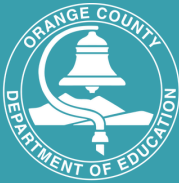


ORANGE COUNTY CHILD CARE STRATEGIC PLAN

2025-2030



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**PREPARED BY:
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COUNCIL**





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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to the members of the LPC Ad-Hoc Committee for their dedicated time and work in developing this Strategic Plan.



BACKGROUND AND OVERVIEW

The Orange County Child Care and Development Planning Council (LPC) collaborates with the early care and education community to meet the needs of Orange County. Council members are interested in issues dealing with all aspects of child care and development, including safety, quality early care and education, development of the whole child, workforce development, and accessibility of services for child development.

Vision

All children in Orange County will have access to quality child care and development services.

Mission

Mobilize public and private resources and foster partnerships to address the child care and development needs of Orange County children, families, and providers.

STRATEGIC PLAN BACKGROUND AND DEVELOPMENT

The Orange County Child Care and Development Planning Council (LPC) developed this Strategic Plan to provide a coordinated, data-informed roadmap for strengthening early care and education across the county. This plan builds on the LPC's longstanding role in assessing community needs, advising local leadership, and mobilizing public and private resources to improve outcomes for young children and their families.

In 2025, the LPC conducted a comprehensive countywide Child Care Needs Assessment to better understand the experiences of families, providers, and community stakeholders. This assessment served as the foundation for the Strategic Plan. The LPC also reviewed findings from the Universal Prekindergarten (UPK) Needs Assessment and First 5 Orange County's Child Care Landscape report to ensure alignment across initiatives and to validate emerging themes.

Through a series of meetings with an ad-hoc committee within the LPC and partnership with Orange County Department of Education's Research, Evaluation, and Data Inquiry team, committee members reviewed the data findings and engaged in a collaborative process that identified core needs, clarified priority areas, developed goals and action steps, and identified key resources to leverage to guide the work over the next five years. The actions and strategies identified in this plan are intended to be flexible in implementation to ensure that, as the larger work begins and continues, strategies, partners, and resources can be adapted to ensure goals are achieved.



KEY COMMUNITY NEEDS IDENTIFIED THROUGH DATA REVIEWS

1

Child Care Is Expensive and Hard to Navigate: Families shared that cost is one of the biggest barriers to finding care. In Orange County, child care costs can take up about 20% of a family's median income, which is nearly as much as housing. Parents also described how confusing it can be to find programs, understand eligibility, or determine whether a program offers part-day or full-day care.

2

Families Want Clear, Centralized Information: Many families rely on word of mouth, online searches, or school websites to find child care. Parents told us they want a trusted "one-stop shop" where they can easily find information about available programs and learn what high-quality care looks like, especially for children with disabilities, multilingual learners, and children with specific developmental or social-emotional needs. Families also expressed that they are often filling out the same information across multiple forms.

3

Multilingual and Diverse Families Need Inclusive Systems: Forty-one percent of transitional kindergarten and kindergarten students in Orange County are English Language Learners, and most speak Spanish. Families need information in their home language and programs that reflect and respect their cultures and communities.

4

Children with Disabilities and Children in Foster Care Need Strong Support Systems: More than 4,000 children under age five receive early intervention or special education services, and hundreds of young children are in foster care. These children benefit from inclusive, high-quality early learning environments that are prepared to meet their unique developmental and emotional needs. However, providers expressed a need for more trainings and resources to support children with disabilities in the classroom.

5

Providers Need Workforce and Operational Support: Child care providers are deeply committed to children and families, but many are struggling with staff shortages, retention challenges, and rising costs. More than half of providers identified staff retention as a major concern. They expressed a need for stronger professional development opportunities, support for inclusive practices, and sustainable funding to maintain quality programs.

Across all of these themes, one message was clear: families need better access and clearer information, providers need stronger support, and the system works best when partners are aligned and collaborating.

PRIORITY AREAS AND STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

After reviewing the data and engaging in collaborative planning, the LPC organized identified needs into four priority areas to guide their work.

Based on the needs identified, **Quality of Care** is the ultimate goal of this Strategic Plan. The LPC recognizes that high-quality early care and education does not happen in isolation. It is strengthened by key conditions that support families, providers, and the broader system. For this reason, the Strategic Plan outlines a pathway that leads to improved quality of care. The LPC carefully considered where it can have the greatest impact over the next five years. As a county planning body, the LPC focused on areas within its sphere of influence and areas where coordinated leadership, partnership-building, and resource alignment can meaningfully improve the overall quality of care in Orange County. Therefore, the Strategic Plan focuses on three interconnected priority goals that serve as the enabling conditions for high-quality care and will guide the LPC's work through 2031: **Access to Care**, **Family Knowledge**, and **Provider Capacity**.

Enabling Conditions and Priority Goals

Access to Care



Our goal is to strengthen equitable access to child care across Orange County by helping families understand costs and financial support options, improving enrollment and information systems, and identifying ways to support cross-agency collaboration.

Family Knowledge



We aim to enhance the child care information system to empower families to identify and choose high-quality care options by ensuring equitable, multilingual, and accessible resources. The LPC also aims to develop a plan to improve how those resources are shared.

Provider Capacity



Our goal is to strengthen provider capacity in Orange County by developing coordinated infrastructure that supports licensing, business operations, workforce sustainability, and providers' ability to effectively serve and communicate with families.



Quality of Care

By 2031, our goal is to advance equitable access to high-quality early education by fostering inclusive practices that respect diversity, promote belonging, and support the success of every student by strengthening countywide collaboration and building the capacity of providers and stakeholders to effectively support all children, particularly those with diverse social-emotional and developmental needs.



2025-30 Goals

Strategies & Activities

Goal 1

ACCESS TO CHILD CARE



Our goal is to strengthen equitable access to child care across Orange County by helping families understand costs and financial support options, improving enrollment and information systems, and identifying ways to support cross-agency collaboration.

Background

Improving equitable access to child care across Orange County requires a coordinated approach to how families obtain information, navigate eligibility requirements, and enroll in available programs. Findings from recent needs assessments showcased that families often encounter fragmented information, complex application processes, differing enrollment timelines, and inconsistent eligibility requirements across programs. These challenges can create barriers to access, particularly for families who may already be navigating multiple systems. In response, this goal focuses on strengthening affordability navigation, improving the accessibility and alignment of enrollment processes, and advancing more coordinated approaches to data collection and sharing across agencies.

Efforts to advance this work will include identifying and consolidating high-quality resources to better support family awareness of available child care options and financial assistance programs, while also examining opportunities to streamline how families identify and apply for care. In parallel, the LPC and its partners will work to better understand the steps necessary to improve cross-agency coordination related to data collection, sharing, and reporting. This includes assessing current systems, identifying areas of duplication or misalignment, and exploring more cohesive approaches that reduce administrative burden for both families and providers. Together, these strategies aim to create a more accessible, transparent, and user-centered child care system across the county.



Goal area 1 has the following sub-goals and key strategies or actions that will assist in achieving the respective sub-goals:

Sub-Goal 1: Find and share clear information that aims to increase families' knowledge of available child care programs, eligibility requirements, and financial assistance options to better support families

- Identify key partners and develop a cross-agency work group
- Coordinate efforts with the State of California and other key agencies
- Define criteria for clear, high-quality resources
- Systematically review existing resources
- Develop and organize checklists and tools that support family understanding of child care options (See Goal 2: Family Knowledge)

Sub-Goal 2: Better understand the required steps necessary to improve coordination of enrollment processes to support families in identifying and applying for their preferred child care options

- Review current enrollment processes across providers to identify similarities and differences
- Map existing enrollment systems, eligibility requirements, and application processes
- Identify opportunities to simplify and better align application processes where possible
- Review existing tools or platforms that could support a more streamlined application and enrollment process for families

Sub-Goal 3: Collaborate with partners to better understand how to work towards cross-agency data collection, sharing and reporting to reduce burden on families and providers

- Review current data-collection and reporting requirements across agencies to identify areas of overlap, duplication, and burdens for families and providers.
- Map existing data systems, processes, and reporting timelines to better understand differences and opportunities for alignment.
- Engage cross-agency partners to identify shared data needs and priorities that could support more coordinated efforts.
- Explore approaches to improve data sharing practices while maintaining privacy and compliance requirements.

Resources

Children's Home Society, OC Head Start, Orange County Department of Education, MCT Technology, Child Care Resource Center, College & University partners

Goal 2

FAMILY KNOWLEDGE



We aim to enhance the child care information system to empower families to identify and choose high-quality care options by ensuring equitable, multilingual, and accessible resources. The LPC also aims to develop a plan to improve how those resources are shared.

Background

As a result of the needs assessment, one key problem was identified that guided the strategic plan: **Do families know how to find and evaluate child care?** Needs assessment results indicated that families rely on a variety of different resources to find information on child care sites and quality care. However, information is scattered, inconsistent, and not always available in families' home languages. There is no single, trusted place where families can easily find options organized by city, child age, or specific needs. Families also expressed uncertainty about what high-quality child care looks like and how to determine whether a program is the right fit for them, especially for children with disabilities, multilingual learners, or unique developmental needs.

The LPC recognizes that community partners already share valuable information, but also must acknowledge that efforts are not well coordinated. These gaps highlighted the need to consolidate resources, improve language and technology access, and distribute information through trusted community spaces so families can confidently make informed decisions for their children. This goal builds on the work from Goal 1 to ensure that families are able to understand and find the resources available.



Goal area 2 has the following sub-goals and key strategies or actions that will assist in achieving the respective sub-goals:

Sub-Goal 1: Enhance the LPC's understanding of county resources that support families and child care planning that also takes the region into consideration (see Goal Area 2: Access to Child Care)

- Identify, review, and consolidate resources from County partners for families related to child care quality and enrollment through the development of a workgroup (see Goal 1: Access to Child Care)

Sub-Goal 2: Increase families' ability to identify child care options that meet their needs by organizing, adapting, and developing accessible, user-friendly resources tailored to diverse populations (e.g., by age group, disability status, and multilingual learners).

- Develop and adapt checklists and look-fors to identify and enroll in high-quality child care, including:
 - Common expectations in the enrollment process, such as helpful documents to have on hand (e.g., birth certificates, immunization records, etc.), timelines to expect, and identifying a variety of options
 - Examples of high-quality care and education for different stages of development, for different needs, including special education, age transitions, and multilingual learners

Sub-Goal 3: Increase family awareness of available resources and understanding of high-quality care through a coordinated plan for sharing information that includes multilingual and multi-platform outreach.

- Ensure materials are translated into multiple languages and adapted for different needs and regions
- Share information in multiple formats and across platforms (e.g., websites, social media, print materials, in-person outreach)
- Create an ad hoc committee to develop and implement a marketing dissemination plan of identified resources to families and providers
 - Ensure families are members of the committee to provide their voice and perspective to the process

Resources

Children's Home Society, OC Head Start, OC Child Care Association, State Work Group focused on creating Hubs for Child Care, Orange County Resource and Referral Agencies, Existing guides from CA Department of Education, National Association for Education of Young Children, City of Irvine

Goal 3

PROVIDER CAPACITY



Our goal is to strengthen provider capacity in Orange County by developing coordinated infrastructure that supports licensing, business operations, workforce sustainability, and providers' ability to effectively serve and communicate with families.

Background

Another key consideration in improving child care quality in the county is provider capacity. For the purposes of this child care plan, provider capacity is defined in two areas: **workforce development and business operations**. **Workforce development** includes credentialing, career pathways, and ongoing professional learning opportunities for current providers. **Business operations** encompass the practical demands providers face, such as facilities management, fiscal responsibilities, and staffing. Findings from recent county needs assessments identified both areas as critical to supporting providers. Addressing these factors will help strengthen the stability, success, and growth of child care centers and providers across the county.

In terms of professional development, LPC members noted that while the county offers a wide range of learning opportunities, these resources are often fragmented. There is an opportunity to improve access by consolidating information into a centralized "hub" that clearly communicates available professional learning options for child care providers. LPC members also highlighted a sense of isolation among providers, who often navigate responsibilities related to children, families, staff, and business operations independently. In response, providers emphasized the need for more structured opportunities to connect, collaborate, and learn from one another.

Regarding business operations, recent needs assessments have consistently pointed to confusion regarding the credentials, certifications, and degrees required to enter and advance within the early childhood education workforce. This lack of clarity represents a significant gap and may contribute to shortages in qualified staff. Additionally, LPC members identified challenges related to marketing and communication. Many providers report difficulty effectively promoting their programs, which can lead to limited family awareness and misalignment between provider offerings and family expectations once children are enrolled.



PROVIDER CAPACITY

Goal area 3 has the following sub-goals and key strategies or actions that will assist in achieving the respective sub-goals:

Sub-Goal 1: Increase opportunities for providers to connect, collaborate, and share resources in order to strengthen support networks and reduce provider isolation

- Identify existing collaboratives and networks for different types of providers to lessen isolation
- Examine and leverage existing regional and community-based networking for providers to collaborate

Sub-Goal 2: Identify and clarify workforce development pathways for early childhood educators including partnerships with higher education institutions, internship opportunities, etc.

- Showcase internship and apprenticeship programs to promote expansion
- Identify protocols to update resources that outline educational and credentialing requirements pathways with different entry points

Sub-Goal 3: Support providers in clearly communicating their program offerings and benefits to families and the broader community.

- Examine the use of AI to support program messaging about their services
- Develop and share tools, templates, and guidance to help providers strengthen their communication efforts.

Sub-Goal 4: Enhance existing networks to communicate professional development opportunities to providers around the topic areas, such as leadership development, licensing updates, instructional techniques, serving students with greater needs, etc.

- Map the existing higher education support/assistance programs or options
- Collaborate with other county agencies and non-profits to co-disseminate current professional learning opportunities

Resources

Children's Home Society, First 5 OC, Local Children's Museums, Orange County Association for the Education of Young Children, CA Early Childhood Mentor Program, College & University Partners, Director Mentor Collaborative Meetings, Children's Home Society Lending Library, California Early Childhood Online