as increased visibility of, increased access to, and tailored provision of business support. This is indicated by the other two challenges New FCC Entrants faced—understanding the expectations and required steps to become licensed and getting help setting up their business. One respondent illustrated how the lack of clarity in specifics required for licensure and support in setting up produced fear and anxiety as their first licensor visit approached: "It was very difficult to begin with needing to have the space ready before scheduling the visit with the licensor and now you have several questions about the place, the materials, and this creates a lot of fear about not being able to be aproved [sic] after spending time and money."

We asked respondents if they wanted to share more about the challenges they experienced. While many respondents expanded on the challenges we presented to them, other respondents surfaced specific challenges beyond those that we offered. These include:

- Difficulty in updating their physical space to meet regulation
- Difficulty in finding a suitable facility; this manifested as finding a location that the New FCC Entrant felt "work[s] securely and provide[s] comfort to the children," but also manifested as just finding any location that would allow the New FCC Entrant to operate (e.g., "It's very difficult to rent a house for a family daycare, the property owners don't like to rent for this program.")
- The length of time that CORI background checks—mostly for others living in their homes—took extended the amount of time until New FCC Entrants could open (e.g., "My husband had issues with his CORI due to issues over 18 years old. It took over a year to actually get licensed.")
- High start-up costs (e.g., "The amount of money I needed in order to be able to purchase safe and the required furniture and supplies to be able to open my prgram [sic]. I spent thousands of dollars for startup.")
- Difficulty in finding and obtaining liability insurance
- During the COVID-19 pandemic, it took a long time for the license to be processed

New FCC Entrants turn to trusted relationships for support during the licensing process. Finally, we asked respondents who they turned to for support or assistance during the licensing process. Respondents overwhelmingly identified either friends and family (35.8%) or another family child care provider (35.4%) as the people they went to for support.[23] 18.8% of respondents

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22 We offered respondents more choices when asking respondents what other challenges they experienced during the licensing process (see Appendix B), but fewer than 15% of respondents experienced any of the other offerings.

23 We offered respondents more choices when asking respondents how the supports they relied upon as they went through the licensing process (see Appendix B), but fewer than 5% of respondents relied on any of the other offerings for support.

looked to EEC staff for support. Few respondents sought guidance from Child Care Resource and Referral agencies, family child care systems, local community organizations, Professional Development Centers, or SEIU 509 (family child care union). Another 16.5% of respondents did not seek support. These findings indicate that very local, trusted, 1:1 sources are New FCC Entrants primary "go-tos" for support through the process. As we can see, these same "go-tos" for support are the same people from whom New FCC Entrants learn about becoming an FCC: this suggests that these individuals are deeply trusted sources of information and support both during the pre-licensure phase *and also* throughout the licensing process.
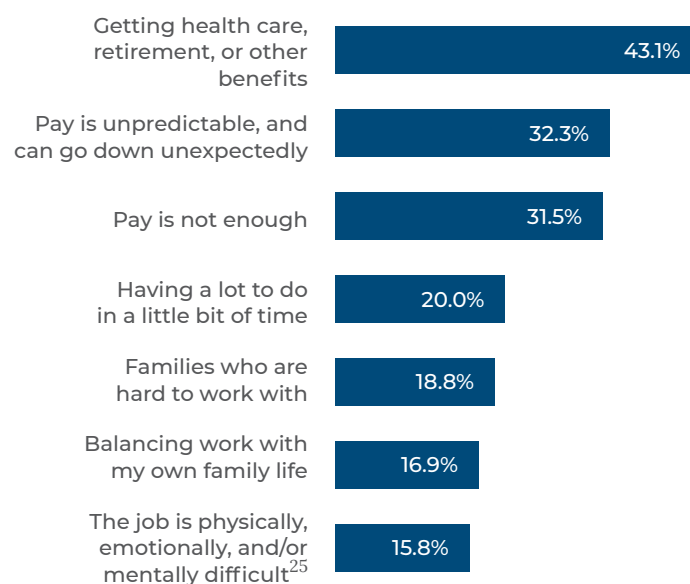
New FCC Entrants who were not fortunate enough to find guidance or support of any kind detailed the effects that *not* having support had on their experience of the licensing process: as one respondent noted, "In my case I did not have the support of an experienced person to guide me throughout the entire process of how to start a daycare. I did it alone. and little by little I learned how everything worked. reading and browsing and researching. I did it like that. It was exhausting because there were many hours and months of preparation to achieve it." This respondent was able to get through the process, but their reflection suggests that they feel they exerted much more time and effort than they would have needed to if they had strong support and guidance. Another respondent also highlighted how the amount of information one must absorb in the licencing process can lead to not really understanding what certain regulations mean or why they exist; this respondent describes their experience without guidance compared to their later experience with guidance: "some of the requirements wasn't clear enough for me not because they don't explain it but because i wasnot [sic] pay attention to them on my first

unannounced visit i missed a lot, but now i am so comfortable with them thanks to my degree I am taking now at Massasoit Community College for early childhood education and management." It is clear that relational, 1:1 licensing support benefits New FCC Entrants by providing much needed guidance, support, explanation, reassurance, and confidence as they embark on an entirely new and unfamiliar process to get their small business set up. In addition, relational, 1:1 licensing support may benefit the child care field by cutting down on time and effort spent researching known answers to commonly asked questions or worrying about whether a step toward licensing was executed correctly. When New FCC Entrants can more quickly, easily, and appropriately get through the licensing process, we are all better served.

Current Stressors

We provided respondents with a list of potential stressors and asked them to identify areas of present stress for them.

Table 6. Stressors Currently Experienced by New FCC Entrants[24]

Stressor	Percentage
Getting health care, retirement, or other benefits	43.1%
Pay is unpredictable, and can go down unexpectedly	32.3%
Pay is not enough	31.5%
Having a lot to do in a little bit of time	20.0%
Families who are hard to work with	18.8%
Balancing work with my own family life	16.9%
The job is physically, emotionally, and/or mentally difficult[25]	15.8%

24   We offered respondents more choices when asking respondents what other stressors they currently experience (see Appendix B), but fewer than 15% of respondents experienced any of the other offerings.

25   The same number of respondents also did not answer this question and left a blank response.

New FCC Entrants' most immediate concerns are with their full compensation (e.g., both wages and benefits). Overwhelmingly these concerns are top of mind. Particularly within the child care field, we need entrepreneurs and businesses that can withstand economic shocks, such as a recession or pandemic. This finding in particular is concerning because these New FCC Entrants are only, at most, three years into their tenure as an FCC. When financial troubles predominate as stressors early on, entrepreneurs are less likely to run businesses that are sustainable in the long-run.[26] The fact that more respondents are worried about benefits over wages is also telling and corroborates other research demonstrating how little we really know about how FCCs factor in benefits as they consider whether to join or leave the field.[27]

New FCC Entrants also find the demands of the job (e.g., the amount of work; navigating relationships with families; balancing their work and home lives in a single space; and a physically, emotionally, and mentally difficult job) stressful as well. While not as many respondents noted each of these "demands of the job" stressors, together they point to the need to provide further wellness and support particularly to New FCC Entrants who acutely feel the demands of the work and likely have few tricks or tips of their own to mitigate the wellness stress they feel. In addition, strong mentors and trusted supporters can work to mitigate these stressors not only by sharing their own tips and tricks for addressing these wellness concerns, but also by simply acting as another validating and affirming support.[28]

Resources That New FCC Entrants Access or Would Like to Access

We also provided respondents with a list of potential resources. We asked them which they already use, which they would like to use, and which they would not like to use.

Food program assistance is widely known and utilized by New FCC Entrants. Only one resource–food program assistance–seemed widely known and already used. 49.2% of respondents shared that they already accessed the food program with 8.5% of all respondents naming the food program as the resource that was the most helpful to them. One respondent noted that, "[The food program] allows me to guarantee balanced meals to the children in my program." We do want to note that while this is a robust number of respondents who do use and love the food program, half of the respondents still *do not* access the program.

> *"...strong mentors....can work to mitigate... stressors....by simply acting as another validating and affirming support."*

Some New FCC Entrants utilize trainings and workshops. The next widely accessed resource was training or workshops focused on EEC regulations, with approximately one-third (32.7%) of respondents saying that they do access these trainings and workshops already. More broad professional development resources were already accessed by 22.7% of respondents. 12.7% of respondents highlighted trainings and workshops as most helpful to them; several respondents mentioned those trainings and workshops

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26 Pattnaik, Joytsna and Mary Lopez. 2023. "Financial challenges of family child care providers during the COVID-19 pandemic: A Phenomenological study." *Early Childhood Education Journal* 1-15.

27 National Association for the Education of Young Children. 2024. "Unlocking Equity: NAEYC's Benefits Brief on Fair Compensation in Early Childhood Education." Washington, DC: NAEYC. https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/user-73607/naeyc_benefits_brief.may_2024.pdf

28 Whitebook, Marcy. 2016. "Mentoring and Coaching: Distinctions in Practice." *Preschool Development Grant Technical Assistance Quarterly Newsletter* 2(3). Washington, DC: US HHS.

Table 7. Resources Needs and Interests among New FCC Entrants

Already Use[29]	Would Like to Use[30]	Would Not Like to Use[31]
• Food program assistance (49.2%) • Training or workshops on EEC regulations (ex. refreshers on old regulations, any changes made recently) (32.7%) • A way to meet other providers and talk about your job (24.2) • Program support (ex. developing learning activities, working with families, approaches to managing challenging behavior) (23.8%) • Professional development (ex. access to college, paying for college, access to specialized training or workshops) (22.7%) • Substitute family child care providers available if you are sick (20.0%)	• Retirement benefits (68.8%) • Business support (ex. insurance, taxes, budgeting, creating or updating contracts) (61.2%) • Disability payments (60.4%) • Child care business management software (57.7%) • Help with start-up costs (56.9%) • Health care benefits (55.8%) • Help advertising your program and finding children (53.8%) • Program support (ex. developing learning activities, working with families, approaches to managing challenging behavior) (50.8%) • Professional development (ex. access to college, paying for college, access to specialized training or workshops) (50.8%)	• Transportation services (28.8%) • Language support (25.8%)

provided by EEC and any trainings or workshops provided online as particularly useful.

Some New FCC Entrants also already access networking, programmatic support, and substitute FCCs. 8.1% of respondents highlighted networking opportunities as most helpful to them, with several respondents mentioning specifically online networks and connections as useful. One respondent shared that their network provided an "Exchange of ideas, learning about others' mistakes and how to prevent them, support system, etc…" 5.0% of respondents highlighted substitute FCCs or having an assistant already as most helpful to them. As one respondent said, "El apoyo de la asistente hace la carga laboral mas llevadera."[32]

The fact that these resources are in fact being used is a demonstration that they need to be sustained as useful resources for New FCC Entrants. The relatively low percentage of usage may point to the need for further communication about the availability of these resources and/or the need for easier access to these resources.

A majority of New FCC Entrants would like to access resources focused on benefits or business support. Nearly every resource named (see Appendix B for all named resources) was voted as something the New FCC Entrants would like to use. Of the resources named, over half of all respondents were interested in benefits (e.g., retirement benefits, disability payments, health care benefits), business support (e.g.,

29 We offered respondents more choices when asking respondents what other resources they already use (see Appendix B), but fewer than 20% of respondents used any of the other offerings.

30 We offered respondents more choices when asking respondents what other resources they would like to use (see Appendix B), but fewer than 50% of respondents wanted any of the other offerings.

31 We offered respondents more choices when asking respondents what other resources they would not like to use (see Appendix B), but fewer than 20% of respondents did not want any of the other offerings.

32 English translation: "The support from the assistant makes the workload bearable."

basic business support, business management software, start-up cost support, marketing), and quality support (e.g., programmatic support and professional development). Among benefits, retirement benefits were of greatest interest, with nearly 70% of respondents interested in this resource. With 22.3% of our respondents at or over age 50, many of these individuals will soon near (or have surpassed retirement age). In addition, the nearly 70% of respondents who list retirement as an interest suggest that it is not just the older population of respondents who are thinking about this need. This corroborates findings from a report published by the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, which demonstrated great need for retirement benefits in New England.[33] The findings surrounding the various types of business supports align quite well with the findings surrounding respondents' experience with onboarding: respondents highlight not just the need for pre-licensure business support, but also strengthening and expanding business support offered during the first few years of operation. Respondents uplifted specific resources they found most useful, including Brightwheel, QuickBooks, and Shared Services; as well as topics covered that were useful, including tax support, voucher billing, and FCC finances.

Some resources may cater only to specific needs of FCCs or the families they serve. There were few resources that respondents *didn't* want, but approximately a quarter of our respondents did note that they were uninterested in using transportation services and language support. This suggests that these resources may be specific to the needs of particular populations, with some populations in search of these over others (and vice versa).

We asked respondents if they wanted to share more about the resources that were most useful to them, and 67.3% offered their thoughts. Many respondents reiterated the resources we suggested above, though several also shared additional resources that are meaningful to them. Respondents highlighted specific groups of people who were their most useful resource, including: EEC, specifically licensors; community support groups, specifically the Valley Opportunity Council; FCC systems; and families. Respondents also highlighted financial assistance (overwhelmingly naming EEC's Commonwealth Cares for Children (C3) grants), education (both university coursework, but also the CDA experience explicitly), technology (including the EEC portal, apps used to connect

"Among benefits, retirement benefits were of greatest interest, with nearly 70% of respondents interested in this resource."

33   Lucas, Kimberly D. 2023. "Retirement for Early Educators: Challenges and Possibilities." Boston: Federal Reserve Bank of Boston.

with families or other FCCs, and the internet, generally). Regarding the C3 grants, one respondent shared, "Con este recurso pude pagar el alquiler de mi negocio"[34]; another respondent shared, "El grant nos ha ayudado mucho ya que trabajamos siempre dos personas y el salario no era suficiente y con esto hemos podido seguir abiertos y prestar el servicio a nuevas familias."[35] Another respondent connected financial assistance, explaining, "I am currently taking advantage of the grant funded college classes through QCC and i am so grateful for this opportunity to better myself, my family, my daycare, and my future career."

Of note, some respondents took the time to let us know that they actually didn't know about any of the resources we listed, which suggests the need to examine the way(s) in which these resources are shared with New FCC Entrants.
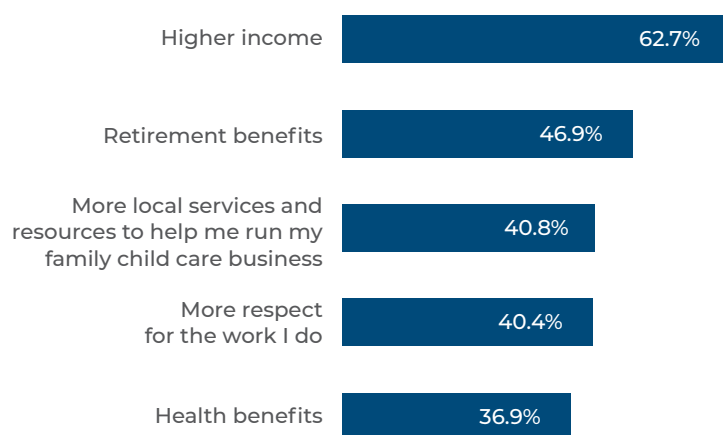
The Future

Finally, we asked New FCC Entrants about their future outlook as professionals in the child care field.

New FCC Entrants intend to stay in the field. At the point that the survey was administered, 42.7% of respondents projected staying in the child care field for five years or more and 36.2% of respondents were unsure. We also asked respondents what factors might contribute to their attrition from the field. The top response was age or poor health (61.5%),[36] corroborating the intention to stay in the field as long as possible.

New FCC Entrants would be more likely to stay in the field if their compensation, business support, and recognition and well-being concerns were addressed. We then asked what, if anything, would sway respondents to stay in the field for a longer time. Three of the top five factors related to compensation: higher wages (62.7%), retirement benefits (46.9%), and health benefits (36.9%). These, combined with the findings on stressors and resources above, suggest that focus on these factors of compensation may be high priorities for the field to address. In addition, 40.8% of respondents noted their interest in more local services and resources focused on business development, which, combined with the resources respondents would like to use (above), signals further that business resources are best delivered at the local level. Finally, 40.4% of respondents noted their interest in more respect for the work [FCCs] do; taken together with the current well-being stressors currently felt by New FCC Entrants, this suggests that focusing on recognition and wellness are important priority areas as well.

Table 8. Factors That May Sway New FCC Entrants to Stay in the Field[37]

Factor	Percentage
Higher income	62.7%
Retirement benefits	46.9%
More local services and resources to help me run my family child care business	40.8%
More respect for the work I do	40.4%
Health benefits	36.9%

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34   English translation: "With this resource I can pay the rent for my business.

35   English translation: "The grant has helped us a lot. Now that it's two of us working, the salary wasn't enough and with this grant we have been able to stay open and provide service to new families."

36   We offered respondents more choices when asking respondents what factors might cause them to leave the field (see Appendix B), but fewer than 25% of respondents selected any of the other offerings.

37   We offered respondents more choices when asking respondents what factors might sway them to stay in the field (see Appendix B), but fewer than 25% of respondents selected any of the other offerings.

Summary

The above findings from the survey administered to New FCC Entrants suggest the following:

1. The early childhood field in Massachusetts continues to attract individuals who are ideal early educators: New FCC Entrants are coming in with both informal and formal experience caring for young children, are excited to use their skills and expertise to address several of the field's needs, and many intend to stay in the field.

2. Not only are New FCC Entrants ideal individuals to attract to the field, but they also find the field attractive to enter into. Many find the amount of workplace autonomy and possibility for economic mobility attractive.

3. New FCC Entrants learn about family child care and gain support navigating the FCC licensing process through trusted relationships with friends, family, and current FCCs.

4. While many New FCC Entrants faced few challenges during the licensing process, most New FCC Entrants encountered challenges that can be addressed. These include:
   - Improving the digital user experience for New FCC Entrants, and
   - Strengthening specific supports already offered, such as clearer communication and/or simplification of the licensing process as well as increased visibility of, increased access to, and tailored and local provision of business support.

5. New FCC Entrants' most pressing sources of stress are centered on compensation, business support, and navigating and balancing the demands of the job. The majority of New FCC Entrants are seeking resources and support that address these areas of concern. They also report that addressing these sources of stress would make the work more attractive and tenable for them to stay in the field in the long-run.

6. There are resources and supports that at least some New FCC Entrants know about and access. These include food program assistance, trainings and workshops, networking, programmatic support, and substitute FCCs.

FINDINGS FROM FOCUS GROUPS OF FCCS WHO LEFT THE FIELD (2020–2023)

The second part of our study focused on learning more about the family child care providers who left the field between January 2020 and August 2023–during and in the immediate wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. A total of 20 focus group participants from across the Commonwealth shared their experiences with us (see Appendix A for full methodology). When asked what advice should be given to those family child care providers who recently entered the field, one veteran participant who closed her program after 28 years said with a laugh, "Don't do it!" While said with a smile, this sentiment seemed to resonate with many of our focus group participants: their experiences as family child care providers were full of mixed emotions as well as mixed experiences. As with many experiences, our focus group participants conveyed several tensions that they balanced and navigated during their respective tenures as FCCs in Massachusetts. Our focus groups centered on reasons for leaving the field as well as supports that may have caused FCCs Who Left the Field to potentially stay in the field. Our focus group guide (see Appendix C) supported the identification of both pre-identified and emergent themes. These are shared below.

> "For many participants, the children and their families were the reason they stayed in the field as long as they did."

Relational Experiences

Our focus groups surfaced several different types of experiences, both positive and challenging, that either led FCCs Who Left the Field to stay in the field a little longer or leave. Some of these experiences were about FCCs' relationships with young children and their families, licensors, and with EEC itself.

FCCs Who Left the Field had deep relationships with young children and their families; these deep relationships mitigated thoughts of leaving the field. The largest positive finding from our focus groups was that every participant spoke of their close relationships and love of the children and often the bonds they had made with the families. Many participants started their professional careers upon having their own young children and kept working as family child care providers long after their children had grown. They all loved the young children in their care, and the children were the first things they mentioned when asked what they missed about working in the early childhood field. Participants took pride in how much the children learned while in their care and would often keep in touch over the years. For many participants, the children and their families were the reason they *stayed* in the field as long as they did. As such, it was not surprising to learn that many of our participants went on to paid or volunteer work in education and their communities even after they closed their programs. This finding is similar to several previous studies on FCCs and their relationship with the children and families they work with.[38]

FCCs Who Left the Field felt that the value of their work and profession was not recognized–and sometimes not respected–by the families they directly worked with. Similar to previous studies focused on FCC experiences,[39] several participants discussed ways in which the time, effort, and expertise that they bring to their work went

38 Paredes, Elena, Edgar Hernandez, Alice Herrera, and Holli Tonyan. 2020. "Putting the "family" in family child care: The alignment between familismo (familism) and family child care providers' descriptions of their work." *Early Childhood Research Quarterly 52*: 74-85.

39 Anderson, Siri and Elisa Minoff. 2022. "The Child Care Paradox: How Child Care Providers Balance Paid and Un-Paid Caregiving." Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Social Policy. https://cssp.org/resource/the-child-care-paradox

ignored or even dismissed. Many families ignored family child care providers' policies and rules. FCCs Who Left the Field are business owners, and many had been in business for years or decades before they left the field. Their business operations were put in place for a reason and honed over time to balance their needs with the needs of families. And yet, our focus group participants cited several instances where families would disregard or ignore their policies and rules. For example, several participants shared their experiences with families who had dropped off children who were sick despite policies that stated that sick children should stay home. This was especially problematic in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, both while emergency child care[40] was in effect and when child care providers were allowed to open up again. Several of our participants noted that their policies around sick children were in place to keep their own families or themselves (some of whom were immunocompromised) safe from contracting COVID-19. One participant told us how much information she gave her families about COVID-19, mask wearing, and the need for children to stay home if they had COVID-19 to little avail: families in her care did not believe in wearing masks and still sent in sick children. This participant had families send children sick with COVID-19 to her program four times before her entire family was seriously sickened by COVID-19 and instead of sympathy, the families only asked, "When are you reopening?" This was the breaking point for this participant. While these experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic were uniquely stressful and unprecedented for both FCCs and families, prior studies and documentation demonstrates that similar disregard in bringing children with colds or other sicknesses in violation with FCCs' policies and rules commonly occurred even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.[41]

Even beyond the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, other participants discussed a similar level of disregard by parents and families who took advantage of participants' time and hospitality in dropping off early or picking up later than they should. While some participants were able to express compassion for the families they worked with as many formed close bonds with the parents too, having their rules ignored, sometimes to the detriment of their family's or their own well-being, left participants feeling powerless and uncared for–by the very families they so deeply cared about. This example coupled with the previous finding on how young children and families played a mitigating role in keeping FCCs in the field demonstrates the tension that FCCs feel as they love and care for their families, even families who violate FCC policies.

FCCs Who Left the Field didn't see licensors as a source of support. A majority of participants felt that receiving more support from EEC would have kept them in the profession. They pointed to licensors as lacking in providing the support they wanted. As one participant remarked, "licensors need to be more supportive and remember that [family child care providers'] programs are their homes."

Licensor inconsistencies resulted in family child care provider frustration. Many participants identified inconsistencies in the way licensors understood and enforced the regulations and policies. As one participant noted, the "licensors fluctuated and interpreted the regulations in different ways." Another participant shared that, "no one was on the same page...regulations are interpreted differently and no one can support you." For example, one participant with over 30 years of experience in the field had no problems with licensors until her most recent licensor pointed out problems in her program that no licensor had ever brought up before. Such inconsistencies in street-level bureaucratic

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40 Child care that was allowed to operate during the first several months of the COVID-19 pandemic; these centers and FCCs were specially licensed to operate specifically for essential workers. See https://eeclead.my.site.com/apex/EEC_ChildCareEmergencyProviders.

41 Modigliani, Kathy. 1993. "Child Care as an Occupation in a Culture of Indifference." PhD dissertation, Department of Education, University of Michigan.

decision-making[42] meant that participants were not able to anticipate what small things a new licensor would find wrong with their programs, leading to undue stress, concern, anxiety and humiliation on the part of participants. These findings are supported by a national Family Child Care Licensing Work Group.[43]

Transactional relationships with licensors do not build trusting relationships. Some participants described transactional relationships with their licensors. When relationships were more transactional, participants described a sense of aloneness and difficulty in seeking or receiving support. For example, one participant mentioned that she only heard from EEC [licensors] when something was needed of her; she felt very stressed and unsupported. Similarly, another participant felt that she wanted to be "more supported and less isolated." Participants also mentioned that because they feared that asking questions of their licensors would only cause them more harm, licensors were not considered a source they could turn to for information. As one participant said, it "would have been nice to have a support system and not a principal."

Some licensors' approach to working with FCCs instilled fear and anxiety during licensing visits. These participants shared their experience of licensors–their primary and sometimes only interaction with EEC–as punitive and something to be feared, rather than supportive and something that helps them improve the quality of their caregiving work. One participant felt that her "[licensors were]...looking for something wrong"; this caused her to feel on edge as she anticipated interacting with her licensor. Another participant shared that the way that her licensor shared anything that was found wrong felt humiliating; she also felt oppressed and scared of her licensing visits. Specifically, other participants honed in on the stringent read of

> *"Transactional relationships with licensors do not build trusting relationships."*

the regulations that some licensors employed as "picky": one participant shared, "I've always had a fear-based thing with licensors. They had all the control...got pickier and pickier" and another participant told us how she wanted to cry as her licensor asked her for a ruler to measure the size of toys and other objects in the family child care space. While none of our participants disputed the need for licensors to inspect their workplaces and ensure that the regulations were being followed, the participants who shared their feelings of fear and anxiety conveyed the need to improve the approach that licensors employ during these visits. As one participant asked, "Are you here to support me or are you here to catch me?" As this participant shows, participants understood and even welcomed opportunities for improvement and support in becoming higher quality. To be fair, other participants (and even some of those who shared negative interactions) identified positive interactions with licensors as well. However, the presence of positive interactions does not deny these negative interpersonal experiences that many of our participants highlighted and which have also been brought to attention through other research studies, including those focused on Massachusetts.[44] This finding highlights the tension that FCCs experience as they seek support and improvement from their licensors, but sometimes experience approaches that reprimand rather than teach.

42   Lipsky, Michael. 1980. *Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services.* New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

43   Home Grown. 2024. "Building Belonging: Valuing Family Child Care Via Licensing Systems." Philadelphia, PA: Home Grown.

44   Bromer, Juliet, Toni Porter, Samantha Melvin, and Marina Ragonese-Barnes. 2021. "Family child care educators' perspectives on leaving, staying, and entering the field: Findings from the multi-state study of family child care decline and supply." Chicago: Herr Research Center, Erikson Institute. https://www.erikson.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/The_shifting_supply_of_regulated_FCC_in_the_US_2021_LITREVIEW.pdf

> *"...family child care businesses are fundamentally different from centers..."*

EEC regulations, policies, and/or implementation of regulations and policies sometimes felt as if inclusion of family child care was an afterthought. Participants expressed what Bromer et al. (2021) call "Quality standards that privilege center-like environments and Eurocentric values."[45] In other words, participants discussed needing to conform to regulatory and policy standards (and/or the practices and mechanisms that implement these regulations or policies) that did not center their experiences or needs; because family child care businesses are fundamentally different from centers in their operation, size, and implementation (among many other variables), and because family child care businesses are overwhelmingly run by women who are people of color, immigrants, and/or low-income,[46] holding them to standards that are not designed with their experiences or needs in mind essentially sets our family child care businesses up for failure. While this does not apply to every single regulation or policy focused on FCCs, FCCs Who Left the Field were able to identify some examples of these inequities in practice:

- As one example, participants described trainings that make sense for those who work with a single age group (as most center-based early educators do), but less sense for those who have mixed-age groups.

- As another example, with regard to Commonwealth Cares for Children (C3)[47] funding, one participant shared this thought: "[EEC] did not have their act together and what FCCs need," suggesting that the C3 roll out had not been properly vetted with regard to the family child care experience. Another participant offered more insight: she was "freaked out" by the threat of an audit in regards to the C3 funds received; these fears were not addressed for her, rendering C3 funds inaccessible to her.

- Finally, almost all participants identified issues with pop-in visits. This example actually extended beyond EEC's federally mandated licensor visits and included any other type of pop-in visit (e.g., pop-in visits by FCC system staff, food program staff). For the purposes of example, and because it does include EEC pop-in visits, we include this example here. While participants understood the need for unannounced licensing visits,[48] they found the pop-in nature of the visits nerve wracking and added stress to an already stressful job. One participant discussed how the need to always be "inspection ready" was very stressful, and this constant worry made her feel as if her home wasn't really her home, but instead a child care center. Still another participant said that she had anxiety and nervousness hanging over her head due to pop-in licensing visits and the fear of non-compliance. These experiences highlight a tension that exists specifically among family child care providers, where their workplace is also their home:[49] individuals who live and work in the same space delicately balance their personal privacy with the necessity of opening their live/work spaces up to strangers. When this balance skews too far one way or another (e.g., when their own children or partner come home

45   Ibid.

46   Burchinal, Margaret, Lauren Nelson, Mary Carlson, and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn. 2008. "Neighborhood Characteristics and Child Care Type and Quality." *Early Education and Development* 19(5): 702-725.

47   https://www.mass.gov/info-details/commonwealth-cares-for-children-c3-grants

48   EEC is required by US federal government regulation under the Child Care and Development Fund Title 45, Subtitle A, Subchapter A, Part 98.42(b)(2)(i)(B) to "Not less than annually, an unannounced inspection for compliance with all child care licensing standards." https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-45/subtitle-A/subchapter-A/part-98

49   Lucas, Kimberly D. 2020. ""We Have to Do It All": How Family Child Care Providers Negotiate the Boundaries of Care." PhD Dissertation. Waltham, MA: Brandeis University.

early from school or work, or when an official comes in for a pop-in visit), that delicate balance is severely disrupted and increases stress on the FCC to bring that balance back to stasis. Some participants found visits that regularly occurred during key transition moments, such as naptime, disruptive to the flow of the day; one participant spoke about how the presence of unknown people would change the children's behavior for the worse. Beyond these disruptions, participants found it difficult when the unannounced visitor expected the family child care provider to leave the children unattended to procure requested paperwork.

Centers are also subject to these types of pop-in visits, but centers also have a central administrative office that can receive visitors and provide them with paperwork separate from the classroom and children. Some centers can also provide observation spaces separate from classrooms, which allows observation to occur without disrupting the flow of the day. In these ways, the impact on a center's operations and its children's schedule is much less than the same visit with a family child care business, where often the FCC is both lead teacher and administrator, trying to balance keeping eyes on children while finding paperwork, or where observation in inherently disruptive to the flow of the day because the vast majority of family child care homes do not have built-in observation spaces.

While these may seem miniscule, subtle messages such as these can compound and signal the lesser importance of family child care providers to EEC. In fact, one participant shared that "…as the years went on, it felt like [EEC] put [family child care] on the back burner." In our data, more than one participant noted that her experience of EEC led her to believe that EEC was trying to phase out family child care providers. What participants were really looking for was a fair foundation: as one participant stated, she simply wanted to

feel valued by EEC for "educating and caring and teaching kids in our own homes… there wasn't value [recognized in her work]." As these examples demonstrate, FCCs experience tensions between wanting to follow regulations and policies and having to follow regulations and policies that are sometimes not designed for them.

Operational Experiences

FCCs Who Left the Field also highlighted some of the experiences they had with running their family child care business and either staying in or leaving the field.

Some FCCs Who Left the Field were not fully prepared for the business aspects of running a family child care. Some participants mentioned not being ready for the business aspects of their work. This lack of preparedness seemed to produce structural inefficiencies that may have led to increased financial, time, or emotional stress. For example, one participant said she did not know how to market or attract clients and would often accept children who were not a great fit. This same participant felt pressured to provide lunch to all of the children in her care even though she had not intended to do so. Another participant mentioned that doing the taxes was a burden and it took her 50 hours to prepare. Finally, one participant said she did not like collecting payments from families and that it was hard to set boundaries. These findings are consistent with prior research that identifies inequities in provision of business support in relation to curricular or professional development support offered to Massachusetts family child care providers.[50]

Some FCCs Who Left the Field could no longer make ends meet due to low compensation. Unsurprisingly, one big operational challenge was low compensation.[51] Two participants mentioned low compensation outright, but others offered impli-

50   Lucas, Kimberly D. 2020. ""We Have to Do It All": How Family Child Care Providers Negotiate the Boundaries of Care." PhD Dissertation. Waltham, MA: Brandeis University.

51   National Association for the Education of Young Children. 2024. ""We are NOT OK": Early childhood educators and families face rising challenges as relief funds expire." Washington, DC: NAEYC.

cations and effects of low wages on their attrition from the field. Some participants noted that their work alone would not be enough to sustain their family. Some participants brought up the subsidy system noting the current reimbursement rate is "not worth it" and calling the present system an "insanity." Similarly, another participant realized she had nothing saved for retirement and had no real salary; she consequently left the field. Finally, one participant said that aging and low wages were the factors that led her to leave the field. These participants utilized the pause in work and the pause in income during the COVID-19 pandemic to reflect on the practical aspects of their career choice; they ultimately made the decision to pivot from their career as early educators in order to pursue more lucrative opportunities.

Many participants mentioned their long days and long hours and feeling burnt out. One participant felt the financial stress of working in a low compensation job; this along with mental health concerns caused her to leave the field. Another participant said that by the end of the day, she had put so much into her family child care program that she was exhausted and had nothing left of herself to give her family.

Some participants could no longer make ends meet due to shocks to their income. One participant cited that many of the parents of the children in her care started working from home, and she was not able to access financial support to stay open. A similar loss of families caused another participant to close after opening back up for a brief period. An emergency surgical procedure left one participant with no source of income, no substitute or assistants, and no sick days; she subsequently closed her program. These participants were not able to find time to reflect and pivot, but were instead thrown into a career change out of necessity. As shocks to their already low wages produced even less income due to the

COVID-19 pandemic, these participants were forced to find work in a new field.

Beyond wages, participants did nod to other supplemental compensation support. Research demonstrates that, beyond wages, other aspects of compensation may alleviate financial stress associated with low wages in the child care sector.[52] While participants did express gratitude for C3 funds, some noted that the taxes associated with the program made it less attractive to apply. Participants also described their participation with the food program, but the unannounced visits from food program staff and the little savings from participation did not arouse much enthusiasm.

FCCs Who Left the Field's Experience of the COVID-19 Pandemic and Its Aftermath Pushed Them To Leave the Field–But They Were Already On the Brink

All participants closed their FCC businesses by 2023; some closed as soon as the COVID-19 pandemic began and Massachusetts closed all child care programs. Others provided emergency care, but then closed soon after all child care programs were given the "green light" to open again. Still others had other reasons for closing. However, the COVID-19 pandemic was not the primary reason for program closure. Some participants had considered retiring prior to COVID-19. As one participant said, "[being a family child care provider is] unsustainable...taxing on your body, mind, and money-wise." As we will demonstrate, reasons for leaving the field ended up being a combination of the heightened operational challenges, physical and mental health tolls, and financial challenges. We have learned many lessons about emergency preparedness from the COVID-19 pandemic, and many of these lessons can support the kind of "emergency advance planning" for any future shocks that FCCs seek nationally.[53]

52 National Association for the Education of Young Children. 2024. "Unlocking Equity: NAEYC's Benefits Brief on Fair Compensation in Early Childhood Education." Washington, DC: NAEYC. https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/user-73607/naeyc_benefits_brief.may_2024.pdf

53 Home Grown. 2024. "Building Belonging: Valuing Family Child Care Via Licensing Systems." Philadelphia, PA: Home Grown. https://homegrownchildcare.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/HomeGrownlicensingRecs2024.pdf

COVID-19 policies were sometimes unrealistic. Some participants' experience in the immediate wake of COVID-19 burned them out. One participant described "the unattainable [policies] of 29 pages," and another participant said "the rules [during the COVID-19 pandemic] were unrealistic for home day cares." More than one participant stated that all of the required cleaning and sanitation posed a problem, especially when resources were scarce.

COVID-19 policies introduced too many rapid changes, leaving little time to acclimate to and properly transition into new ways of being. One participant noted that because emergency care providers were not necessarily matched with children they had cared for before, working with an entirely new group of children was like starting all over again. This, in combination with a new licensor, caused her to leave the field within a year. Another participant struggled with COVID-19-related policies that felt at odds with what her child development training suggested was developmentally appropriate care. Similarly, this, in combination with a new licensor, caused her to leave the field. For these participants, their experience with rapid changes and transitions in the immediate wake of COVID-19 left them feeling like they could not or would not continue their work into the 'post-pandemic' period.

Frequently changing COVID-19 policies were difficult to navigate and keep informed about. Participants felt that policies in general, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, were very hard to keep up with. One participant took a smaller group of children after providing emergency care, but she took an EEC-sanctioned pause from her program to care for her own sick parents. Unfortunately, the pause was longer than she had thought was allowable, and she lost her license. These types of complex and sometimes contradictory policies were too much for some participants, and became the final reason for them to leave the field.

Some FCCs Who Left the Field left due to COVID-19-related health concerns. One participant said her closing was prompted by sick children coming into her program; she ended up with pneumonia, and along with difficulty in finding new families, she decided to close. Another participant chose to leave the field because COVID-19 came into her home, despite excessive nightly cleaning. Two other participants also cited the fear of catching COVID-19: one felt too afraid to even offer emergency care (she later contracted long COVID), and the other did end up providing emergency care–when the emergency care period ended, she felt it would be easier not to go back to caring for children even though she thought she had a few more years to give to the field. These participants put their and their families' health on the line in order to provide care for others' children. Their actions resulted in sickness, sometimes with long-term consequences.

Some FCCs Who Left the Field were physically and mentally exhausted. One participant felt she could not continue to work as a family child care provider; she attempted to apply for disability and was denied. Another participant's story is similar: she told us that her "body got used up," and she now works as a special education assistant in a public school. Yet another participant tried to reopen, but the stress was so much that she ended up in bed for a month after closing, which was followed by a stroke. A combination of physical and mental exhaustion, these participants demonstrate that working up to and through the COVID-19 pandemic was taxing on their bodies. Family child care work itself is already physically and mentally laborious, not to mention any added cleaning requirements and the stress of working in potentially hazardous public health conditions.[54]

FCCs Who Left the Field Offered Solutions to the Challenges They Experienced

As often happens, discussing challenges with family child care providers quickly led to sourcing

54 Lucas, Kimberly D. and Wendy Wagner Robeson. 2020. "Too much and not enough: Family stresses and child care preferences in Boston during COVID-19." Boston, MA: City of Boston's Office of Women's Advancement and Economic Mobility Lab.

practical and useful solutions. Family child care providers are knowledgeable and resourceful, especially when it comes to addressing challenges they experience firsthand. Participants offered the following in relation to some of the challenges posed above.

Peer support is crucial. Some participants did seek peer groups for support. Some would travel to after work gatherings, and others found peer support through Facebook groups. The fact that our participants naturally sought out some type of peer support suggests that it is beneficial in supporting these often-isolated early educators.[55] Providing multiple and multi-modal paths to participating in peer support networks remains crucial to supporting family child care providers. Participants suggest that one such path may be that EEC provides new family child care providers with a paid mentor that could help with set up, show them how to do things, and be an ally and cheerleader. In this vein, focus group participants offered their advice to New FCC Entrants; the full list can be found in Appendix D.

Recognition and respect do not have to be grand gestures. Participants had thoughts on ways that the value of their work might be elevated and recognized, including:

- A monthly newsletter from licensors could not only streamline communication of key policy or regulation changes, but could also include "shout outs" to providers, resources, and even songs
- Licensors could bring supplies, toys, diapers, snacks, and cleaning supplies as supportive resources upon drop-in visits, making these visits much more welcome and less one-sided
- Licensors can mention good things they observe or witness, employing principles of

positive reinforcement in their own work with family child care providers[56]

Pop-in visits can still be "pop-in" while providing respectful communication. Participants suggest that pop-in visits can still include an element of surprise while also being more respectful toward family child care schedules and transitions. This might include:

- Pop-in visitors letting family child care providers general days to expect them (e.g., "I'm in your town on Mondays.")
- Pop-in visitors might show up in pairs so that one could function as a temporary assistant while the family child care provider is occupied with the other pop-in visitor
- Pop-in visitors might simply send a quick text saying, "I'm in the driveway" so that family child care providers can quickly prepare children and other adults for an unexpected transition
- Pop-in visitors might request paperwork electronically ahead of time/prior to a visit[57]

Financial and business support comes in many forms. Participants identified multiple ways in which financial and business support could be provided, including:

- Support in finding and financing financial access training
- Support in finding and financing college courses
- Support in finding and financing obtaining the family child care license
- Changing C3 funds to a stipend, rather than taxable income (one participant experienced a portion of her C3 funding going back to the state in increased taxes)
- Increasing C3 amounts

55   Bromer, Juliet and Toni Porter. 2019. "Mapping the family child care network landscape: Findings from the National Study of Family Child Care Networks." Executive Summary. Chicago, IL: Herr Research Center, Erikson Institute; Bromer, Juliet and Toni Porter. 2017. "Staffed family child care networks: A research-informed strategy for supporting high-quality family child care." Washington, DC: National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance, Office of Child Care, Administration for Children and Families, U.S Department of Health and Human Services.

56   This same recommendation is shared nationally by FCCs who were part of Home Grown's Family Child Care Licensing Work Group: Home Grown. 2024. "Building Belonging: Valuing Family Child Care Via Licensing Systems." Philadelphia, PA: Home Grown.

57   This same recommendation is shared nationally by FCCs who were part of Home Grown's Family Child Care Licensing Work Group: Ibid.

- Creating an insurance pool for FCC homeowners insurance (it is difficult to find a carrier that would accept FCCs)
- Spreading the work about Shared Services and the business classes family child care providers are eligible to take. Participants talked about not knowing how to market their business, how to handle all of their paperwork, or how to properly do their taxes. Some referenced not having a handbook that spelled out hours, vacations, etc.
- EEC could help pay not only for the needed classes and training but as mentioned above, the needed family child care license

Create a central clearinghouse for resources and support. Participants recognize that technology may be able to provide some of the centralized support they seek from EEC. Many participants suggested a website or portal that current FCCs could use to gain support, ask questions, and learn about resources and upcoming trainings. Participants suggested that such a website or portal would need to be translated into the languages that FCCs speak. Most importantly, this website or portal should not be a system of surveillance.

Summary

The above findings from the focus groups with FCCs Who Left the Field suggest the following:

1. In a relational field, relational tensions continue to exist:
   a. Families are both the reason that FCCs Who Left the Field stayed in the field as long as they did–and some families also clearly and knowingly disregarded family child care providers' policies and rules.
   b. FCCs Who Left the Field sought support and improvement from their licensors, but sometimes experienced approaches that reprimanded them rather than taught them.
   c. FCCs Who Left the Field wanted to follow regulations and policies–and had to operate within regulations, policies, and/or implementation of these regulations and policies that did not center their experiences or needs.

2. Some FCCs Who Left the Field were not fully prepared for the business aspects of running a family child care.

3. Some FCCs Who Left the Field could no longer make ends meet due to low compensation. An economic shock, such as sudden medical bills or a sudden gap in income, can throw low-wage workers like FCCs out of the field entirely.

4. The emergency roll out of EEC's COVID-19 pandemic policies provided many lessons learned:
   a. Policies need to be feasibility-tested and grounded in the reality of implementation.
   b. Policies require time for information to be disseminated, digested, and implemented.
   c. A single source of truth that highlights changes in policies is necessary for clear communication.
   d. Physical and mental health of our essential workers and their families must be kept at the forefront.

5. FCCs Who Left the Field–and likely current FCCs as well–know the challenges they faced well and suggest solutions that are feasible and implementable.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings from this mixed-methods study detail some very clear and tangible next steps toward creating the family child care infrastructure needed to properly support and sustain family child care providers who are newly engaged in the field. Some recommendations focus on what EEC should (and could!) do to better support new family child care providers:

1. **EEC should create a family child care provider task force or working group to re-examine current policies, inform new policies, connect family child care providers, and identify ways to recognize family child care providers and their work.** As the saying goes, "every system is perfectly designed to get the results it gets." If family child care providers feel as if they're an afterthought in EEC's policy design (or if they feel designed out of EEC's policies altogether), then it is also possible for family child care providers to be centered in policy design. EEC should create and compensate a working group of family child care providers to support EEC in developing regulations, policies, processes,

resources and support, and culture that explicitly and directly includes family child care providers.[58] As demonstrated by the solutions shared by focus group participants, engaging family child care providers not only helps to quickly identify challenge areas, but also surfaces feasible and meaningful solutions.

EEC has already started down this trajectory through the recent creation of its first Program Development Specialist focused on Family Child Care Providers; the current staff member in this role provided licensed family child care for 18 years prior. The creation of a working group would build on this momentum and provide the current Program Development Specialist with a wide range of family child care experiences to draw from and inform their work. For example, this working group might draw upon the group focused on Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) FCC wellness or upon any number of the informal networks that meet by location or language. One of the first orders of business for this working group might be to consider and

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58 This same recommendation is shared nationally by FCCs who were part of Home Grown's Family Child Care Licensing Work Group: Home Grown. 2024. "Building Belonging: Valuing Family Child Care Via Licensing Systems." Philadelphia, PA: Home Grown. https://homegrownchildcare.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/HomeGrownlicensingRecs2024.pdf

potentially implement the solutions posed by family child care providers above.

2. EEC should continue to provide Commonwealth Cares for Children (C3) and other business support funds.

Analysis of administrative data suggests that attrition from the field and entry into the field is correlated with the introduction of the C3 funds provided by EEC initially though American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding and eventually sustained through state funding mechanisms in FY24. Data from both New FCC Entrants and FCCs Who Left the Field suggest the continued importance[59] of C3 funding to supporting and sustaining FCC business operations.

3. EEC should expand communication and provision of business support, both during the licensing process and beyond.

New FCC Entrants identified a need for expanded business support efforts–including those that are locally provided and tailored to local needs, and FCCs Who Left the Field also described not being fully prepared to run a family child care business. Because EEC, in partnership with the United Way, already provides business support in the form of its Professional Development Academy, and because several participants from both the survey and focus groups were able to name specific business support resources that were useful to them, such as Shared Services, we see this recommendation as a call for expansion of these supports (e.g., to include explanations of the tax system or why documentation is important) as well as more clear communication that these supports exist and that utilizing these supports may be meaningful for new entrants as well as veteran family child care providers.

4. EEC should support an opt-in family child care mentoring program that connects veteran family child care providers with new entrants.

New FCC Entrants heavily rely on known, trusted, 1:1 relationships for support in learning about and getting through the licensing process. FCCs Who Left the Field highlighted the importance of peer connection and support. Development of an opt-in mentoring program that connects veteran family child care providers with new entrants may create a new pathway for peer support. In addition, such a program could continue to engage FCCs Who Left the Field, to ensure that the wisdom that these FCCs have gained is not lost after they leave the field. EEC has recently begun to invest in this pathway through its investment in apprenticeship pathways.[60] These investments may serve as a proof of concept for how a broader mentoring program may be funded and implemented.

5. EEC should develop and widely communicate a user-friendly single source of truth with up-to-date information for family child care providers.

One source of frustration for FCCs Who Left the Field was being overwhelmed by a large amount of information that was sometimes contradictory. Some New FCC Entrants also described the need for more clarity or simplification of the licensing process. It would be ideal to have a digital single source of truth: a single, known, and trusted place where family child care providers can find the latest information on regulations, policies, opportunities, and other resources. This digital space can be further enhanced by periodic human interaction, such as office hours or focused discussion on various topics that might be delivered in both virtual and in-person formats.

59   Bergeron, Victoria. 2024. "Importance of C3 Continuation for the Commonwealth." Boston: Massachusetts Taxpayers Foundation. https://www.masstaxpayers.org/importance-c3-continuation-commonwealth

60   https://www.mass.gov/news/healey-driscoll-administration-investing-3-million-to-support-early-education-workforce-pipeline-and-apprenticeships

6. **EEC should create alignment and consistency across licensors by first asking licensors about their own experiences, challenges, and recommendations.** We want to acknowledge that this study was designed to center the family child care experience, and that is what our findings show: the family child care experience. In the process of collecting our data, we realized that we were learning so much from the experiences of New FCC Entrants and FCCs Who Left the Field: our participants offered insights about the field that we would not have otherwise known–and they offered real, feasible solutions that we may not have otherwise thought of.

Both New FCC Entrants and FCCs Who Left the Field discussed licensors who were amazing supports (e.g., the person some turned to for support during the licensing process, a source of knowledge and resources after being licensed), but also a source of some of the challenges that they encountered either as they were becoming licensed or after. In conducting this study, we realized that licensors may have just as many insights as our FCC participants–and perhaps just as many real, feasible solutions to the challenges we highlight here and beyond.

7. **EEC should actively cultivate trusting relationships between licensors and family child care providers.** While the recommendation for building internal structural support for alignment and consistency (see Recommendation 5 above) is necessary for improving relationships between licensors and family child care providers, it is not sufficient. Cultural shifts will need to accompany any structural shifts EEC might make; together cultural and structural shifts can form the basis for building trusting relationships between licensors and family child care providers. Some

suggestions for cultivating trusting relationships between licensors and family child care providers include:

- Continuing the practice of offering technical assistance as a first response to concerns with programs (as opposed to immediately issuing a citation), especially in cases unrelated to severe health or safety issues

- Including licensors in the family child care task force or working group (see Recommendation 1 above) to foster a sense of co-learning and mutually respected expertise

- Engaging both licensors and family child care providers in the co-development of a way to honor the underlying reason for pop-in visits while also respecting family child care schedules and transitions (see solutions offered above by FCCs Who Left the Field as a starting point for potential interventions)

- Engaging both licensors and family child care providers in co-development of a system for paperwork storage, update, and sharing that is both secure and private, but also cuts down on time spent on finding, sharing, and inspecting documents during pop-in visits

- Supporting a training or professional development workshop for both licensors and FCCs focused on understanding power dynamics in licensor/family child care relationships[61]

- Creating opportunities for licensors and family child care providers to meet and interact with each other–this might be something as simple as asking licensors to hold virtual office hours on a regular basis, supporting virtual fora for licensors and family child care providers to discuss specific topics (e.g., family engagement, outdoor safety, etc.), or any of the solutions offered by FCCs Who Left the Field above

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61   This same recommendation is shared nationally by FCCs who were part of Home Grown's Family Child Care Licensing Work Group: Home Grown. 2024. "Building Belonging: Valuing Family Child Care Via Licensing Systems." Philadelphia, PA: Home Grown. https://homegrownchildcare.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/HomeGrownlicensingRecs2024.pdf

EEC cannot address many of the challenges identified by our participants by itself. As with most challenges, other actors in the field are needed to address challenges holistically and intentionally. Recommendations for the wider early childhood field to engage with include:

8. **Key actors in the early childhood field should explore and pilot initiatives that focus on providing family child care providers with health care, retirement, and other benefits.** While low wages continues to loom as one of the most salient challenges that both New FCC Entrants and FCCs Who Left the Field identified as a stressor, both groups were keen to identify other elements of compensation, such as health care, retirement, and other benefits, as distinct challenges that they worry about. These elements have already been identified as endemic to ensuring that all early educators (including family child care providers) are working in "good jobs."[62] Key actors in the early childhood field should learn more about innovations in health care and retirement provision for family child care providers or other early educators and, alongside family child care providers, co-construct possible pilot interventions that support alleviation of the stress and worry that family child care providers have regarding these aspects of full compensation.

9. **Key actors in the early childhood field should support EEC in its efforts to communicate about and provide locally-relevant and tailored business support, both during the licensing process and beyond.** New FCC Entrants identified a need for expanded business support efforts–including those that are locally provided and tailored to local needs, and FCCs Who Left the Field also described not being fully prepared to run a family child care business. While we suggest that EEC should focus on promoting and expanding the business support that it already provides, both during and beyond the licensing process, we also recommend that other key actors in the early childhood field work with EEC to promote and provide these supports. New FCC Entrants in particular highlighted interest in local and tailored business support as resources that would support longevity in the field. Other key actors in the early childhood field can work with EEC to ensure that general business support offered is locally-relevant and tailored to specific needs of different communities.

10. **Key actors in the early childhood field should work with EEC to strengthen and deliver digital literacy support to all family child care providers.** New FCC Entrants report finding digital navigation challenging. This extends to specific software or content management systems (e.g., LEAD or StrongStart), but includes navigation of broader resources, such as the EEC website. Multi-pronged support is needed to provide a seamless experience of our systems that are increasingly digital. Areas to focus on include:

   - EEC should conduct user testing with multiple user groups on the functionality of its website and streamline/simplify to provide an easy-to-use interface

   - Key actors in the early childhood field should support EEC in developing user-friendly trainings and resources on EEC-specific software or content management systems that can be delivered by live (to troubleshoot in-time questions) and asynchronously (for those who cannot attend live sessions or need a refresher)

   - Key actors in the early childhood field should work together to address digital divide issues that extend beyond EEC.

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62 Patil, Pratima A., Paula Gaviria Villareal, Fernanda Q. Campbell, and Birth to Eight Collaborative Data Committee. 2024. "Strengthening the Foundation: A Profile of Early Educators in Boston and Beyond." Boston, MA: Boston Opportunity Agenda. https://www.bostonopportunityagenda.org/-/media/tbf/reports-and-covers/2024/boa_earlychildhoodeducators_feb2024_final.pdf; Osterman, Paul and Beth Shulman. 2011. *Good Jobs AmericaMaking Work Better for Everyone.* New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

These might include provision of hardware (e.g., laptops, Chromebooks, and phones), provision of a reliable and affordable internet connection, and technological support for general digital literacy (e.g., Zoom, word processing, email, password creation, etc.)

11. **Key actors in the early childhood field should work with families to better understand the prevalence and reasoning behind actions that disregard family child care providers' rules.** Both New FCC Entrants and FCCs Who Left the Field identified challenges with regard to families; as FCCs Who Left the Field discussed, families who disregard family child care providers' rules contribute toward mounting feelings of disrespect and disempowerment. Learning more about why families sometimes disregard family child care providers' rules may give clues to possible interventions that directly address underlying and root causes of these actions and support building and strengthening trusting relationships between families and their family child care providers.

12. **Key actors in the early childhood field should create space for family child care providers–New FCC Entrants, FCCs Who Left the Field, and everyone in between–to come together to identify and craft structural and cultural interventions that can be employed to address challenges related to building and maintaining relationships with families.** Recognizing that families play a huge role in building and strengthening trusting relationships with their family child care providers, there are both structural and cultural interventions that family child care providers can implement to also support building and strengthening these relationships. Such interventions must be identified and crafted by family child care providers themselves. Key actors

in the early childhood field can provide family child care providers with the space, time, and resources to come together to do this work.[63] Such spaces already exist for other challenges; for example, The Early Childhood Agenda working groups invite all actors from the early childhood field (and beyond) to create meaningful change focused on narrow, meaningful, and feasible priorities. These working groups require dedicated and compensated leadership, time and space (even if via Zoom) for the group to meet, mechanisms that hold the group accountable to the wider field (e.g., reporting out to the 9:30 Call), and resources to support possible interventions that are developed through the working groups.

FCCs Who Left the Field identified both contracts and handbooks as starting points for structural interventions within family child care providers' control. Key actors in the early childhood field could design a gathering of family child care providers focused on sharing and learning best practices in contract and handbook development. An output of this gathering might be a prototype blueprint, guideline, or playbook for developing contracts and handbooks that both new and veteran family child care providers can learn from and/or contribute to beyond the time and space of the initial gathering. For example, such a blueprint, playbook, or toolkit might include discussion of hours of operation (and what to do about late parents), when not to bring children to care (e.g., when they have COVID/fever/communicable disease), paid time off (e.g., holidays, personal days, sick days, bereavement days, etc.), and how to balance their live/work spaces and the stress that comes with working in your home.

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63 This same recommendation is shared nationally by FCCs who were part of Home Grown's Family Child Care Licensing Work Group: Home Grown. 2024. "Building Belonging: Valuing Family Child Care Via Licensing Systems." Philadelphia, PA: Home Grown. https://homegrownchildcare.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/HomeGrownlicensingRecs2024.pdf

CONCLUSION

With so many reasons not to become a family child care provider in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, New FCC Entrants still entered the early childhood field. Our current New FCC Entrants are not only inspired and excited to be part of the field, but they feel their work as family child care providers is complementary to the kind of work they want to do. In other words, our current New FCC Entrants are right where they belong: they're doing the work they want to do, and the work they're doing works for them and their families. They have found "good" jobs, but can these jobs be even better?

Our New FCC Entrants aren't the only ones who are keeping family child care alive and running. FCCs Who Left the Field, while no longer working as family child care providers, continue to stay close to the field, working as bus monitors or in outdoor education programs, volunteering as tutors and family child care assistants for their friends, and caring for their grandchildren. What would it look like to continue to pass their wisdom along to others in the field?

Whether they've been in the field for a year or thirty years, family child care providers continue to experience the joys of working directly with young children and families—and the challenges of low compensation, the digital divide, navigating tensions within and beyond work relationships, and the need for more business support. Amidst these challenges, however, family child care providers find strong support from their friends and family—and from each other. Through this project we learned that FCCs Who Left the Field don't just have stories about what went right or wrong during their tenure, but they hold innovative and implementable solutions to recruitment and retention issues that continue to challenge the field. And their experience through the COVID-19 pandemic serves to provide us with some practical changes that can be implemented now to protect us from an ever-changing and unknown future.

These grassroots ideas in collaboration with the grasstops momentum already underway with EEC and other key actors in the field provide us with a concrete road map to better supporting and retaining family child care providers in the field—and attracting additional New FCC Entrants who are just as inspired and excited to support young children, their families, and their communities.

METHODOLOGY

We focused on New FCC Entrants and FCCs Who Left the Field between January 2020 and August 2023. We selected January 2020 as our start date because the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic proved to be a market shock that was felt throughout the early childhood education field worldwide; we also wanted to gain an understanding of what the field looked like in the months that led up to the COVID-19 pandemic shut down in March 2020, to gain an understanding of how severely the COVID-19 pandemic affected both the fields New FCC Entrants as well as FCCs Who Left the Field. We selected August 2023 as our end date because we wanted to understand whether and how the COVID-19 pandemic recovery had an effect on both New FCC Entrants and FCCs Who Left the Field, and that was the time of the data pulled by EEC staff.

This study was funded by the Massachusetts Early Childhood Funders Collaborative; the development of the research instruments and interpretation of administrative data fields were informed by EEC staff; and the full study, including the research design, data collection instruments, and recruitment methods was approved by both the Institutional Review Board for Wellesley College/Brandeis University and the Institutional Review Board for Northeastern University.

Part 1:
New FCC Entrants - Methods and Sample

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

New FCC Entrants are defined as those who are entirely new to the early childhood field in Massachusetts (e.g., had never before been a licensed early educator in Massachusetts) during and immediately after 2020 through the time of the administrative data download in August 2023.[64]

Recruitment

The total population of New FCC Entrants between January 2020 and August 2023 were identified using administrative data from EEC; data were cleaned to ensure that only the target population was included and no duplicates were in the pool. This data cleaning was informed by EEC staff, who provided clarification on administrative data fields and meaning behind discrepant dates. Ultimately there were 1354 New FCC Entrants between January 2020 and August 2023, and these New FCC Entrants provided 8994 total child care slots to the Commonwealth. New FCC Entrants spoke a variety of languages,[65] with the majority of New FCC Entrants speaking English (41.6%), Spanish (30.4%), and Portuguese (18.4%); additional languages[66] were present, but each of these accounted for <1% of the New FCC Entrant population. With regard to EEC licensing region, roughly equal numbers of New FCC Entrants live and work in each of the five regions. Finally, out of the total population, 12.5% entered

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64 We requested data from EEC in August 2023, so our data do not cover the entire year for 2023, but instead the entire year up to the date of the data pull.

65 There were two administrative fields for language: "language" and "preferred language." Without more documentation to identify the distinction, we used the single language listed (where there was only one language listed). When there were more than one language listed, we defaulted to the non-English language. In the single case where two non-English languages were listed, we defaulted to the language listed under "preferred language."
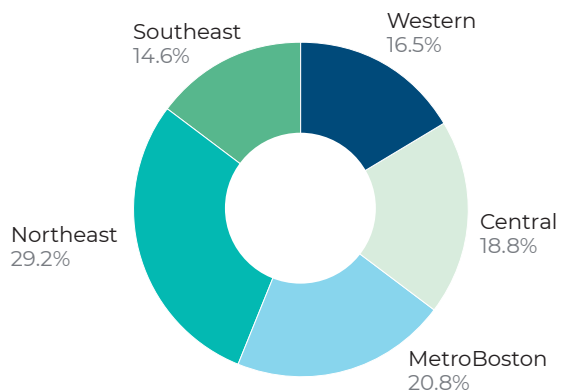
66 Haitian Creole, Russian, Mandarin, Cantonese, Vietnamese, French, and some not listed.

the field in 2020, 23.0% entered the field in 2021, 36.6% entered the field in 2022, and 27.9% entered the field in 2023 through the date of the data download in August 2023.
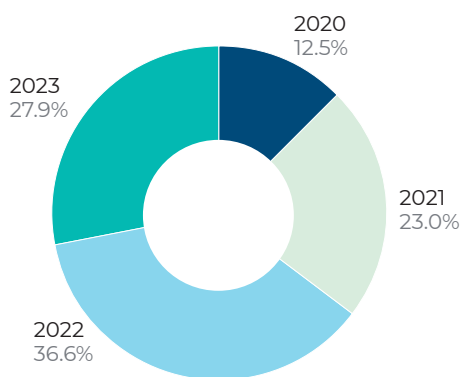
Table A. Total New FCC Entrants Jan 2020 – Aug 2023, by Primary Language

Cantonese 0.4%
None 0.2%
Portuguese 18.4%
English 41.6%
Spanish 38.4%
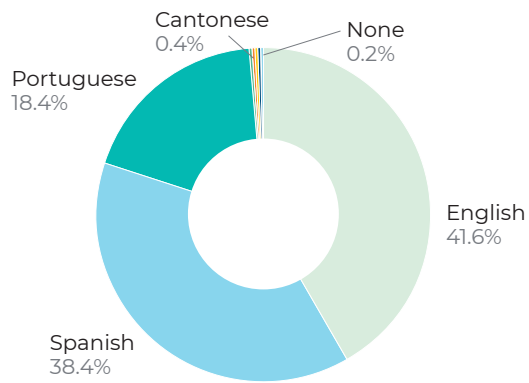
Table B. Total New FCC Entrants Jan 2020 – Aug 2023, by EEC Licensing Region

Southeast 14.6%
Western 16.5%
Northeast 29.2%
Central 18.8%
MetroBoston 20.8%

Table C. Total New FCC Entrants Jan 2020 – Aug 2023, by Year of First Licensure

2020 12.5%
2023 27.9%
2021 23.0%
2022 36.6%

This population of New FCC Entrants between January 2020 and August 2023 were emailed a direct link to a survey that was translated into English, Spanish, and Portuguese. In addition, information was spread to all of our contacts, coaches, family child care systems, the Strong Start offices throughout Massachusetts, and through the 9:30 Call so that we might reach as many New FCC Entrants in the Commonwealth as possible. After a week, non-respondents were called in English, Spanish, and Portuguese using a standard script.

Methods

A survey was employed to gain a broad understanding of the interests, challenges, and usefulness of support that New FCC Entrants experience. Survey tools are biased in the sense that they rely on participant self-report,[67] but can still offer valuable insights when the information sought is focused on the subjective experience of an individual. They also allow for scaled data collection.

Our survey was conducted using Qualtrics and was translated into English, Spanish, and Portuguese (see Appendix B for English translation). Each individual was assigned a unique ID to assure that it is indeed the emailed individual who answered the survey; we also asked respondents for their name and email address to triangulate that the responder was someone on our list of 1354 potential participants.

The survey was live for the month of November 2023. On November 27, 2023, we extended the survey through December 6, 2023. For six days (between December 1, 2023 and December 6, 2023), we randomly selected five participants from each batch of 50 respondents and provided each participant with a $100 VISA gift card (see Table A).

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67 Among biases that may factor into survey results both generally and in this study are non-response bias, social desirability bias, and survivorship bias. More on this topic can be found in Fowler, Floyd J. 1993. *Survey Research Methods, 2nd Ed.* Newbury Park: Sage Publications.

**Table D. Gift Card Draw Dates and Eligible Survey Respondents**

Draw Date / Fecha del sorteo	Eligible Survey Respondents / Encuestados con opción
December 1, 2023 1 de diciembre de 2023	First 50 respondents 50 primeros encuestados
December 2, 2023 2 de diciembre de 2023	Respondents 51-100 Encuestados 51-100
December 3, 2023 3 de diciembre de 2023	Respondents 101-150 Encuestados 101-150
December 4, 2023 4 de diciembre de 2023	Respondents 151-200 Encuestados 151-200
December 5, 2023 5 de diciembre de 2023	Respondents 201-250 Encuestados 201-250
December 6, 2023 6 de diciembre de 2023	Respondents 251-300 Encuestados 251-300

Sample

While a total of 400 individuals attempted the survey, only 260 (65.0%) completed the survey. Survey completers comprise 19.2% of the possible respondents of family child care providers who newly entered the field between January 2020 and August 2023.

We collected some demographic data about this sample. With regard to age, the average age of respondents was 41 years; the median age was 39 years, and the modal age was 34 years. As demonstrated in Table B, the majority of respondents' ages fall between 30-49 years. 10.8% of the sample were younger, and 22.3% of the sample were older.

Table E. Survey Respondents by Age

Blank 8.5%
20–29 10.8%
60–69 5.4%
50–59 16.9%
30–39 35.8%
40–49 22.7%
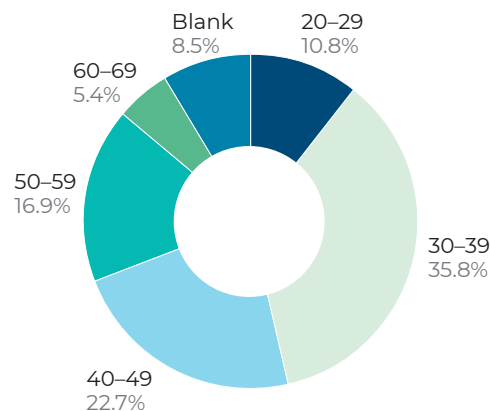
In terms of gender, the vast majority of our sample identifies as female. 1.5% of the sample identifies as male. We did offer "non-binary" and "other" options, but none of the respondents selected those options.

Table F. Survey Respondents by Gender
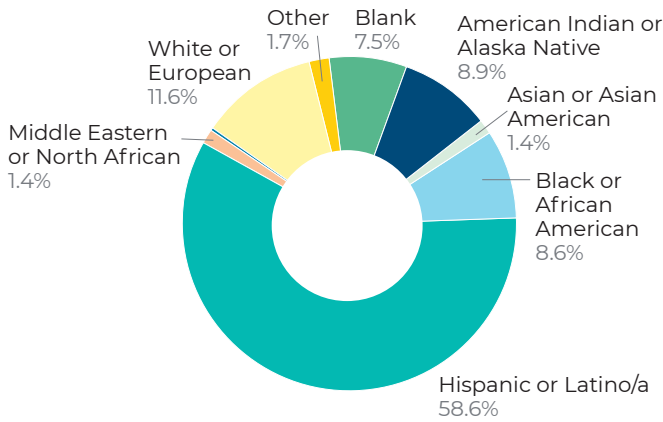

Blank 6.9%
Male 1.5%
Female 91.5%
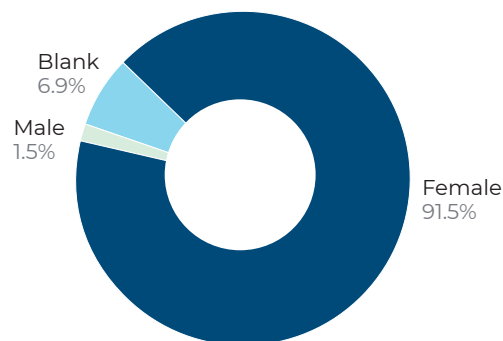
In terms of race, in comparison to Massachusetts' general population[68] our sample is overrepresented by those who identify as American Indian and Hispanic or Latino/a; in contrast, our sample population is underrepresented by those who identify as Asian or Asian-American and white or European. Our sample roughly meets general population representation for those who identify as Black or African-American and Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander. Historically the early education field includes many races, but is often predominated

68 We cannot make a comparison between the population of early educators in general or FCCs in general because these data do not exist. We used US Census data from 2020 to make comparisons to the general population: https://www.census.gov/library/stories/state-by-state/massachusetts-population-change-between-census-decade.html.

by people of color, immigrants, and the working class.[69]

Table G. Survey Respondents, by Race

- White or European 11.6%
- Middle Eastern or North African 1.4%
- Other 1.7%
- Blank 7.5%
- American Indian or Alaska Native 8.9%
- Asian or Asian American 1.4%
- Black or African American 8.6%
- Hispanic or Latino/a 58.6%

The top three primary languages spoken by survey respondents are Spanish, English, and Portuguese. This makes sense, as the survey was designed in English and only translated into Spanish and Portuguese. Compared to the total population of New FCC Entrants, the survey respondents underrepresented English and Portuguese speakers and overrepresented Spanish speakers.

Table H. Survey Respondents, by Primary Language

- Portuguese 11.5%
- Blank 0.4%
- English 36.2%
- Spanish 50.8%
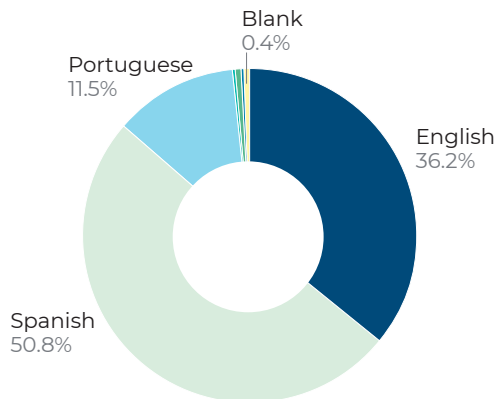
With regard to education, we asked about both the highest level of education completed and whether respondents have obtained a Child

Development Associate's degree (CDA). The majority of our sample has at least a high school degree, with 11.4% of respondents also obtaining an Associate's degree and 16.9% of respondents also obtaining a Bachelor's degree. Our sample is quite educationally diverse, as it also included individuals who had not yet obtained a high school degree (9.9%) as well as individuals with at least some graduate experience (17.0%). With regard to the CDA, a majority of our respondents (54.8%) did not have a CDA; only 21.6% of the sample did have a CDA.
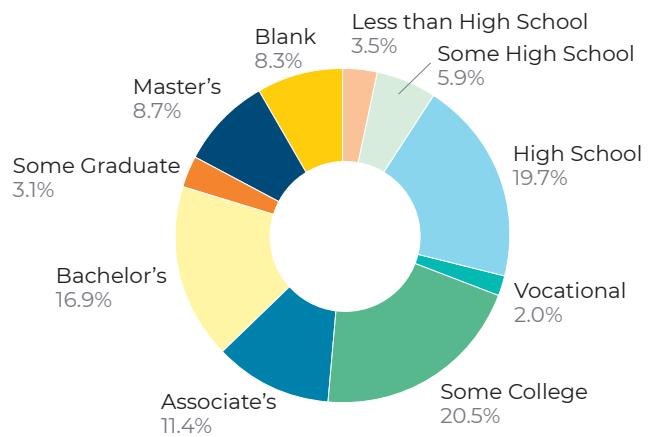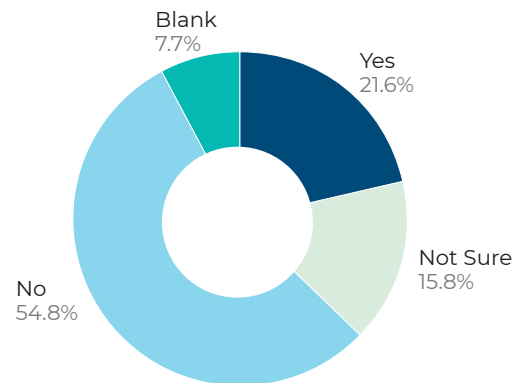
Table I. Survey Respondents, by Education Level

- Blank 8.3%
- Master's 8.7%
- Some Graduate 3.1%
- Bachelor's 16.9%
- Associate's 11.4%
- Less than High School 3.5%
- Some High School 5.9%
- High School 19.7%
- Vocational 2.0%
- Some College 20.5%

Table J. Survey Respondents, by CDA Obtainment

- Blank 7.7%
- Yes 21.6%
- Not Sure 15.8%
- No 54.8%

We had roughly comparable numbers of survey respondents from each of the five EEC licensing regions. Compared to the total population of New FCC Entrants, the survey respondents from

69 Mefferd, Eve and Dawn Dow. 2023. "The US child care system relies on women of color, but structural barriers systematically disadvantage them." Washington, DC: The Urban Institute. https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/us-child-care-system-relies-women-color-structural-barriers-systematically-disadvantage

the Western, Central, and MetroBoston regions roughly represented the population percentages for those same regions; respondents from the Southeast region were slightly underrepresented; and respondents from the Northeast region were slightly overrepresented.

Table K. Survey Respondents, by EEC Licensing Region
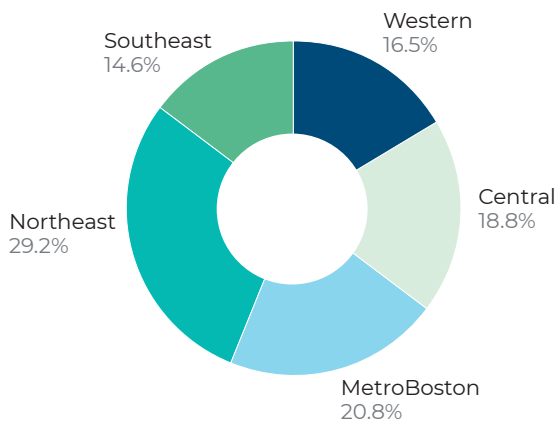
- Western 16.5%
- Southeast 14.6%
- Central 18.8%
- Northeast 29.2%
- MetroBoston 20.8%

Lastly, compared to the total population of New FCC Entrants, the survey respondents who were first licensed in 2022 and 2023 roughly represented the population percentages for those same years; respondents from 2020 were slightly underrepresented; and respondents from 2021 were slightly overrepresented.

Table L. Survey Respondents, by Year of First Licensure

- 2020 8.8%
- 2023 28.5%
- 2021 28.1%
- 2022 34.6%
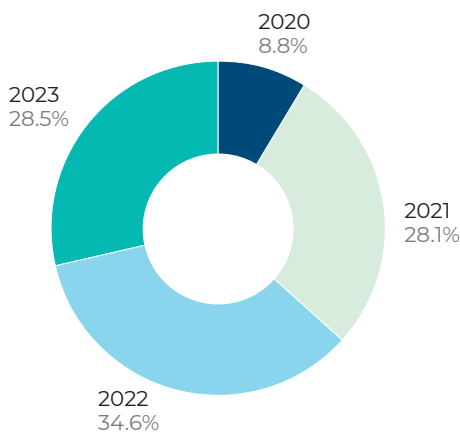
Data Cleaning Notes

Some individuals completed the survey more than once, which is expected with such a large window for completion. For data quality control, we employed the following rules as we cleaned the data:

1. For individuals who submitted more than one survey response, we deleted all submissions that were completely blank. For example, if an individual submitted three times, but the last submission was entirely blank, we deleted that submission. As another example, if an individual submitted three times, but the second submission was entirely blank, we deleted that submission.

2. For individuals who submitted more than one survey response, we kept the most recent submission and their final answers. For example, if an individual submitted three times, we kept all responses for their most recent submission.

3. For individuals who submitted more than one survey response, we also included (and coded separately) open-ended responses from submissions prior to their most recent submission. For example, if an individual submitted three times, in addition to keeping all responses to their most recent submission, we also included (separately) their open-ended responses from prior submissions.

For individuals who submitted only once, if their survey was entirely blank, we kept that survey as-is and counted it as such. For example, these surveys factor into our completion rates, as presented in Table B.

Regarding demographic information focused on race: if individuals selected "My race or ethnicity is best described as: _____" and if the answer they wrote in was already represented by a named category, then we deleted their write-in answer. This produced 25 responses for "My race or ethnicity is best described as: _____" that were deleted.

Finally, for questions where we provided an "I did not experience…" option (Questions 8 and 10), some individuals selected this option *as well as* other options. To clean these data, we erred on the side that individuals actually did experience their selected other options and, therefore, did not count the selected "I did not experience…" in our counts. For Question 8, this resulted in twelve individuals whose "I did not experience…" we did not count. For Question 10, this resulted in four individuals whose "I did not experience…" we did not count.

Limitations of the Survey

Language. The survey was limited to English, Spanish, and Portuguese. We made this call because these were the top three primary languages represented in the population, but that obviously poses a language barrier to those who speak other languages, by design. Some of the over- and underrepresentation of certain races in the data (above) may be related to this choice in survey design.

Survey non-completers. Taking a look at survey non-completers, the general proportions of non-completers by English, Spanish, and Portuguese primary language speakers is similar to the proportion of the primary language speakers in the total population of New FCC Entrants, suggesting no indication that there were no language barriers present for those who speak these three languages.

Table M. Survey Non-Completers, by Primary Language

English
37.1%

Haitian Creole
0.7%
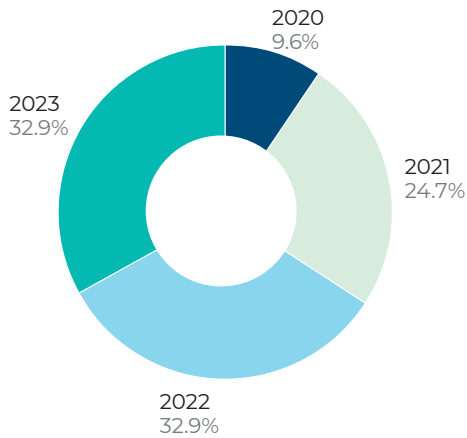
Portuguese
22.1%

Spanish
39.3%
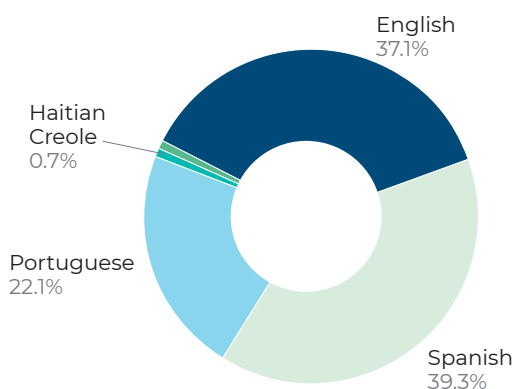
Compared to the total population of New FCC Entrants, the survey respondents from the MetroBoston and Southeast regions were slightly overrepresented; respondents from the Northeast region were slightly underrepresented; respondents from the Central region were overrepresented; and respondents from the Western region were underrepresented. Combined with respondent data (Table K), we can determine that more respondents from the Western and Northeast regions were able to complete the survey and fewer respondents from the Central and Southeast regions were able to complete the survey.

Table N. Survey Non-Completers, by Licensing Region
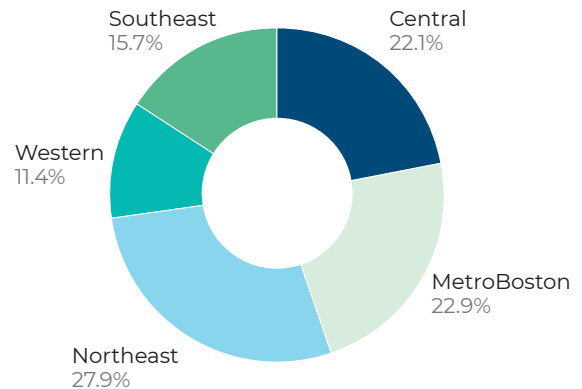
Southeast
15.7%

Central
22.1%

Western
11.4%

MetroBoston
22.9%

Northeast
27.9%

Lastly, compared to the total population of New FCC Entrants, the survey respondents who were first licensed in 2020 and 2022 were underrepresented; respondents from 2021 were slightly overrepresented; and respondents from 2023 were overrepresented. Combined with respondent data (Table L), these results suggest fewer overall respondents licensed in 2020 and more overall respondents licensed in 2021 as compared to the total New FCC Entrant population.

Table O. Survey Non-Completers, by Licensing Year

languages[71] were present, but each of these accounted for <1% of the population of FCCs Who Left the Field. Compared to New FCC Entrants, a much larger proportion of FCCs Who Left the Field speak English and a much larger proportion of New FCC Entrants speak Spanish and Portuguese. This means that the workforce is rapidly becoming more language diverse.

Table P. Total FCCs Who Left the Field Jan 2020 – Aug 2023, by Primary Language

Part 2: FCCs Who Left the Field – Methods and Sample

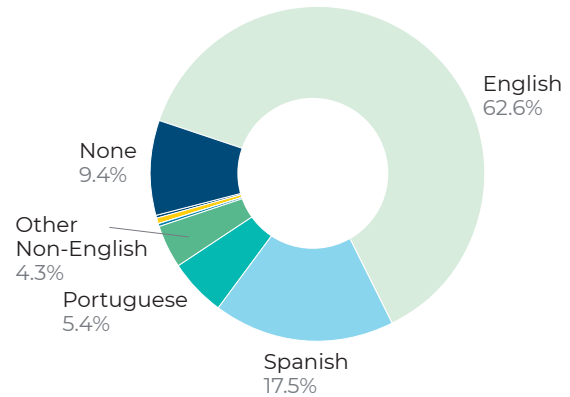### Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

FCCs Who Left the Field, are defined as those who left the early childhood field in Massachusetts during and immediately after 2020 and did not return through the time of the administrative data download in August 2023 (e.g., were not relicensed in Massachusetts during this same time period).

With regard to EEC licensing region, roughly equal numbers of FCCs Who Left the Field came from the Western, Central, and Southeast regions. MetroBoston saw comparatively less attrition; Northeast saw comparatively more attrition.

Recruitment

FCCs Who Left the Field were identified using administrative data from EEC; data were cleaned to ensure that only the target population was included and no duplicates were in the pool. This data cleaning was informed by EEC staff, who provided clarification on administrative data fields and meaning behind discrepant dates. Ultimately there were 1745 FCCs Who Left the Field between January 2020 and August 2023. FCCs Who Left the Field spoke a variety of languages,[70] with the majority of FCCs Who Left the Field speaking English (62.6%), Spanish (17.5%), and Portuguese (5.4%); additional

Table Q. Total FCCs Who Left the Field Jan 2020 – Aug 2023, by EEC Licensing Region
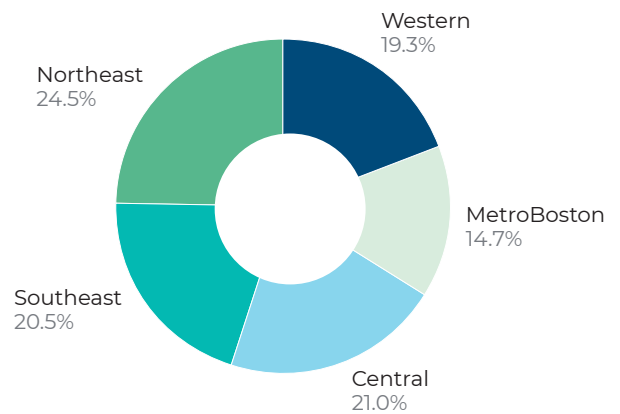
70 There were two administrative fields for language: "language" and "preferred language." Without more documentation to identify the distinction, we used the single language listed (where there was only one language listed). When there were more than one language listed, we defaulted to the non-English language. In the single case where two non-English languages were listed, we defaulted to the language listed under "preferred language."

71 Haitian Creole, Russian, Mandarin, Cantonese, Vietnamese, French, and some not listed.

Finally, out of the total population, 25.8% left the field in 2020, 38.8% left the field in 2021, 25.3% left the field in 2022, and 10.0% left the field in 2023 through the date of the data download in August 2023. Compared to New FCC Entrants, more FCCs left the field in 2020 and 2021 than entered the field. While more FCCs entered the field in 2022 and 2023, the field remained at an overall deficit of FCCs.

Table R. Total FCCs Who Left the Field Jan 2020 – Aug 2023, by Year of Closure
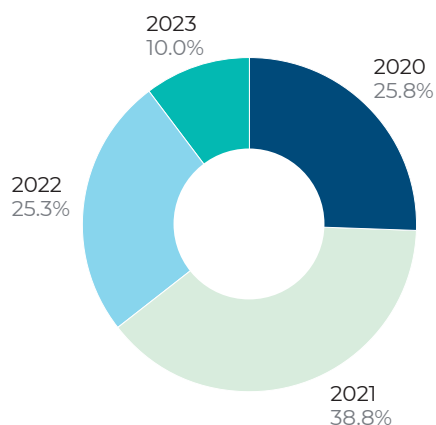
The population of FCCs Who Left the Field between January 2020 and August 2023 were directly emailed an invitation to join a series of focus groups conducted by EEC Licensing Region. In addition, information was spread to all of our contacts, coaches, family child care systems, the Strong Start offices throughout Massachusetts, and through the 9:30 Call so that we might reach as many New FCC Entrants in the Commonwealth as possible. For FCCs Who Left the Field, word of mouth through as many networks as possible were particularly crucial because our direct contact information from EEC may have been out-of-date or no longer used and, therefore, a "hard-to-find" population. Before each focus group was conducted, the researchers cross-referenced focus group sign-up information with administrative data to ensure that participants (1) were indeed part of the pool of 1745 FCC leavers and (2) were signed up for the right focus group by region.

Methods

Focus groups were employed to gain a deep understanding of the mechanisms underlying the reasons FCCs gave for leaving. Focus groups not only allowed us to probe the "hows" and the "whys" behind FCCs' decision to leave the field, but also provided space for FCCs to jog each others' memories as they shared their own experiences with one another. The small size of each focus group (6-8 people) does not allow us to generalize to the broader population, but instead allows us to draw on common experiences and themes that emerge from the group's collective discussion. These themes point us in the direction of where we might focus our work and support prioritization of areas of continued excellence or improvement. Finally, because of the "hard-to-find" nature of FCCs Who Left the Field, we deemed utilization of scaled method designs, such as surveys, ineffectual, as these methods require a robust response rate that we did not expect to get with such a "hard-to-find" population.

We conducted focus groups using a standard Focus Group Guide (see Appendix C). This guide was developed to identify specific etic understandings (e.g., pre-identified themes that we wished to explore), such as each participants' overall history, the context in which they closed, and their present context. The guide is also designed to uplift emergent emic understandings (e.g., themes that we would not otherwise know to construct or consider). While we used the guide to ensure standard questions were asked, we let the conversation flow organically and also encouraged participants to speak directly to one another and ask each other (and us) questions if they had them. All focus groups were conducted via Zoom in February 2024 and each ran for no more than 90 minutes, and all were offered during weekday evenings. Focus groups were divided by EEC Licensing Region[72] to ensure that participants would have similar experiences to one another, holding constant

72   Licensing regions were also obtained via correspondence with EEC administrators.

both geography and EEC Licensors. Interpreters were provided if participants expressed interest in having language interpretation, and we did employ Spanish interpreters for two focus groups (MetroBoston 1, Northeast). All focus group participants were offered compensation of a $75 VISA gift card.

Sample

We offered a total of nine focus groups across five EEC Licensing Regions: two focus groups for MetroBoston, Northeast, Southeast, and Central; and one focus group for Western. We initially only offered one focus group per EEC Licensing Region. If the focus group did not reach our target of 6-8 participants, we offered another focus group for the region. Only the Western Region reached our target at the outset. Out of nine focus groups offered, we held six. Our total number of participants can be seen in Table C.

**Table S. Number of Focus Group Participants, by Region and Focus Group**

Region	Focus Group 1 (n)	Focus Group 2 (n)	Total (n)	Total (%)
MetroBoston	2*	2	4	20%
Northeast	2*	0	2	10%
Southeast	4	0	4	20%
Western	7	N/A	7	35%
Central	3	0	3	15%
TOTAL			20	100%

*Employed Spanish interpretation services

Of the 20 participants in our overall sample, 30% (n=6) had provided emergency care during the COVID-19 pandemic.

At least 80.0% had been family child care providers for five or more years, and at least 50.0% of our participants had been family child care providers for 15 or more years (see Table D).

Table T. Focus Group Participants, by Number of Years as an FCC

- Unknown 5.0%
- < 5 years 15.0%
- 5–14 years 30.0%
- 15–24 years 20.0%
- 25+ years 30.0%
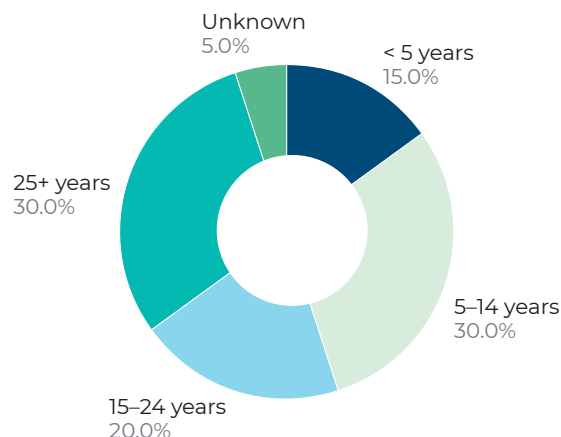
In addition, we asked each participant about their experience with various supports, including FCC systems, C3 grants, assistants, the subsidy system, and home ownership (see Table E).

Table U. Focus Group Participants' Utilization of Supports

Additional Information	n	%
Participated in a family child care system at any time	9	45%
Received C3 funds	6	30%
Had an assistant	3	15%
Cared for children with a subsidy	8	40%
Owned their home	17	85%

Limitations of the Focus Groups

The major limitation to the focus groups was the fact that FCCs Who Left the Field are a "hard-to-find" population. While we were able to obtain a population list of FCCs Who Left the Field, including their contact information, many contact emails and even phone numbers were no longer functional by the time of study recruitment. We learned through our focus groups that some FCCs Who Left the Field may also have left the state. Beyond the lack of current contact information, unlike New FCC Entrants, FCCs Who Left the Field have no current relationship to EEC, meaning that there is no relationship to the agency (or possibly even to the field) that

supports a need or interest in response to our recruitment efforts.

Limitations of the Overall Study Design

Research studies are limited by their design, time, resources, and more. This study is no exception. First, our mixed methods research design rests on self-selection.[73] All surveys are inherently opt-in, with those who choose to participate–and those who complete the survey–as an inherently self-selected group. For example, those who choose to participate may be more inclined to provide information to researchers, and those who complete the survey may have more time or resources to complete a survey than their non-completer peers. Our focus groups, too, are self-selected individuals who are not just interested in participating and sharing, but who have time or can make time to spend 90 minutes with researchers.

Second, if we could have kept the survey live longer or had more than a month to conduct focus groups, we would have been more likely to increase our participant counts by at least a few. In addition, we may have been able to conduct more focus groups, allowing us to provide regional sub-analyses for this portion of the study; because of our small sample size, we are unable to generalize by region using focus group data.

Finally, our overarching focus is on the FCC experience. This is because the aim of the project is to understand what has challenged–and what continues to challenge–FCCs in Massachusetts. We acknowledge that this is one perspective among many whose voices should be elevated when it comes to addressing the challenges that we have uncovered. Because we did not focus on families or licensors, these perspectives are not represented in this study, but experiences from these key actors should be elevated just as much as FCC experiences have been elevated in this research study.

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73 Among biases that may factor into survey results both generally and in this study are non-response bias, social desirability bias, and survivorship bias. More on this topic can be found in Fowler, Floyd J. 1993. *Survey Research Methods, 2nd Ed.* Newbury Park: Sage Publications.

SURVEY INSTRUMENT

By continuing this survey, you agree to the following:

- I am older than 18 years old and have read the description of this study above.
- I voluntarily agree to complete the survey.

1. Please type in the ID that you can find on the first page of the survey: _____

2. To make sure we have all of Massachusetts represented, what is your zip code? _____

3. When did you first get your family child care license from the state (EEC)?
   Choose the best category.

Before 2020
2020
2021
2022
2023

Becoming a Family Child Care Provider

All of these questions are about your experience with different steps to become a family child care provider.

4. What work did you do before you became a family child care provider? _____
   Choose all that apply.

Worked in a child care center or preschool
Worked in someone else's family child care
Was a nanny or au pair
Cared for my own child or the child of a friend, family member, or neighbor
Did something else with young children, but not child care
Worked with elementary, middle school, high school, or college students
Had a job outside of the child care and education field
Stayed at home full time
Working toward a degree in a field related to child care
Working toward a degree unrelated to child care
Other

5. How did you find out about how to become a family child care provider?

Choose all that apply.

Someone I know - Friends or family
Someone I know - A current family child care provider
Local community programs
Government programs
Through my high school or college
EEC staff or event
Social media
Email
Other

6. Here are some reasons people have given for why they became family child care providers. What was important to you when you made the decision to become a family child care provider?

For each reason, please share if it was not important, somewhat important, important or very important.

Reason	Very Important	Important	Somewhat Important	Not Important
a. To be able to work with children				
b. To be home with my own children				
c. Frustration with other jobs				
d. To explore new career directions				
e. To add to family income				
f. To be able to work from home				
g. To be my own boss				
h. To work part time				
i. To use my education/background in child development				
j. To have a secure job				
k. To be able to raise children the way I think they should be raised				
l. Because this was the only job I could find				
m. Because child care is important work				
n. To see my grandchildren/niece/nephew/ cousin or other relative				
o. To help my daughter/son/sister/cousin or other relative				

Reason	Very Important	Important	Somewhat Important	Not Important
p. To be able to care for children who live in my neighborhood/community				
q. Because children should be cared for by a relative				
r. Because children should be cared for in someone's home				
s. To have a job in the US				
t. To learn English				
u. Because it pays well				
v. Because I are good at caring for children				
w. Other				

7. When did you take the EEC Potential Provider Training: Part 1 (PPT1) course?

Month_____ Year_____
I don't know.
I don't remember this training.

8. Did you experience challenges with any of the following after taking the PPT1?
Choose all that apply.

Navigating the EEC website
Understanding the expectations and required steps to become licensed
Working with technology or access to wifi
Getting help or support from EEC staff
Getting help in your preferred language
Getting help setting up your business
Accessing and navigating the StrongStart Professional Development System/Learning Management System
Completing the Potential Provider Trainings and the EEC Essentials (13 online required training courses)
Collecting all required documents (ex. proof of physical exam, proof of one year full-time experience)
Submitting required documents
Getting access to the LEAD portal
Navigating and using the LEAD portal
Scheduling a pre-licensing home inspection by your Licensor
Responding to any corrections requested by your Licensor after the pre-licensing inspection
Filling out and submitting forms for a background record check (CORI, SORI, and fingerprints)

Being able to afford any of the fees associated with the above steps
Other
I did not experience any challenges

9. If you would like to, please share more about the challenges you experienced. _____

10. Did anyone provide you with help or assistance during the licensing process?
    Choose all that apply.

Someone I know - Friends or family
Someone I know - A family child care provider
Local community organizations
EEC staff or event
Local Child Care Resource & Referral Agency (CCR&R)
Family child care system
Professional Development Center (PDC)
Child care union (SEIU 509)
Other
I did not receive any outside help or support

Your Current Experience as a Family Child Care Provider

All of these questions are about your current experience as a family child care provider.

11. Right now, are any of these potential challenges stressful for you?
    Choose all that apply.

Pay is not enough
Pay is unpredictable, and can go down unexpectedly
Getting health care, retirement, or other benefits
Working with technology or access to wifi
Juggling conflicting tasks or duties
Having a lot to do in a little bit of time
The job is physically, emotionally, and/or mentally difficult
Not having opportunities for advancement, or ways to get ahead, in your job
Pay is not enough
Pay is unpredictable, and can go down unexpectedly
Getting health care, retirement, or other benefits
Working with technology or access to wifi

Juggling conflicting tasks or duties
Having a lot to do in a little bit of time
The job is physically, emotionally, and/or mentally difficult
Not having opportunities for advancement, or ways to get ahead, in your job
Regulations limit your creativity and interest in providing high-quality education and care
You wish you had more skills to be able to work with children and families
Needing more accessible and available support for tough situations with children or families
Families who are hard to work with
Balancing work with my own family life
Balancing running a family child care with a second or third job
Other

12. We are also trying to understand what resources family child care providers are looking for. Have you used or would you like to use any of these resources?

For each resource, please tell us if you already use or have used it, would like to use it or would not use it.

Resource	Already use or have used this service	Would like to use this service	Would not use this service
Substitute family child care providers available if you are sick			
Health care benefits			
Retirement benefits			
Disability payments			
Help with start-up costs			
Business support (ex. insurance, taxes, budgeting, creating or updating contracts)			
Help advertising your program and finding children			
Child care business management software			
Training or workshops on EEC regulations (ex. refreshers on old regulations, any changes made recently)			
Program support (ex. developing learning activities, working with families, approaches to managing challenging behavior)			
Professional development (ex. access to college, paying for college, access to specialized training or workshops)			
Transportation services			
Food program assistance			
Language support			

Resource	Already use or have used this service	Would like to use this service	Would not use this service
Finding family child care assistants			
A way to meet other providers and talk about your job			
Other			

a. Of the resources you have used, what has been the most helpful?

b. If you would like to, please share more about the resource that was most helpful to you.
_____

Looking to the Future

All of these questions are about your future as a family child care provider.

13. How much longer do you plan to offer child care in your home?
Choose the best answer.

Less than one year
One year
Two to four more years
Five or more years
I do not know

14. What, if anything, would make you want to offer care for a longer time?
Choose all that apply.

Higher income
Health benefits
Retirement benefits
More contact with other providers
More respect for the work I do
Respite care (a trusted substitute to give me time off)
Shorter hours
More flexible hours
More local services and resources to help me run my family child care business
Other

15. What might lead you to stop working as a family child care provider?

    Choose all that apply.

Age or poor health
Moving
Starting or adding to my family
No assistant
Going back to school
Taking another job
Child old enough to attend other child care facilities/preschool/prek
Families I work with find another family child care, center, or school
Other

About You

Finally, this last section is just so we have an understanding of who is participating in our survey.

16. What year were you born? _____

17. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

    Choose the best answer.

Less than high school
Some high school
High school diploma or GED or HSE
Some college, no degree or diploma
Vocational degree
Associate's degree
Bachelor's degree
Some graduate work but no degree or diploma
Master's degree or higher

18. Do you have a CDA?

Yes
No
I'm not sure

19. What is your gender?

Female
Male
Non-binary
Other

20. What is your race?

Choose all that apply.

American Indian or Alaska Native (e.g., Navajo Nation, Blackfeet Tribe, Inupiat Traditional Gov't., etc.)
Asian or Asian American (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Korean, South Asian, Vietnamese, etc.)
Black or African American (e.g., Jamaican, Nigerian, Haitian, Ethiopian, etc.)
Hispanic or Latino/a (e.g., Puerto Rican, Mexican, Cuban, Salvadoran, Colombian, etc.)
Middle Eastern or North African (e.g., Lebanese, Iranian, Egyptian, Moroccan, Israeli, Palestinian, etc.)
Native Hawai`ian or Pacific Islander (e.g., Samoan, Guamanian, Chamorro, Tongan, etc.)
White or European (e.g., German, Irish, English, Italian, Polish, French, etc.)
My race or ethnicity is best described as: _____

21. In 2022, what was your total household income, including your own (All information is confidential and used only for research).

Choose the best answer.

Less than $30,000
$30,001–$40,000
$40,001–$50,000
$50,001–$60,000
$60,001–$70,000
$70,001–$80,000
$80,001–$90,000
$90,001–$100,000
More than $100,000

22. How many adults are supported by this income_____.

23. How many children are supported by this income_____.

FOCUS GROUP GUIDE

Welcome + Introduction • 0:00 – 0:10

- Welcome everyone and thank them for taking the time to join us and volunteer their experiences
- Researchers introduce themselves and their role
- Ask participants to introduce selves: name, how long they worked in the field, one take away from living through the pandemic

Housekeeping • 0:10 – 0:20

- Verbally go through consent form (while screen sharing it):
- Read consent form and highlight the main parts,
- Let folks know about gift cards coming through their email,
- Share copy of consent form with our contact information
- Ask if there are any questions; answer
- Collect verbal consent: "Would you like to participate in this research study?"
- Collect verbal consent to audio and video record the Zoom session: "Would it be okay if we record this Zoom session?"
- "Alright, we are ready to begin. We want you to bear in mind a few things:
- First, the thing that will be most useful to us is your experience.
- Second, we'd love for you to represent your thoughts with "I" statements (from your own personal experiences)
- Third, you should feel free to ask each other questions, too.
- Lastly, we want to ask you to please keep this conversation confidential and don't bring it out into the world beyond this focus group.

We'd like people to be able to speak candidly, and to do that, we need folx to know that their business won't be shared beyond this Zoom room.

- We will help move the conversation along."

Discussion • 0:20 – 0:55

- Their FCC Program
- What is one thing you really miss about being a family child care provider?
- What is one thing you really DON'T miss about being a family child care provider?
- Closing context
- What factor(s) contributed to closing your program?
- Had you considered closing your program for a long time or was it a sudden decision?
- Is there anything that, if you had been able to have access to it, would have kept you in the field?
- What advice would you give someone wanting to become a family child care provider?
- Present context
- What are you doing now for work?
- What is your present occupation (title, how long)
- Do you think you'll ever go back and re-open?

Wrap Up • 0:55 – 1:00

- Thank participants for their participation and contribution
- Stop recording
- Ask if there are any outstanding questions; answer any outstanding questions
- "Ok, great. If you do have questions don't hesitate to reach out to us."
- Remind participants to look out for gift cards.

ADVICE FOR NEW FAMILY CHILD CARE PROVIDERS FROM THOSE WHO LEFT THE FIELD

Focus group participants had much to say about what they would tell new family child care providers. One participant summarized it well by saying, "It's a tough job, constantly clean, paperwork, meals, lessons. It takes a while to have a good program and good parents....Only take one baby at a time...don't overload yourself. Get an approved assistant. Get support from other providers. Think hard about it–rules don't always work. It's not a center, and there are more regulations. It's an all-day job." This Appendix provides advice that our 20 focus group participants wanted to impart to New FCC Entrants.

Be thoughtful about your contract and your handbook. Almost all focus group participants talked about the importance of having a contract and a handbook for families so that boundaries were clear and direct. Advice related to developing contracts and handbooks includes:

- Everything should be written in the contract because unexpected things could come up and impact the relationship you have with your families

- Time off needs to be put into the handbook. This should include paid vacation days (or weeks), sick days, professional development days, bereavement days, and snow days.

- Your program could follow the local public school calendar

- Include a family interview and visit from the child before accepting them into your program

- Do not apologize about the money you charge families

- When parents pushed boundaries, burn out could follow if families took too much advantage of any leeway given

- Set up the program reflecting your values: you need to be happy too!

- You need to mentally and psychologically prepare the self for disappointments and new experiences

Learn about the business side of family child care. Focus group participants highlighted the need to learn something about the business side of family child care, including:

- Learn how to do your taxes

- Learn about shared services

- Seek professional development if you feel it is needed

Connect with your peers. Participants also had suggestions on finding support from others, especially other family child care providers, including finding peers and a support network you can contact at any time, talk to, visit to see how they do things, and bounce ideas off of.