

ACCEE Fund Community Conversation Notes

In January and February of 2024, the Implementation Team and its contractor did extensive ACCEE Fund outreach throughout the Municipality, including hosting a number of public listening sessions in different locations and via different platforms (in-person and Zoom). These notes reflect feedback received from the community at these events.

Top concerns/challenges raised at all events

- Providers need better wages and benefits. This is how we increase quality care (not by lessening regulations). They also need mental health supports.
- Providers need more paid, accessible training, including in other languages.
- Providers could also use support with grant-writing to supplement revenue.
- Providers sometimes need help navigating licensing challenges. A liaison at AHD might be helpful.
- There is too much turnover in staffing, which harms centers and children, likely due to the above issues.
- The child care and early education sector needs to be viewed as a valuable, respected profession to be able to retain and attract workers.
- The cost of care is far too high for parents.
- Parents need more available care, especially in more remote parts of Anchorage and during nontypical times (evenings, weekends, etc.), as well as for drop-in care and early/after/summer care.
- Foster parents or parents who have children with special needs or mental health issues are especially struggling to find care.
- It is difficult to navigate and secure assistance and we need stop-gaps for when families might unintentionally lose assistance (parent gets a raise, etc.).
- More families need to be eligible for assistance, and assistance needs to reflect the market rate of care.
- Challenges with child care are causing parents to change their work schedules, quit their jobs, and choose not to have additional children – or children at all.
- There needs to be funding for increased capacity and renovation/construction of existing or new child care or early education facilities.
- There needs to be more collaboration with ASD. We could leverage ACCEE Funds by utilizing empty ASD buildings to provide child care and early education. ASD's mission should include children under kindergarten age.

January 30, 2024: 6-8pm
BP Energy Center
Parent event

Participants identified a number of **challenges** and **suggestions** on how to improve the child care and early education sector.

Access

- **Wait lists are too long**
- **Lack of options for kids who are disruptive or need specialized care**
 - Lack of training for staff to address and deescalate outbursts.
 - The solution too often is to remove unruly children (which is bad for kids and adds a burden on parents to find new child care), increasing stress for families.
 - There is economic support for children with special needs who qualify for child care assistance, but not for other families (the majority) with children who have special needs or require individual education plans.
- **Hours/pickup times**
 - After school programs close at different times, creating logistical challenges for parents with multiple young children.
 - Especially difficult for parents with jobs that go later into the day or on weekends.
 - Some parents are taking pay cuts or less responsibility at work because they can't find care when they need it.
- **Foster parents don't have enough access to child care**
- **Lack of access/high cost barrier to care impacts family planning**
 - People are choosing to have children later, fewer children, or no children
- **Transportation/access**
 - Need for care in more remote areas (Chugiak, Girdwood, Eagle River).
 - Need for care along commute routes.
 - Transportation for kids between programs (school, after school).

Quality

- **Providers need better wages and benefits**
 - **ACCEE Fund should pay for providers' kids to attend programs for free (grandparents too!).**
- **Too much staff turnover in classrooms**
 - Children are dealing with perpetual instability, making it difficult for them to develop an understanding of what a classroom looks like/what's appropriate behavior and how to form positive relationships with caring adults and teachers.
 - **"Quality = Continuity"** → "early childhood is based on relationships"
 - Need better plans for sick days
- **Poor communication between child care centers and parents**
 - Parents don't have a clear idea of what happens during the day at their kids' child care facilities.

- Want to see more accurate, accessible, and consistent communication from and among staff.
 - Example: child comes home talking about watching TV or playing games on an iPad, but child care center reports no screen time.
 - Example: a parent drops off their kid and tells one caregiver about an issue, but at pickup the other caregiver is not aware of the issue.
- Some suggested a more rigidly specified curriculum/lesson plan.
- Others suggested there is need for more staff training and better management/oversight.
- **Certain child care programs in low-income areas have classrooms with over 50% percent of students needing individual education plans**
 - Families that need higher quality care often can't afford access.
 - High cost to society; all children in these programs become more at risk due to stress.
 - Cost of upgrading quality within facilities is extremely high/prohibitive.
- **Need for more robust, accessible, and affordable provider training**
 - Need funding to support providers in advancing in Learn & Grow system.
 - Need better access to CPR and first aid courses to support provider education.
 - Employees currently have to pay for their own CPR training and background checks.
 - Training needs to be paid. Caregivers already don't make a living wage, and then they are additionally burdened with costs of entering field.
 - Make training available for unlicensed family care providers; they provide necessary quality care, too.
 - Translation services
 - Trainings (UAA courses, etc) needed in languages other than English to support providers across Anchorage's diverse population
 - Provider workforce largely unaware of labor rights; needs to be more outreach/education.
 - Schedule staff adequately so that providers can attend training during work hours and not have class time continuity broken with reliance on substitute teachers.
 - We need more cultural training to ensure culturally-appropriate care.

Affordability

- **Parents have to pay for supplementary communication platforms to contact schools, teachers**
 - Different platforms for different schools, levels of communication (counselor, principal, teacher etc.).
 - Burden of funding currently on parents; need financial assistance for this

Other

- **Licensing**

- Concern that providers don't want to get licensed based on cumbersome requirements (especially for in-home providers). **Providers need help navigating licensing requirements.**
- Some geographic areas have a lack of licensed care options.
- **Unfair pay discrepancy between management and providers who directly interact with children**
 - **Need more equity and support for those interacting with children, incentivising jobs and leading to more stable careers.**
- **Need better information gathering**
 - Surveys don't ask relevant questions like "were your childcare providers licensed?", which would help us understand how many unlicensed providers exist.
 - **Need more outreach/support/data collection for unlicensed child care providers.**
- **More community center support for stay-at-home parents**
 - They feel isolated, need community involvement and engagement opportunities.
 - Being in such a cold, dark, northern community exacerbates feelings of isolation.
- **Paid leave/paid time off for new parents** – likely outside the scope of the ACCEE Fund, but multiple parents brought this up. Some parents would also like more access to doulas and support for family members to get CPR training.

January 31, 2024: 6-8pm

BP Energy Center

Provider event

Participants identified a number of **challenges** and **suggestions** on how to improve the child care and early education sector.

Quality

- **Retaining workers is the biggest issue - high turnover with employees leaving for jobs with better pay**
 - Provider salaries are incredibly low
 - **For low wage workers, getting regular lump sum awards would help dramatically boost quality of life/ability to work effectively.**
 - **Need funding to compensate staff for professional development/furthering their continued education. Hard to incentivise positions that have little potential for growth.**
 - **A higher base salary (\$18-20/hr) would better incentivise participation in workforce and retain employees, addressing staffing and continuity issues**
 - Families can't afford higher child care costs; providers need to come up with money from other sources besides raising costs to improve quality.
- **Need to increase wages and benefits provided in sector**
 - **Increase ROOTS award funding**

- Need to bring new workers into the field; need to increase base wage to do so.
- If any bonuses are awarded, educate providers that they will be taxed on those bonuses later.
- Increase all wages. Even adding \$1/hr would make a dramatic increase. Tie wage subsidies to SEED level (or experience could be a substitute).
- Possible incentives: Pooled healthcare programs for workers
 - Do this through thread? Unions? What about the public education health trust that teachers use?
 - Many employees don't have health care; needed for retention
 - Build competent staff by offering high-quality services
 - Retirement benefits are also very important
 - Staff need mental health benefits as well
 - Need a substitute pool
- **High number of children/families with different needs**
 - Need temporary support for these families
 - Fund a mental/behavioral health consultant so staff can better care for all children
 - ASD implements Head Start in classrooms, providing inclusive services and coaches for children with different needs; do this for child care centers, since they need these supports too
 - (example: speech therapist assists children with different communication needs)
- **Need more supports (i.e. substitutes) to accommodate teachers out of office in emergency situations.**
- **Continuity of care**
 - Very important to keep kids in the same program
- **Not many trainings for providers in languages other than English**

Affordability

- **Care too expensive for families**
 - Use Juneau as a model – pay for part of the cost of care using the ACCEE Fund.
- **Difficult for families to maintain assistance eligibility, impacting providers, parents, and children**
 - Difficulty maintaining assistance impacts enrollment and kids' attendance.
 - Providers take on the burden (staff time, money) of helping families try to keep their assistance/enrollment.
 - Families have an information barrier about the specifics of maintaining eligibility. Provide technical assistance.
 - Possible solution: consider emergency/temporary assistance stop-gapping for families and/or programs when eligibility lapses
 - Some families lose childcare with one-time overtime pay increases.
 - Parents who lose their jobs don't qualify for assistance.

- These interruptions in access/eligibility impact continuity of care, which is critical for early social/emotional/educational development.
- **Child care assistance not reimbursed at market rate, creating financial gap**
 - The burden to fill this gap falls on providers.
 - Programs can't make accommodations for children/families with extenuating circumstances
 - To do so, programs are forced to use their existing budgets (already spread thin)
- **Not enough families receive child care assistance**
 - Families with relatively higher income who don't qualify for child care assistance are forced to make tough decisions and often can't provide their kids with care due to prohibitive costs
 - Provide child care assistance for everyone
 - Increase assistance, expand eligibility

Other

- Increasing concern about the behavior of young children in child care centers (outbursts potentially indicating stress, other risk factors)
 - We need more benefits for young families in particular
 - **Licensing**
 - Consider exemptions to educational requirements
 - Can the Muni provide more how-to documents? Booklets explaining process?
 - Instead of guiding providers, compulsory renewals/compliance requirements create barriers to providers entering the workforce and keeping facilities open
 - Regulations don't support or guide programs
 - Muni licensing should take a supportive and collaborative approach
 - State-mandated licensing focuses more on ensuring compliance than supporting programs
 - Municipality is often forced to adhere to the State's compliance-focused policies rather than uplift local programs
 - No oversight/overarching role or organization to support providers with licensing.
 - Since thread is State-funded, they cannot address provider questions about licensing
 - Need a liaison to support with licensing and training requirements as well as interpretation of Muni Code.
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February 13, 2024: 2-3:30pm

Held virtually by Zoom

Provider event

Participants identified a number of **challenges** and **suggestions** on how to improve the child care and early education sector.

Quality

- **Several providers said that they have never felt so defeated. A real lack of good staff.**
 - Incredibly stressful to manage programs without high quality staff
 - Receiving poor candidates for employment - often don't hire positions because there are no qualified applicants
 - One director said this problem persists at her center despite decent wages, full benefits, and tuition reimbursement
 - **Need to strengthen teacher workforce, NOT reduce regulations/background checks to improve staffing**
 - **Need better pay and benefits**
 - **Allow teachers who are parents to bring kids in, let them join programs.** This would be a good incentive to boost provider staffing, and better for retention of existing employees.
 - **Centers can only pay so much/offer so many benefits. Need help.**
 - **Lack of mental health support for employees. Could ACCEE Funds pay for this?**
 - **Need to make the profession more respected**
 - **Early education should be viewed as a professional career with internships/apprenticeships - early educators are just like teachers, but often thought of as less than**
 - **Profession needs to be framed differently internally and externally**
 - **Not enough training, particularly in languages other than English**
 - Under-resourced to provide necessary services for non English-speaking communities
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February 18, 2024: 7:30-9pm

Held virtually by Zoom

Parent event

Participants identified a number of **challenges** and **suggestions** on how to improve the child care and early education sector.

Access

- **Really hard to find care, particularly during unusual hours**
 - Especially true for health care families
 - **Can we use ACCEE Fund to increase wages?**
 - **Can we use Municipal community centers for additional programs?**

Quality

- **Lack of translation services for non-English speaking providers**
 - Limits their ability to provide quality care to kids

Affordability

- **Cost is way too high**
 - Parents are having to make adjustments to work schedules or leave work entirely to care for their children based on lack of access to affordable care
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February 27, 2024: 6-8pm

Eagle River Community Room

Parent event

Participants identified a number of **challenges** and **suggestions** on how to improve the child care and early education sector.

Access

- **Programs have physical space but not staff capacity to support parents who have need for child care**
 - Programs' ability to support is disproportionate to need
 - Eagle River in particular has far too few programs to support a community of its size
 - Parents given short notice on impacts to their child care, forced to take drastic measures to ensure that their kids have some care (often means that moms end up being forced to quit their jobs)
 - Disproportionately affects women already burdened with gender pay gap
- **Hard to find care for the right times**
 - For parents to drop kids off, and for programs to staff morning shifts
 - New school start times will make it even harder
 - Parents have to pay extra fees for early care
 - Extremely difficult for those working jobs with long shifts (health care etc.)
- **Could we use unused buildings to increase child care availability?**
 - Schools could use these to establish a model of early education with child care /pre-K in same location as school itself
 - Could we fund incentives for employers/communities to use surplus space for child care at the workplace?
- **School age care is also extremely underfunded**
 - 3 hr/day during school year, 12 hr/day over summer
 - Similar needs to early care - licensing, staffing issues
 - Need to make after school care more accessible for everyone
 - Only higher income families can afford after school care

- **Some folks unhappy with in-home care services, but this is the only option they can find**
- **Difficult to locate part-time care, often need to pay full-time rate**
 - Need affordable “drop in” temporary options for emergencies for parents staying at home or part-time workers
- **Income-based lottery prohibits many families who need care from accessing pre-K**
 - Poorest and richest families have access to services - those in the middle struggle
- **Need better transportation to care for communities within ASD but not within Anchorage (Girdwood, Eagle River, Chugiak)**

Quality

- **Need to invest in the profession**
 - Can't sustain careers with such low wages
 - Staff can't afford to have kids/take time off
 - Staff don't get reduced tuition for their kids. **Could fund this.**
 - This all leads to retention being a huge issue
 - Program funding is tuition-based, placing the burden of developing capacity/supporting staff on parents
 - **Need support for early education staff so they can still come to work if ASD closes for the day (bring their children to the child care program)**
- **Need to provide training**
 - Builds employee skills/professional development
 - Helps with retention by showing staff that they are valued
 - **Need centralized centers where providers can access training.**
 - **Fund training/certification for providers/support high schoolers entering early childhood workforce**
 - **Could partner with organizations (American Heart Association, etc.) to offer providers trainings (CPR, etc.) free of charge**

Affordability

- **Incorrect market rate for reimbursement for children on assistance**
 - Unable to support families with high need
- **Childcare assistance isn't used by everyone who is eligible**
 - Some struggle to access it
 - Some programs don't take children using assistance because of the logistical hurdles
 - **Programs need administrative support for assistance reimbursement**

Other

- **Could we use ACCEE funds to advocate to the State legislature for more funding?**
- Not a lot of programs or things to do for parents with young kids
 - Not many options for fun, making it hard to relieve stress
 - Few programs, activities, or events for families/kids to do together

- Lots of Alaskans are transplants - don't have family support networks here with them
 - Could all grants from the ACCEE Fund have a requirement that grantees support childrens' advocacy issues at local/statewide level?
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February 29, 2024: 6:30-8:30pm

Girdwood Community Room

Parent event

Participants identified a number of **challenges** and **suggestions** on how to improve the child care and early education sector.

Access

- **Incredibly difficult to find childcare in Girdwood**
 - 2 year wait at the only licensed provider in town
 - Great care, but limited capacity due to space
 - No infant care
 - Due to not meeting licensing regulations relating to space/walls
 - Rent/home expenses in Girdwood make child care expenses even more difficult to cover
 - Working to improve child care access through building a new center in Girdwood
 - They don't currently have enough space, but think they can staff the larger Little Bears facility when it comes online
- **Hard to find before and after care**
 - Pick up and drop off are even bigger issues in remote communities
 - Use some of the funding to help with this
- **Difficulty for providers to provide year-round summer care**
 - Some grant funding specifically excludes year-round care facilities to apply (designed to only support summer camps, like Trailside)
- **Lack of funds for new construction and increased capacity**
 - Fund grants for successful programs to expand their capacity, whether via new spaces or using vacant commercial space
 - Want to see a focus on funding for new construction (ie Little Bears facility)
 - From ACCEE Fund, should set aside a pool for one-time facilities/capacity building improvements that can support different communities each year
 - Need funds to renovate existing spaces
- **ASD isn't developing existing Municipal land that could be used for child care facilities/centers**
 - Could the ACCEE Fund help repurpose/develop spaces for child care facilities?
 - Using existing facilities reduces overhead for big programs
 - ASD's overall mission should be to have child care and preschools at school locations

Quality

- **Need to appreciate child care providers**
 - Make staff feel appreciated
 - Give them benefits
 - Make them feel like more than “just a babysitter”
 - Access to career development is there, but programs too often don’t incentivise/prioritize investing in staff
- **Need to provide better wages and benefits**
 - Could we partner with the Chamber to create a pool for more affordable benefits rates?
- **Some additional supports would improve program quality**
 - Should fund support for grant writing
 - Need support improving/navigating the Muni licensing website, or improving that website
 - Licensing specialists are sometimes hard to reach, but sometimes great. Depends on who you get.

Affordability

- **Childcare industry hampered by having one major source of income – parent-paid tuition**
 - Reliant on parents who are already struggling

Other

- Girdwood community should get more of the ACCEE Fund money than their population size dictates due its importance as a tourism hub
 - Funds dispensed evenly by population would “exclude” Girdwood
 - Residents feel underserved due to the town’s small populations size
 - Funds distributed to/by school areas?
 - Communities want to see their share of marijuana tax revenue coming back to their specific programs
- Flexibility should be built into the ACCEE Fund system