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DEFINING QUALITY IN EARLY CARE & EDUCATION



01

INTRODUCTION

Defining Quality in Early Care and Education

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Survey data from 77 educators revealed strong alignment in how quality is understood and enacted. Key elements include play-based learning, trusting relationships, child autonomy, well-supported educators, equity, and family partnership. These themes appeared consistently across both definitions and real-life examples.

This report synthesizes educator responses from two narrative survey questions regarding their understanding and experience of high-quality early learning and care.

Each section is organized around one of the eight emergent themes and includes: a definition and key indicators drawn from survey responses; representative quotes from early care and education respondents; and real-life examples shared by survey participants.

The eight themes represent a synthesis of educator's perspectives rather than a ranked list of priorities. These include: Relationships & Belonging, Play-Based Inquiry, Child Agency, Skilled Educators, Whole-Child Development, Family Partnership, Inclusive Environments, and Well-Prepared Engaging Environments.



"Early learning should include an environment that is engaging, organized, offers opportunity for student agency and inquiry, includes adults that scaffold playful learning with thoughtful questions and rich language use. Social emotional skills should be explicitly taught and modeled..."
~TK Teacher

"...It goes beyond simple supervision, aiming to nurture a child's natural curiosity and build a strong foundation for lifelong learning and well-being."
~PreK Teacher

"The most important elements...staff compensation and retention, a sense of belonging (for staff, families, children), deep understanding of child development, strong attachment relationships, family partnerships."
~ECE Administrator

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02

WHAT QUALITY LOOKS LIKE

RELATIONSHIPS, BELONGING & EMOTIONAL SAFETY

Definition from Educators

Quality begins with warm, trusting, and responsive relationships. Children and families feel safe, loved, valued, and a sense of belonging. Educators are emotionally present, attentive, and intentional in building connections that help every child feel seen, heard, and secure.

"To me high quality learning and care is an environment where children feel safe, loved and valued."
~District Prek Teacher

"Every child feels that they belong and feel seen, heard, safe, and valued."
~ECE Administrator

Indicators

- Educators are emotionally present, responsive, and attentive to children's cues and needs.
- Every child experiences consistent, caring relationships and feels seen, heard, valued, and included.
- Children develop trusting relationships with peers and adults.
- Daily interactions foster connection, respect, and emotional security.

What Quality Looks Like in Practice

A child was anxious about starting school. The teachers made an intentional effort to connect with him, spending time talking with him and building a relationship. Within a week, the child was going home and telling his family how much he "loves school."

What This Tells Us About Quality

- Building trusting relationships helps children feel safe and comfortable in their learning environment.
- Consistent, caring interactions can transform a child's experience of starting school.
- When children feel connected and secure, they are more likely to develop a sense of belonging and enjoy coming to school.



03

WHAT QUALITY LOOKS LIKE

PLAY-BASED, HANDS-ON, INQUIRY LEARNING

Definition from Educators

Children learn through meaningful play, hands-on exploration, imagination, and discovery. Educators nurture children's natural curiosity, follow their interests, ask thoughtful questions, and extend learning through experiences that invite investigation, creativity, problem-solving, and wonder.

"Play based and relationship centered. Children are immersed in play, nature, discovery."
~Elementary Administrator

"It looks like joyful exploration, strong relationships, and teachers who thoughtfully guide each child's growth through connection and discovery."
~ECE Administrator

Indicators

- Children have extended, uninterrupted opportunities for meaningful play.
- Educators follow children's interests and use thoughtful questions to extend learning.
- Children investigate, experiment, create, and solve problems through hands-on experiences.
- Learning integrates language, literacy, math, science, art, music, movement, and nature

What Quality Looks Like in Practice

A child discovered a caterpillar on the playground and brought it to the teacher. What began as a moment of curiosity developed into a two-week, child-led learning experience. Teachers followed the children's interest by providing opportunities to observe the caterpillar, explore books and materials about life cycles, ask questions, and make predictions. The experience culminated in the children and teachers releasing the butterfly together, celebrating as they watched it take flight.

What This Tells Us About Quality

- Children's interests and discoveries can become meaningful, extended learning experiences.
- Educators nurture curiosity by providing time, materials, and opportunities for children to investigate and explore.
- Learning is enriched when children can observe, question, make predictions, and connect new information to their experiences.



04

WHAT QUALITY LOOKS LIKE

CHILD AGENCY, AUTONOMY & CAPABILITY

Definition from Educators

Children are recognized as capable, competent, and active participants in their own learning. Educators create opportunities for children to express their ideas, make meaningful choices, take appropriate risks, solve problems, and develop confidence and independence.

"Children are viewed as capable and competent and able to construct their own learning."
~ECE Administrator

"Students should be given autonomy... the themes of study should follow the children's interests."
~TK Teacher

Indicators

- Children have meaningful choices and opportunities to express their ideas and interests.
- Educators trust children to take appropriate risks, make mistakes, and solve problems.
- Children participate in decisions about their learning and environment.
- Daily routines and environments support self-help skills, leadership, and independence.

What Quality Looks Like in Practice

Two four-year-olds had spent the morning building a large cardboard boat in the dramatic play area. When they disagreed about who would be the captain, tensions rose and the children became upset. Rather than immediately stepping in to resolve the disagreement, the teacher stayed nearby, observed, and allowed the children time and space to work through the situation themselves.

What This Tells Us About Quality

- Educators recognize children as capable of working through challenges and solving problems.
- Adults know when to step in and when to allow children the opportunity to navigate situations independently.
- Everyday interactions provide meaningful opportunities for children to develop communication, negotiation, and conflict-resolution skills.



05

WHAT QUALITY LOOKS LIKE

SKILLED, REFLECTIVE, WELL-SUPPORTED EDUCATORS

Definition from Educators

Quality depends on knowledgeable, responsive, and reflective educators who understand child development and continually strengthen their practice. Educators need access to professional learning, coaching, collaboration, and meaningful decision-making, along with supportive working conditions that recognize their well-being as essential to children's well-being.

Indicators

- Educators have access to ongoing professional learning, coaching, and opportunities to reflect on practice.
- Programs provide time and structures for collaboration and shared decision-making.
- Educators understand child development and use observation to guide their practice.
- Educator well-being, retention, and supportive working conditions are recognized as essential to quality.

"Staff have autonomy in their classrooms and are also actively involved in decision-making that impacts their work and well-being."
~ECE Administrator

"Teachers must feel taken care of before they can adequately care for children."
~ECE Administrator

What Quality Looks Like in Practice

One program intentionally focused on strengthening its staff culture. Educators participated in weekly program team meetings, monthly all-team meetings, and teacher-led leadership and social committees. They also shared expertise, led meetings, contributed to planning, and provided feedback through regular surveys.

The administrator shared that these changes meaningfully impacted the program. Teachers had more opportunities to collaborate, make their voices heard, and connect with colleagues. As staff felt more valued and supported, they became more present and engaged, positively influencing classroom and program quality.

What This Tells Us About Quality

- Quality is influenced by the conditions and culture in which educators work.
- Educators benefit from having a voice in decisions that affect their work and well-being.
- Collaboration, shared leadership, and opportunities to contribute strengthen educators' sense of connection and engagement.
- Supporting educators is an investment in the quality of children's experiences.



06

WHAT QUALITY LOOKS LIKE

DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE PRACTICE & WHOLE-CHILD FOCUS

Definition from Educators

Quality recognizes and nurtures the whole child, supporting cognitive, social-emotional, physical, language, and creative development. Experiences are responsive to each child's developmental stage, strengths, interests, and needs. Educators provide meaningful opportunities for children to build relationships, develop social-emotional skills, communicate, explore, and grow.

Indicators

- Learning experiences support all developmental domains.
- Social-emotional skills are intentionally modeled, taught, and practiced throughout the day.
- Educators use observation and knowledge of child development to individualize support.
- Predictable routines, responsive interactions, and appropriate challenges support children's growth.

"High-quality early learning and care encompasses the whole child. We care for the whole child."
~TK Teacher

"A huge focus should also be on social emotional learning as that plays the largest part in students' future success in school and in life."
~TK Teacher

What Quality Looks Like in Practice

While children were exploring their environment, each in their own unique way, the educator noticed how each child brought different strengths, ideas, and ways of thinking to their play. Children were free to express themselves, experiment, and use their imaginations as they engaged with the environment around them.

What This Tells Us About Quality

- Children develop and learn in different ways, and quality experiences recognize and value those differences.
- Educators provide opportunities for children to explore, experiment, and express their individual strengths.
- A whole-child approach recognizes that learning includes more than academic skills; it also includes creativity, curiosity, relationships, and confidence.



07

WHAT QUALITY LOOKS LIKE

FAMILY PARTNERSHIP, COMMUNICATION & CONNECTION

Definition from Educators

Families are welcomed, respected, and recognized as essential partners and experts on their children. Educators build trusting, two-way relationships through meaningful communication, shared decision-making, and opportunities for families to contribute their knowledge, experiences, cultures, and perspectives.

Indicators

- Communication between families and educators is ongoing, respectful, and two-way.
- Families' knowledge, cultures, languages, and perspectives inform children's learning experiences.
- Families have meaningful opportunities to participate, contribute, and co-create goals
- Programs build relationships based on trust, shared goals, and mutual respect

"Families are treated as partners and experts in their child's learning and care experience."
~ECE Administrator

"Good communication between teachers and parents is important."
~TK Instructional Assistant

What Quality Looks Like in Practice

An educator shared about an activity where families and children learned about the importance of reading together every day. The experience strengthened the connection between parents and children, encouraged a shared reading routine, and demonstrated how collaboration between the program and families can support children's overall development.

What This Tells Us About Quality

- Families are important partners in supporting children's learning and development.
- Meaningful learning experiences can extend beyond the classroom and become part of family routines.
- Programs strengthen family partnerships when they create opportunities for families to engage in their children's learning.



08

WHAT QUALITY LOOKS LIKE

INCLUSIVE, EQUITABLE & RESPONSIVE ENVIRONMENTS

Definition from Educators

Quality honors and values the cultural, linguistic, developmental, and individual identities, strengths, and experiences of every child and family. Educators adapt environments, materials, and practices to support meaningful participation, equitable access, and a genuine sense of belonging for all.

Indicators

- Children and families see their identities, cultures, and languages reflected and valued.
- Educators adapt materials, interactions, and experiences to support individual and unique needs and abilities.
- All children have meaningful opportunities to participate, contribute, and build relationships.
- Programs actively address barriers to access, participation, and belonging.

"We are committed to providing an inclusive education for every student."
~Prek Teacher

"Quality means taking each culture into consideration."
~Prek Teacher

What Quality Looks Like in Practice

Educators described feeling proud of their programs' efforts to provide inclusive learning experiences for all children. They shared how they adjust their practices to help ensure that every child can participate. They also described the importance of creating environments where children, families, and staff feel welcomed, represented, and that they belong.

What This Tells Us About Quality

- Inclusion requires educators to be responsive to the individual needs and experiences of children.
- Equitable participation means considering what adjustments or supports may be needed for each child.
- A sense of belonging is strengthened when children and families see themselves reflected and valued in their learning community.



09

WHAT QUALITY LOOKS LIKE

PURPOSEFUL, ENGAGING & WELL-PREPARED ENVIRONMENTS

Definition from Educators

Learning environments are safe, welcoming, thoughtfully organized, and intentionally designed to inspire curiosity, exploration, creativity, and connection. Materials, spaces, and experiences reflect children's interests, cultures, and developmental needs while supporting active learning, discovery, and independence.

"Environments should be clean, organized, and full of learning toys and choices for students to play and learn through."
~District Superintendent

"...An engaging and safe environment where children can explore, build confidence, and exude joy."
~Kindergarten Teacher

Indicators

- Environments are safe, accessible, organized, and responsive to children's developmental needs.
- Materials are varied, open-ended, and available to support exploration and choice.
- Indoor and outdoor spaces invite movement, creativity, discovery, and interaction.
- Environments reflect children's interests, cultures, and emerging learning.

What Quality Looks Like in Practice

During a "write the room" activity, children moved throughout the classroom, writing letters on sticky notes. Even children who were typically hesitant to participate were excited to engage. The activity allowed children to move, practice their emerging writing skills, and learn alongside their peers.

What This Tells Us About Quality

- Environments can be intentionally designed to invite movement, exploration, and active participation.
- Providing different ways to engage with materials and learning experiences can encourage children who may otherwise be hesitant.
- A thoughtfully prepared environment supports children's independence, confidence, and enjoyment of learning.

SUMMARY

Defining Quality in Early Care and Education Across ECE and Early Elementary

A comparative analysis of educator survey responses reveals strong alignment between the birth–preschool (ECE) and early elementary communities in how “high-quality early learning and care” is defined and experienced.

Across 77 educator responses, both communities consistently identified quality as:

- Rooted in strong, trusting relationships
- Grounded in engaging, developmentally appropriate learning
- Designed through intentional environments
- Focused on children feeling safe, valued, and capable

Areas of Strong Alignment

Educators across age spans described quality as something children feel, not just something adults implement.

Both communities emphasized:

- Relationships and belonging
- Well-prepared, engaging environments
- Play and exploration as essential to learning
- Inclusive practices that support diverse learners



“Good quality care is offering a home-like environment for our children, where they receive love, feel free to explore new things, and feel safe.”
~Family Child Care Provider

These shared themes suggest a common philosophical foundation across early childhood systems.

Differences in Emphasis (Not Values)

While alignment is strong, each community emphasized slightly different aspects of quality:

- Birth–Preschool (ECE) educators more frequently highlighted:
  - Skilled, intentional teaching
  - Professional preparation
  - Emotional security and care

SUMMARY (CONTINUED)

- Early Elementary educators more frequently emphasized:
  - Student voice and independence
  - Whole-child development (social, emotional, and academic)
  - Family partnership

Importantly, these differences reflect professional context and language — not disagreement about what matters.

Conclusion

There is a shared, cross-sector understanding of quality from birth through early elementary. This alignment reflects not only what educators do with children, but also the conditions that support their ability to provide high-quality learning and care.

Quality is not created by educators alone. It is strengthened by the relationships, resources, professional learning, leadership, and working conditions that allow educators to do their best work.

This shared understanding presents an opportunity to strengthen system coherence, professional learning, and shared messaging about what young children need to thrive.

Quality Means:
Children Know They Matter!

From Shared Understanding to Shared Committment

- ***Children thrive:*** Every child experiences safety, belonging, meaningful relationships, and opportunities to learn through play and exploration.
- ***Educators thrive:*** Educators are valued, supported, knowledgeable, reflective, and provided with the conditions necessary to do their work well.
- ***Families belong:*** Families are recognized as essential partners whose knowledge, cultures, languages, and experiences strengthen early learning.
- ***Inclusion is foundational:*** Every child has equitable opportunities to participate, contribute, and experience belonging.
- ***Systems support quality:*** Programs have access to resources, professional learning, leadership, and collaborative partnerships that sustain high-quality early learning and care.

Quality Is Interconnected

Quality is interconnected. It is reflected in the relationships we build, the experiences we create, the voices we value, and the conditions we provide. It is not defined by one practice, program, or measure, but by our collective commitment to ensuring that children, families, and educators feel seen, heard, valued, and supported to thrive.

REFLECTION

01 What words, phrases, or examples from educators resonate most with your understanding of quality? Why?

02 Which themes feel essential for a shared countywide definition?

03 How do the lived examples help illuminate what quality actually looks like in practice?

04 Where do you see alignment or misalignment between these themes and existing state frameworks

05 What do educators' responses suggest about how equity should appear in our definition of quality?

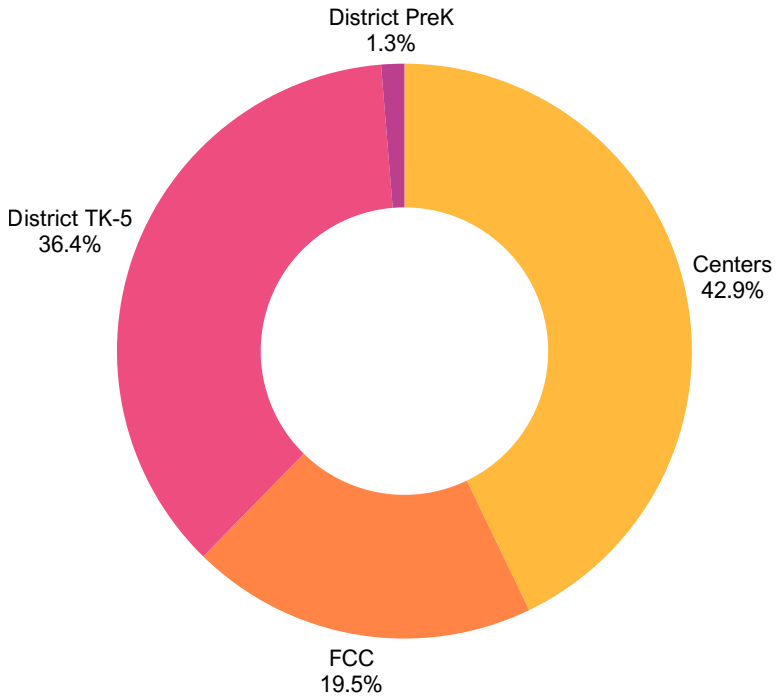
06 How can a definition ensure that all program types (FCC, IT, PS, TK, K) are represented?

07 Are there other themes that should be considered? If so, what would those be?

08 If these themes define quality, what commitments does that imply for:

- teacher support and preparation
- funding and workforce conditions
- family partnership
- inclusion and environment?

SURVEY RESPONSES



Educators and providers were asked to identify the type of program in which they work.

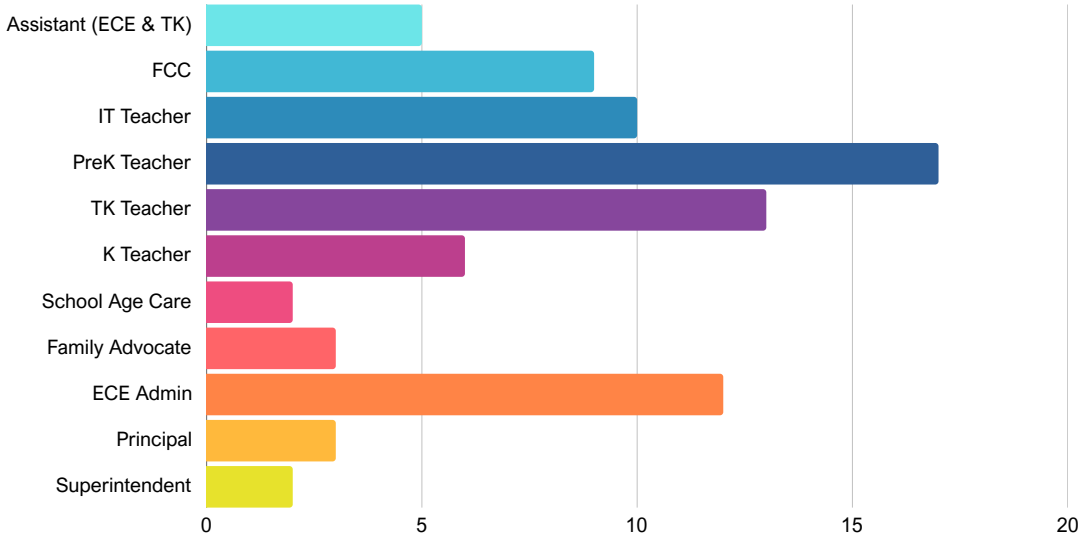
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46 English language responses
31 Spanish language responses

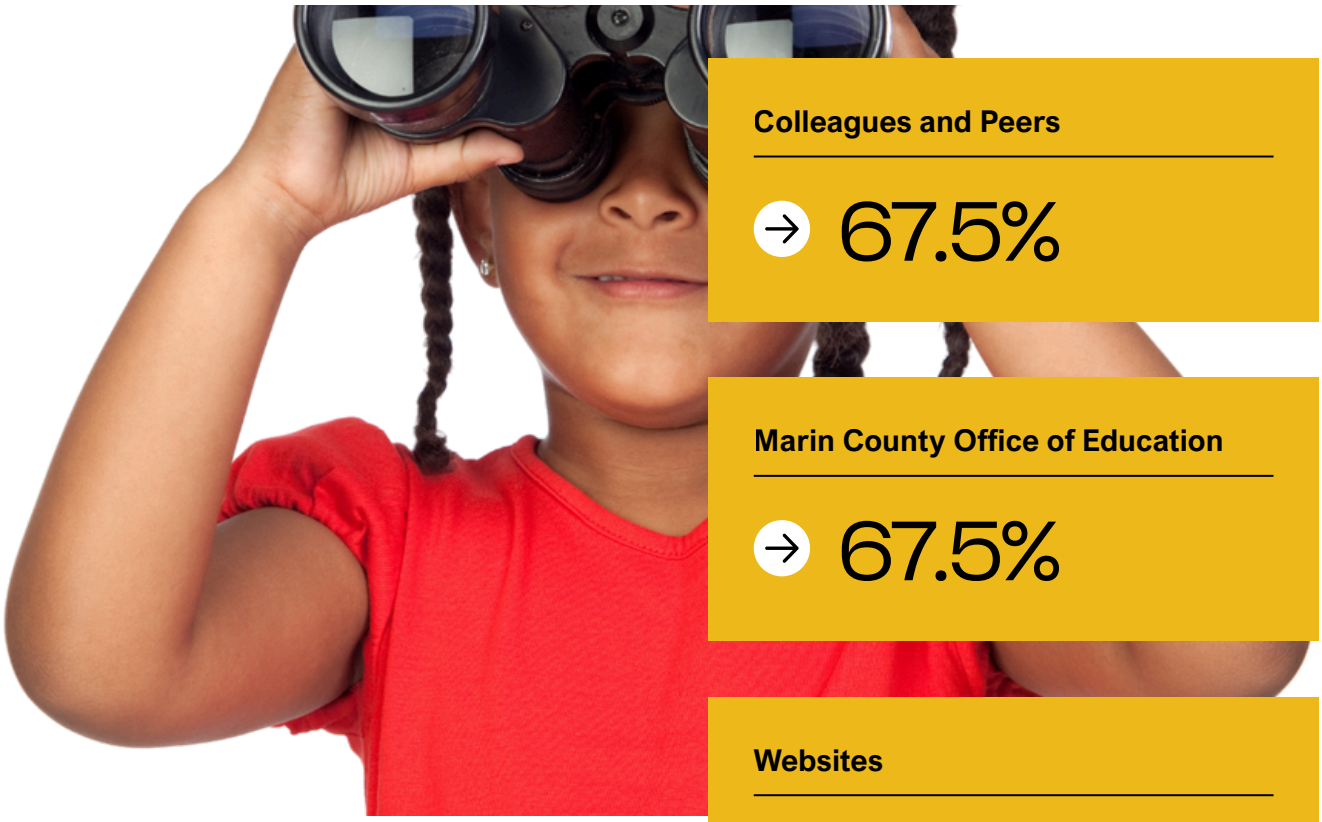
They were also asked to indicate their role within the program.

Some educators hold more than one role.

n=77



RESOURCES FOR QUALITY



Educators and providers were asked, "Where do you look to for resources and support on quality of early learning and care?"

In addition to the five resources listed on this page, educators and providers also relied on colleges and college faculty (25.9%) and libraries (32.4%). Websites included: Edutopia, NAEYC, PITC, Zero to 3, the California Department of Education, First 5, CECO, social media, online teacher forums, and Pinterest.

Elementary educators most often sought support from the Marin County Office of Education, colleagues, and online resources. In contrast, ECE educators and providers were more likely to turn to the Marin County Office of Education, colleagues, and the Marin Child Care Council.

Colleagues and Peers

→ 67.5%

Marin County Office of Education

→ 67.5%

Websites

→ 41.5%

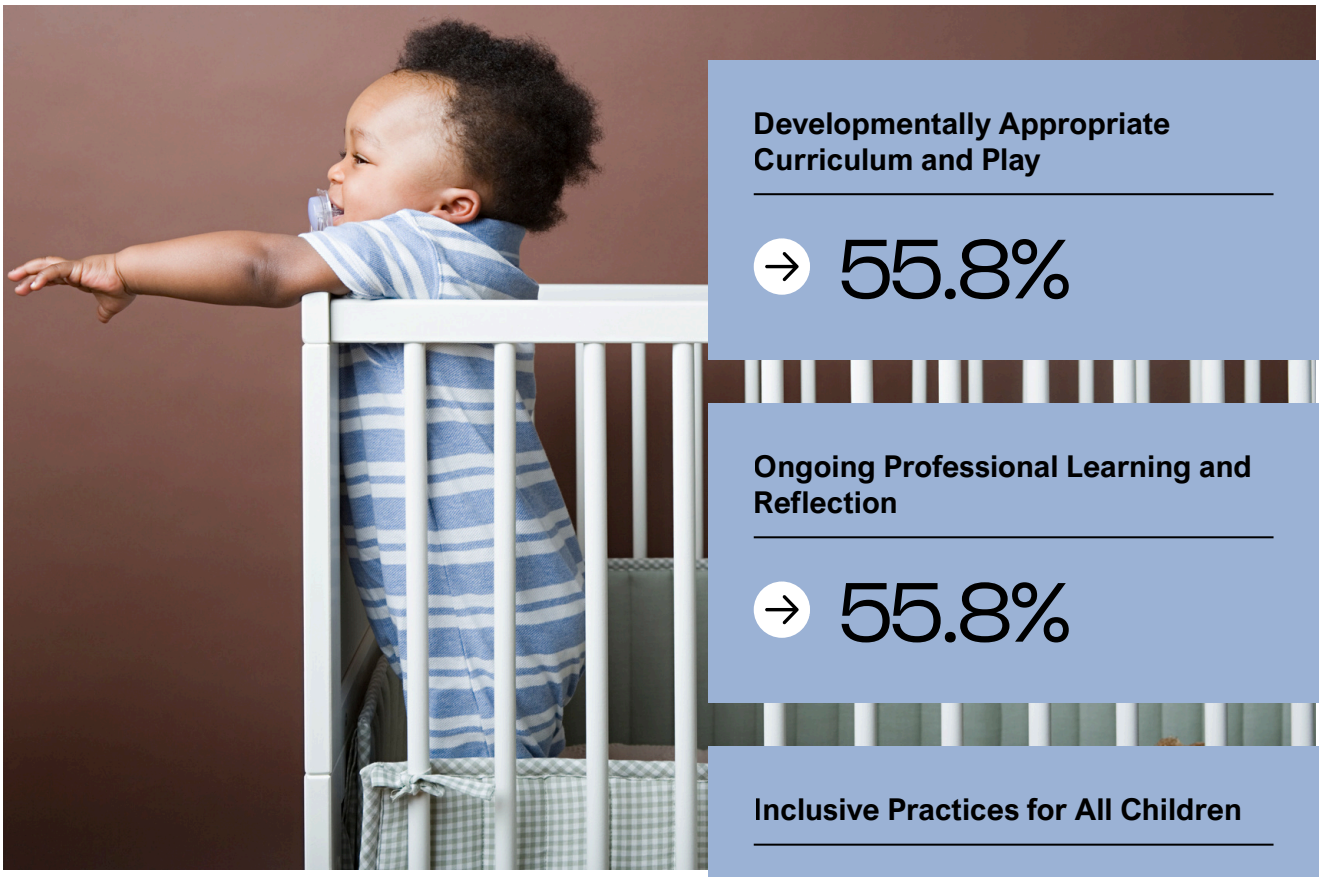
Site or District Administrators

→ 37.6%

Marin Child Care Council

→ 32.4%

RESOURCES OR SUPPORT ON...



Developmentally Appropriate Curriculum and Play

→ 55.8%

Ongoing Professional Learning and Reflection

→ 55.8%

Inclusive Practices for All Children

→ 53.2%

Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Practices

→ 50.6%

Family Engagement and Communication

→ 44.1%

Educators and providers were asked to rate how much support or resources were needed in different areas of quality early learning and care.

Educators and providers rated the supports or resources they need on a scale of *none*, *a little*, *some*, and *significant*. The data shown here reflect the combined responses for some and significant need.

Approximately 78% reported needing no or little support with nurturing, responsive relationships, and 71% reported the same for creating safe, engaging environments.

Beyond the five highest-priority areas, educators and providers also expressed a need for support or resources related to: funding for high-quality materials, furniture, and equipment; financial assistance for families to access high-quality care; leadership and mentoring; toileting; self-care; and behaviors that are challenging for teachers.

Frequent terms mentioned in narrative responses



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