

# Plan for TN Tomorrow Parent Focus Group Summary Report

## Introduction

### Background

In the summer of 2024, [Tennesseans for Quality Early Education \(TQEE\)](#) collaborated with our [Bright Start Tennessee Network](#) Fellows to host parent focus groups across Tennessee to gather parent perspectives on the availability, accessibility, and affordability of quality child care. These focus groups aimed to capture the real-world experiences of Tennessee families navigating the often-confusing world of child care and inform actionable recommendations for TQEE’s “Plan for TN Tomorrow.”

### Participants and Methodology

Thirty-nine parents shared their experiences in four virtual and in-person focus groups (West TN, Northeast TN, Upper Cumberland, and Knoxville/Knox Co.) and one online parent survey (Chattanooga/Hamilton Co.). Conversations were guided by structured questions covering quality, accessibility, suggestions for improvement, and space for open dialogue<sup>1</sup>.

### Overarching Themes

Key themes emerged across all five regions:

- **Affordability:** Parents across the state noted that quality child care consumed much of their budgets. One Upper Cumberland parent noted, “Child care costs are as high as my mortgage; it feels impossible to balance.”
- **Accessibility:** Families struggle with long waitlists for limited seats, particularly for infants and children with disabilities. One mom in Northeast TN lamented, “We got on the waitlist when I was two months pregnant, and my child still didn’t have a spot until they were six months old.”

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix A for the facilitator guide.



- **Safety and Quality:** Parents value safe environments, knowledgeable staff, and developmentally appropriate learning for their children. A parent in Knoxville shared, “I judge quality by how my child feels when I pick them up—a happy child tells me they’re in the right place.”

## Defining High-Quality Child Care

While there is no standard definition of “high-quality child care,” parents across Tennessee agreed that, to them, high-quality child care is safe, developmentally appropriate, and operated by knowledgeable staff. A Chattanooga parent defined high-quality child care as “a safe, nurturing, and engaging environment where my child can grow, learn, and thrive. To me, it’s about having trusted and experienced caregivers who can provide personalized attention, stimulate my child’s curiosity, and support their physical, emotional, and cognitive development.”

Parents noted that they look for low child-to-teacher ratios and open communication between staff and parents or other primary caregivers. Parents prefer child care operated by staff with extensive education and experience in early childhood development. One West Tennessee parent put it succinctly: “High-quality child care means my child is well taken care of physically and emotionally.”

## Parent Experiences Finding and Accessing Care

Parents heavily rely on family referrals, Google searches, and community networks to find open child care seats. Many were familiar with the Tennessee Department of Human Service’s [Child Care Locator tool](#), but noted that they wished more centers kept real-time vacancy and waitlist information on their profiles.

Several parents noted extremely limited options for infant care in particular, citing provider shortages and regulatory challenges. One parent in Knoxville noted that their center removed infant care completely because of regulatory burdens.

Cost is often a barrier even when parents can find open child care seats. A mom in Northeast TN aired her frustration with finding affordable care, stating, “Affordability is such an issue. I need three jobs to cover all the costs for my three children to be in child care. I’m barely making ends meet



because of my \$1,000 monthly child care bill.” This sentiment was echoed across the state, with a parent in Knoxville stating that they spend nearly **half** of their monthly income on child care.

While there are some federal, state, and local subsidy programs to help families with child care costs, many families noted that eligibility requirements are often challenging to meet. A parent in Northeast TN is trapped in this eligibility paradox, stating that they can’t get subsidies because they don’t meet the 30-hour-per-week work requirement but can’t work 30 hours per week because they can’t afford child care.

Ultimately, most parents concluded that high-quality child care is very expensive and hard to come by.

## Parent Recommendations and Next Steps

### Parent Recommendations

While parents had countless suggestions for improving child care affordability, accessibility, and availability in Tennessee, a few key themes emerged:

- **Financial Relief:** Expand subsidies and vouchers to include middle-income families.
- **Increased Accessibility:** Increase the number of child care seats in underserved areas, support infant care providers, and keep more real-time vacancy and cost information.
- **Workforce Development:** Launch campaigns to attract and retain child care workers through higher wages and training opportunities. A West Tennessee parent hypothesized that “if child care workers were paid more, they’d be more likely to stay, and that consistency would benefit everyone.”

### Next Steps for Advocates

- Advocate for legislation supporting expanded child care funding, such as Promising Futures
- Encourage Chambers of Commerce and business community members to champion employer-supported solutions.
- Amplify existing efforts by Bright Start TN communities to expand child care access locally.

## **Conclusion**

The voices of Tennessee parents interviewed in TQEE’s Plan for TN Tomorrow Parent Focus Groups highlight a clear need for systemic improvements in child care affordability, accessibility, and quality. As one parent shared, “Child care is the foundation of our community’s future – investing in it benefits everyone.” Tennesseans for Quality Early Education is dedicated to advocating for families across the state and transforming parent insights into meaningful change for Tennessee’s youngest citizens.