A Policymaker's Guide to School-Age Child Care

Challenges and Opportunities to Support and Scale Federally Subsidized Programs

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Policy considerations

For the past several years, there has been a national focus on improving quality and access to child care for infants, toddlers, and young children from low-income families. However, there is also a substantial federal investment in services and supports for school-age children.[i] In fact, thirty-nine percent of the children served by the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS)-funded Child Care Development Fund (CCDF) subsidies are school-age, an average of 513,000 students each month. This constitutes a federal investment by HHS alone of $2 billion annually.[ii] School closures, hybrid schedules, and continued uncertainty during the COVID-19 pandemic have highlighted the urgent need to provide families of school-age children with programming that supports children's learning and development and allows parents to continue with work, virtually or in-person.[1 2 3 4]

Services and programs for school-age students consist of before- and afterschool programs and summer learning supports. This array of programming offers a unique opportunity to fill gaps from the school day and provide children with some of the social-emotional, behavioral, and physical health competencies needed to thrive in and out of school. Additionally, low-income working families in particular rely on school-age child care as a work support. Despite the large proportion of the CCDF subsidy population that falls within the school-age range, research, training, and quality

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[i] School-age is defined in this brief as ages 6 to 12

[ii] ASPE estimates computed using FY2017 CCDF Data Tables (https://www.acf.hhs.gov/occ/resource/fy-2017-ccdf-data-tables-final)

improvement efforts still largely focus on the birth-to-five end of the age continuum. Indeed, high-quality early care and education (ECE) provides a strong foundation for healthy development, but the need for quality settings that support children's growth across developmental domains continues well beyond the early childhood years.

This brief synthesizes and extends key findings from the *Improving Programs, Policies, and Services to Promote Healthy Development in Middle Childhood in Afterschool Settings Project (MCASP)* (see sidebar). Findings draw from a literature review, case studies of five afterschool programs, and input from experts in the field. The brief highlights **policy opportunities to address five key areas of need** identified by the project:

1) support for working families;
2) strengthen the quality of child care settings for school-age students;
3) scale supports for social-emotional and behavioral health;
4) address tremendous unmet need; and
5) pursue sustainable cross-sector strategies to finance school-age child care.

In 2017, the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, in partnership with the Office of Women's Health, both within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, awarded James Bell Associates a contract for the *Improving Programs, Policies, and Services to Promote Healthy Development in Middle Childhood in Afterschool Settings Project (MCASP).*

The project sought to 1) understand the emotional, behavioral and physical health competencies needed to thrive in and out of school; and 2) identify key elements of a coordinated, high-quality school-age child care system.

Supporting working families

School-age child care programs provide safe, supportive, and enriching environments for students during the hours school is not in session and parents are working. Findings from a large national survey conducted by the Afterschool Alliance showed that 83 percent of parents of students in afterschool programs agree that afterschool programs help working parents to keep their jobs, miss fewer days of work, and feel confident their kids are safe.[5] School-age child care programs can support working families by engaging in family-friendly policies that allow parents to cover working hours, even if family situations change, or if work/training hours are non-traditional.

One setting that offers families the flexibilities to support employment is family child care (FCC). Several studies describe the ways family child care serves as a work support, including by providing care: 1) during hours that extend beyond the traditional nine-to-five workday; 2) to siblings of

different ages at the same location; 3) broadly in rural communities; and 4) in ways that can be more culturally appropriate, particularly for dual-language families.[6][7][8] In spite of the potential of offering more flexibilities to families from the most vulnerable communities, more than ninety thousand licensed FCCs closed between 2005 and 2017.[9]

Another family-friendly policy emphasized in the CCDF Final Rule (2016) is the requirement that Lead Agencies establish redetermination periods of twelve or more months.[10] These longer eligibility periods provide continuity of care for children and financial stability for families. COVID-19 highlighted the importance of such policies when work circumstances change during a public health emergency. Twelve-month eligibility means families are no longer at risk of losing CCDF benefits due to temporary work stoppage before the end of the minimum eligibility period.

Strategies for strengthening family-friendly policies

- Support non-traditional hours care for working families by expediting licensing for providers offering care during extended hours.
- Use targeted training and technical assistance to strengthen family child care networks and build the capacity of FCCs to serve mixed caseloads that include younger children and school-age populations.
- Ease the difficulty of losing benefits for families whose incomes change by adjusting family benefit phase out schedules.[11]

Improving quality

School-age child care is in an excellent position to partner with schools, other human services providers, and community-based organizations to improve quality in learning and enrichment. Students in high-quality programs have safe spaces to learn and supported ways to develop relationships, which are contextual factors related to success in school and life.[12][13] Findings from MCASP and other recent studies suggest that programs can benefit from the use of evidence-based models. Multiple programs and curricula have been developed, modified, and validated for afterschool and summer learning settings that promote increased school participation, improved behavior, motivation to learn, and physical development.[14][15][16] Implementing these approaches can contribute to high-quality care. However, there is a lack of national or administrative data about the uptake of such evidence-informed programming, making it difficult to determine whether or how often it is used, particularly in the subsidized care settings that low-income families access.[17]

Systematic approaches to improving quality are happening across the country. Several states are building on lessons learned from more mature quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS) for younger children. For example, Georgia is currently conducting a validation study that assesses the

quality of afterschool and summer learning settings. Georgia's goal is to embed school-age child care into its existing rating system for ECE. The state of Washington also leveraged lessons learned from ECE by conducting a multi-year pilot to align and improve the quality of school-age child care through the implementation of coaching, targeted professional development, and competencies for child care professionals serving children and youth across the age span.[18] These efforts have a common goal of developing more unified and transparent rating systems from ECE through school-age settings. Leveraging existing flexibilities of the CCDF program by offering higher reimbursement rates to programs that are rated higher quality is a policy approach that has demonstrated some evidence of effectiveness in ECE.[19]

Strategies for improving quality

- Build the evidence base that helps policymakers understand the elements of program, curricula, interventions, and settings that work best to improve child outcomes.
- Collect new nationally representative information about the extent to which evidence-based or -informed approaches are taken up by federally subsidized child care programs.
- Develop and validate ways of assessing quality in school-age child care.
- Offer tiered subsidy payment rates to higher quality-rated programs in order to incentivize quality improvement.

Embedding Supports for Social-Emotional and Behavioral Health (SEBH)

In addition to building academic skills during the school-age years, children are meeting developmental milestones related to social emotional and behavioral health (SEBH). [20] Although economically vulnerable children face adverse environments that threaten optimal development,[21] [22] school-age child care programs can mitigate risk factors by promoting positive social-emotional and behavioral health skills that serve as important protective factors.[23] [24] [25] MCASP highlighted program efforts to promote SEBH, including the importance of building supportive relationships with peers and adults in buffering traumatic experiences.[26] The National Center for Afterschool and Summer Learning (NCASE)[iii] facilitated a peer learning group on social-emotional learning (SEL) in out-of-school-time for ten states in 2018-19.[27] This work demonstrated the value of building

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[iii] NCASE is funded by the US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Child Care

systems and supports for SEL[iv] [28] into out-of-school time, and the potential of building child and family resilience through collaborative relationships between providers and families.

Strategies for supporting for social-emotional and behavioral health

- Consider evidence-based approaches from related sectors that support and build the capacity of staff, such as coaching, mentoring, mental health consultation, and enhanced training and technical assistance resources.[29]
- Expand behavioral health supports for staff.
- Provide trauma-informed training for staff members.
- Strengthen partnerships with other social services to help refer children, families, and staff with more intense behavioral health needs.

Addressing unmet need

In spite of efforts by programs and states to diversify their funding sources documented by MCASP and other recent studies, many parents are still unable to afford care for their school-age children. In fact, a 2014 survey by the Afterschool Alliance[30] reported that parents pay an average of $113/week for school-age child care during the academic year, and $250/week during the summer months. It is well-documented that costs of providing care far exceed parent fees.[31] [32]

Not only do parents of children who have care struggle to pay for it, but millions of parents cannot find the care they need. Findings from a 2020[33] administration of the Afterschool Alliance survey indicate the tremendous unmet need is growing, as **nearly 25 million school-aged children who were not participating in an afterschool program in 2020 would be enrolled in a program if one were available to them,** compared to 19.4 million in 2014. This represents a 60 percent increase in unmet need for school-age child care since this national survey was first administered in 2004. Although participation and the need for school-age child care is much higher among low-income households and families of color, cost, availability of affordable programs, and lack of a safe way for children to get to programs are most often reported as barriers by low-income families.

Notably, much of the national data on unmet needs is from before the time of COVID-19. Several new analyses are underway that describe how the difficulties of working families of finding affordable school-age care have been exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic. In a recent

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[iv] Social and emotional learning (SEL) is a process through which young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions. (CASEL, 2020)

working paper, Adams and Todd project full-time distance learning could require families to need care for significantly more time than is needed when schools are in session in-person.[34]

Strategies for increasing access

- Increase investment in high-quality child care for all school-age children at the national, state and local level.
- Conduct in-depth analyses of national data about the costs of school-age child care to provide policymakers with more up-to-date and comprehensive information.
- Address critical shortfalls in care for low-income families.
- Prioritize licensing of new providers who have the capacity to serve children from underserved populations.
- Target training and technical assistance to providers serving children and families experiencing disparities in health and education outcomes.
- Collect and publicize national data documenting changes in school-age child care demand by working families during the public health crisis and recovery.

Pursuing sustainable cross-sector strategies to finance school-age child care

Costs and financing strategies supporting school-age child care vary across different types of care and geographical regions. Case study research from MCASP demonstrated that programs could benefit from more stable, long-term funding and greater transparency about access to federal and state funds. Many funding sources are short-term, linked to specific goals, and lack flexibility to administer the most appropriate, evidence-informed curricula matching program goals and population needs.[35]

Though multiple federal programs support children and families in afterschool programs, states and programs have struggled to put sustainable financing in place. Beyond the federal investment through the CCDF program, other US Department of Health and Human Services funding sources for school-age children include Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and the Social Services Block Grant (SSBG). The Department of Education's 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) also support enriching academic opportunities in afterschool programs. States, local communities, corporations, and private foundations contribute significantly to offset the cost for families.

Recent work by the NCASE[36] explores how funding sources can be combined at the state and program level to support quality in OST programs. However, building on findings from NCASE,

MCASP described the difficulties programs have with combining funding sources, including the challenges of layering funding from private or philanthropic sources that is time- and population-limited with federal or state funding that has different eligibility requirements.[37] Promising work by the National Center on Subsidy Innovation and Accountability[v] (NCSIA)[38] articulates ways the CCDF and TANF block grant programs can be used concurrently to subsidize the care of eligible school-age children. The Afterschool Alliance also recently analyzed existing and new public and private funding sources that could support 'a new learning day' by blending funding from child care, education, allied human services sectors, the private sector, and philanthropy.[39]

Strategies for developing sustainable financing

- Undertake case study research that offers state or community models for effectively combining CCDF and other funding sources.
- Offer targeted technical assistance and training opportunities to states and federal grantees to build cross-sector relationships with schools, early care and education, public health, community partners, the private sector, and philanthropy that could ground shared service delivery and financing approaches.
- Engage in cross-sector partnerships to help re-build the child care market.

Next steps for school-age child care

This brief suggests opportunities for greater cross-sector collaboration and infrastructure building in order to increase access to high-quality care in ways that will better meet the needs of working families with school-age children, while advancing student learning and development. As services and supports are re-envisioned in the wake of COVID-19, it will be necessary for policymakers, researchers, and stakeholders from the out-of-school-time community to partner to determine how to holistically and equitably meet the needs children, families, and frontline staff.

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[v] NCSIA is also funded by the US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Child Care.

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