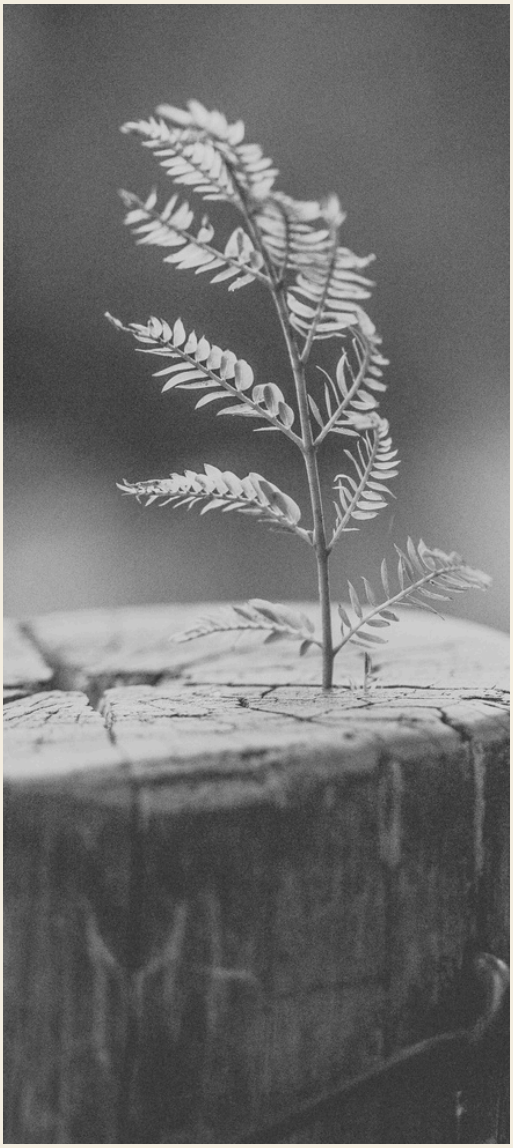
FAMILIES AT THE CENTER

Findings from the Marin UPK Family Survey:
What Families Value, Need, and Experience in Early Care and Education





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INTRODUCTION

Listening to Marin Families

The UPK Family Voices survey was conducted to learn more about the experiences, priorities, and perspectives of Marin families with children ages 3–5. The survey asked families about their current early learning and care arrangements, how they made program decisions, what they believe young children should be learning, how programs communicate and support children and families, what resources families need, and what they consider most important in a quality early learning and care program.

This report brings together three kinds of evidence: quantitative survey results, differences among family subgroups, and the written words of families themselves. These forms of evidence answer different questions. Quantitative results tell us how common a response was. Subgroup comparisons show where experiences or priorities differ. Qualitative responses help us understand what families mean and why a finding may matter.

Across the survey, a consistent picture emerges: families want early learning and care that is grounded in caring relationships, meaningful learning, rich experiences, and attention to each child's individual needs. At the same time, families face different realities when trying to find and sustain a program that works for their family.

These voices illustrate an important theme throughout the findings: families are not talking about "quality" as a single program characteristic. They are talking about relationships, learning, fit, affordability, access, communication, and belonging as connected parts of the experience.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The survey results suggest that Marin families are looking for two things at the same time: a high-quality experience for their child and a program that their family can realistically access and sustain. These are related, but they are not the same.

The Transitional Kindergarten (TK)/non-TK comparison adds another layer. TK families had children attending TK at an elementary school; non-TK families had children attending other early learning and care programs, including preschool and family child care.

> *"We need an early learning experience that fits our child's developmental needs and our family's real-life circumstances."*
>
> **~Family of PreK child**

> *"TK is an affordable, high-quality pathway into kindergarten that offers strong teachers, learning, and school continuity."*
>
> **~Family of TK child**

TK families were more likely to identify affordability as a reason for their program choice, while non-TK families more often identified schedule and information/navigation needs. These differences do not suggest different definitions of quality; rather, they suggest that families encounter different access and decision-making conditions.

The central finding is not simply that families want "quality." It is that families need access to the kinds of quality they value.

WHAT MATTERS MOST

Across the survey, families described quality as more than a set of program characteristics.

Their responses point to **six interconnected elements** of a quality early learning and care experience: caring relationships, whole-child learning, individualized support, rich learning experiences, accessible and sustainable care, and meaningful family partnership and belonging.

Note: "These elements often appear together in a single family's response rather than as separate, mutually exclusive categories"



CARING RELATIONSHIPS

Families consistently emphasized the importance of caring, trustworthy, and responsive educators who know their children, build strong relationships, and respond to individual needs.

WHOLE-CHILD LEARNING

Families described quality as supporting the whole child—not just academic skills, but also social-emotional development, independence, communication, curiosity, problem-solving, creativity, and learning through play.

INDIVIDUALIZED SUPPORT

Families want programs that recognize that children develop differently and provide the right level of support, challenge, flexibility, and encouragement for each child.

RICH LEARNING EXPERIENCES

Families value opportunities for children to explore, create, move, play, and learn through hands-on experiences, including books, art, music, nature, outdoor learning, and activities that build on children's interests.

ACCESSIBLE & SUSTAINABLE CARE

Families consider quality alongside whether a program is realistically accessible and sustainable for their family. Cost, location, hours, aftercare, and other practical considerations can determine whether a family can choose and remain in a program.

FAMILY PARTNERSHIP & BELONGING

Families value programs where they feel welcomed, informed, respected, and connected; where communication is meaningful and families are able to participate in their child's learning and school community.

WHO RESPONDED



25.8

% FAMILIES WITH 3 YEAR OLDS

44.4

% FAMILIES WITH 4 YEAR OLDS

29.8

% FAMILIES WITH 5 YEAR OLDS

43.3

% TRANSITIONAL KINDERGARTEN FAMILIES

54.5

% PRESCHOOL FAMILIES

2.2

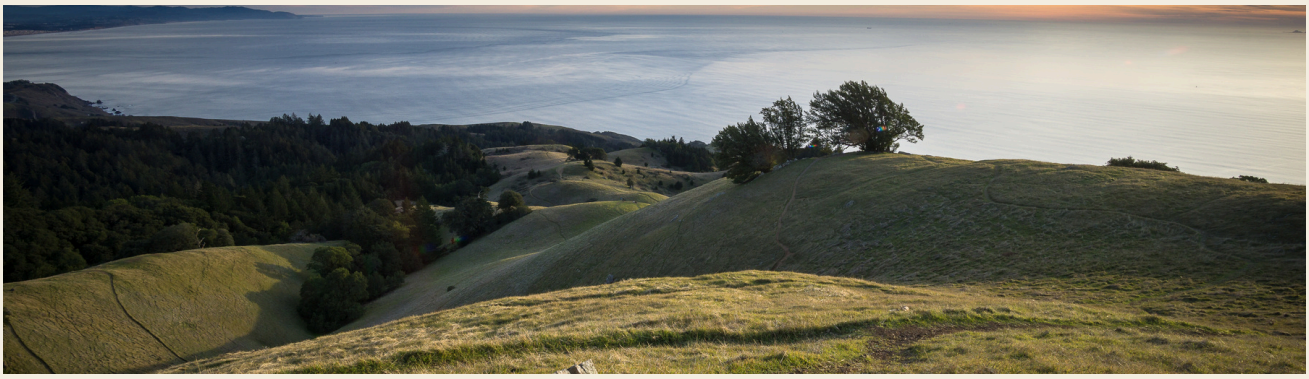
% OTHER PROGRAM TYPE FAMILIES

The survey included 178 responses. The respondents provided a window into the experiences and perspectives of Marin families with children ages 3–5. The findings should be understood as representing the families who responded to the survey, rather than as a statistically representative sample of all Marin families with children ages 3–5.

The subgroup analysis included 77 TK and 101 non-TK respondents. The non-TK group includes multiple program types and should not be viewed as a single experience.

WHERE RESPONDING FAMILIES LIVE

CENTRAL MARIN	**Kentfield School District** **Larkspur-Corte Madera School District** **Miller Creek School District** **Ross School District** **Ross Valley School District** **San Rafael City Schools**
94901 | 94904 | 94925 | 94930 94939 | 94957 | 94960	
SOUTH MARIN	**Mill Valley School District** **Reed Union School District** **Sausalito-Marin City School District**
94920 | 94941 | 94965	
NORTH MARIN	**Novato Unified School District**
94945 | 94947 | 94949	
WEST MARIN	**Shoreline Unifed School District**
94923 | 94954 | 94956 | 94971	



ZIP code information can help show the geographic reach of the survey. Because ZIP codes do not map perfectly to school district boundaries, the table uses the school-district mapping provided for this analysis. It is an approximate picture of where respondents live in relation to districts served—not evidence of which district their child attends.

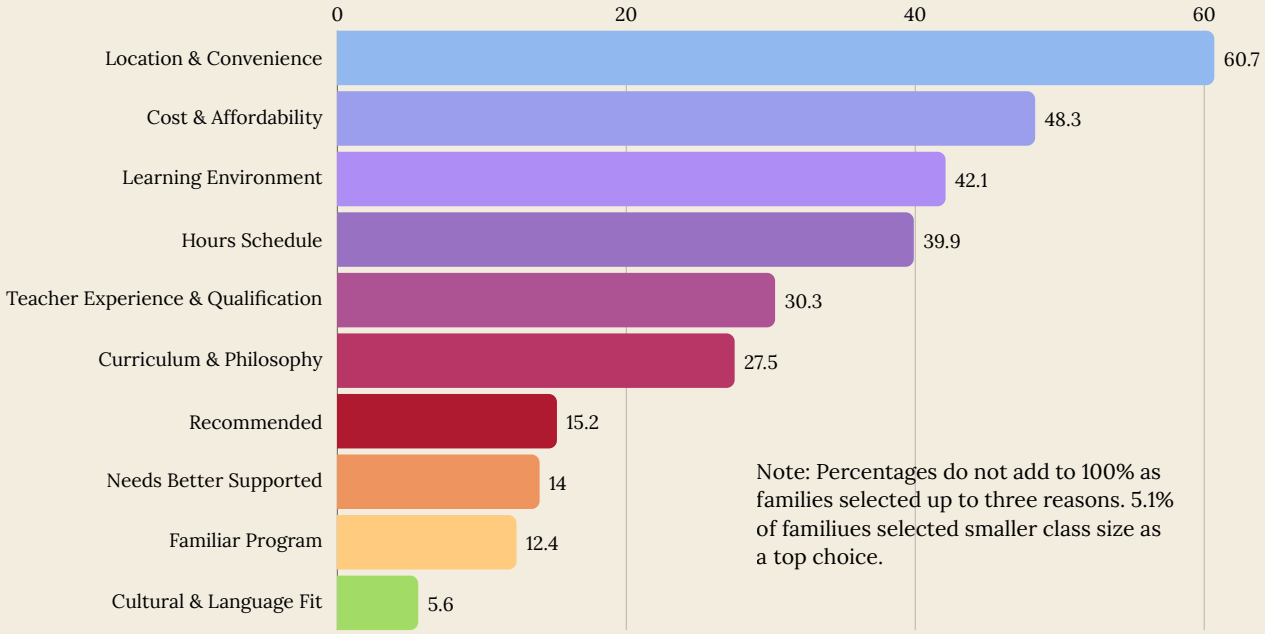
The district groupings above are based on the ZIP-code mapping provided by MCOE for this analysis. Some zip codes are associated with more than one district or charter entity, so these categories were not summed as mutually exclusive geographic counts. The remaining ZIP-code responses that were typed incorrectly were not assigned to a district.

HOW FAMILIES MAKE DECISIONS

Families shared their top three considerations when choosing their child's program.

Their responses show that recognizing quality is not the same as being able to choose it. Cost, schedule, location, extended-care needs, developmental fit, and access to information can all shape which programs are realistically available to a family.

Families want quality, affordability, flexibility, developmental fit, and clear information—but they do not always have access to an option that meets all of these needs at once.

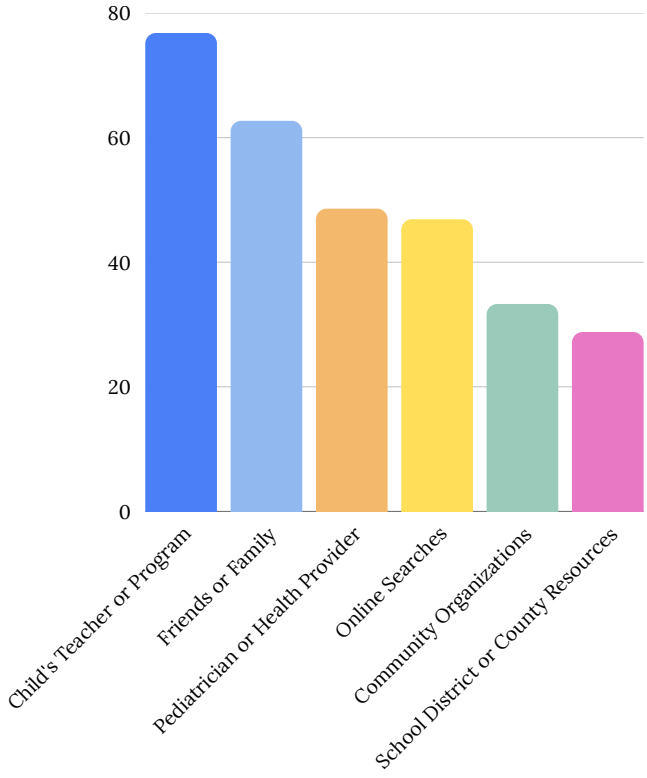






HOW FAMILIES MAKE DECISIONS

Who do families turn to for information?



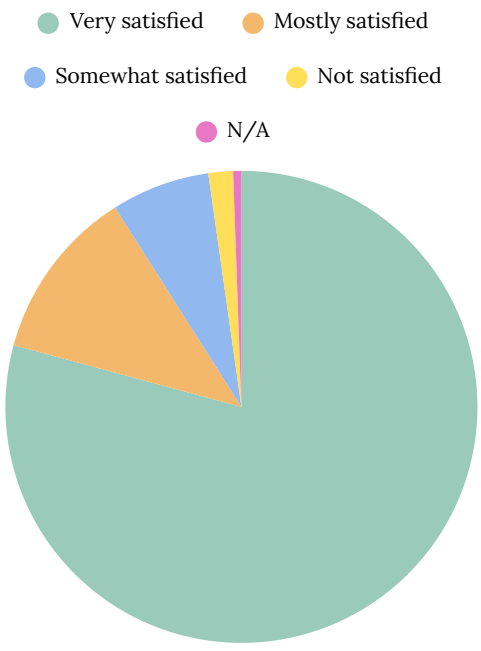


Are families satisfied with their choices?

Satisfaction was high across all program types, but varied by pathway: 97.4% of TK families reported being very or mostly satisfied with their choice, compared with 91.8% of subsidized preschool families and 83.0% of private-pay families.

Both instances of "not satisfied" in the survey came from private-pay families — suggesting that paying full cost does not guarantee the highest satisfaction, and that the relational and developmental-fit qualities families named may matter more to satisfaction than cost alone.

A note on satisfaction: these figures reflect families who chose to respond to a voluntary survey, and families who are unhappy with their current program may be less likely to take the time to complete one.





From What Families Value to What Families Experience...

The survey tells us more than what families want in a quality early learning and care program. It also helps us understand how families experience their programs, how they make decisions, and what can make it easier—or harder—to find an option that works for their child and family.

The six interconnected elements presented earlier—caring relationships, whole-child learning, individualized support and developmental fit, rich learning experiences, accessible and sustainable care, and family partnership and belonging - provide an overarching picture of what families say quality looks like.

The eight dimensions that follow take a deeper look at these themes across the survey. They bring together quantitative findings, TK/non-TK differences, and family voice to explore both the strengths families experience and the barriers they encounter.

The goal is not simply to describe what families value, but to better understand what it takes for families to experience and access the quality they value.

INFORMATION & NAVIGATION

Families need clear, practical information that helps them understand and act on their choices

TK FAMILIES

85.7%

NON-TK FAMILIES

68%

"I wish there was more information on how the classroom supports children with big emotions and helps them regulate."

TK families were more likely to say they had enough information to make informed decisions: 85.7% answered "Yes," compared with 68% of non-TK families.

Families need clear, actionable information to make decisions. Their responses suggest that having information alone may not be enough.

Families benefit from information that is timely, easy to understand, and organized around the decisions they are trying to make—including understanding what children experience and learn.

What this tells us: The opportunity is to make information more useful for decision-making—helping families understand, compare, and navigate their options so they can determine what works best for their child and family.



AFFORDABILITY

Families' choices are shaped by what they can realistically afford.

TK FAMILIES

68.8%

NON-TK FAMILIES

32.7%

"Affordability is and has been our biggest struggle. If it weren't for the co-op, my child would not be enrolled in school as we are priced out. Living in Marin on a single income has been hard."

Across the three program-choice selections, 68.8% of TK families selected cost/affordability as one of their top three reasons for choosing their current program, compared with 32.7% of non-TK families. It is important to note that the non-TK family responses consist of 51% of subsidized families and 12.5% of private pay families.

Families' responses show that affordability can be more than a preference. For some families, cost determines whether enrollment is possible at all.

What this tells us: Families experience affordability as an access issue. The strong TK association with cost also suggests that the availability of free TK can materially influence family decisions. At the same time, it should be recognized that cost interacts with hours, aftercare, location, and program fit.



SCHEDULE & ACCESS

Families need early learning and care to fit the realities of family life.

TK FAMILIES

29.9%

NON-TK FAMILIES

47.5%

"The TK program offered at my district is only 3 hours long, and I need something longer. Yes, aftercare options are available, but they are less structured than the preschool program my child attends."

Families described schedules, extended hours, before- and after-care, location, transportation, and work schedules as factors that can determine whether a program is usable.

Hours/schedule was selected among the top three program-choice reasons by 47.5% of non-TK families compared to 29.9% of TK families. Families describe a practical reality in which the educational program cannot be considered separately from the care arrangement around it.

What this tells us: A program can be affordable and educationally appealing but still be inaccessible if the schedule does not align with family employment and childcare needs. This is important when considering TK as part of a mixed-delivery UPK system rather than as a stand-alone educational program.



DEVELOPMENTAL FIT

Families want a program that is right for their particular child

TK FAMILIES

89.6%

NON-TK FAMILIES

92.1%

"I would simply highlight that at my child's preschool, she is very well cared for and in great hands and that she is in a program that is designed with her developmental needs in mind."

Families repeatedly described quality in terms of programs knowing their child, responding to individual needs, providing appropriate challenges and support, and communicating with families about development.

Overall, 89.6% of TK families and 92.1% of non-TK families said their child's program understands and supports their needs.

What this tells us: Families appear to define responsiveness as knowing the individual child and adapting support accordingly. This dimension is a bridge between access and quality: families are not simply looking for a place with an opening; they are looking for a place where their child can be understood and supported.



CARING, RESPONSIVE EDUCATORS

The strongest recurring quality message is about the adults children experience.

TK FAMILIES

57.1%

NON-TK FAMILIES

51.5%

What is the most important quality? "Caring, loving teachers that are willing to meet your child where they are at."

When families were asked what they would identify as the most important quality in an early care and education program, caring, responsive educators emerged as the strongest family-defined quality theme, mentioned by a majority of the respondents overall (53.9%).

This theme was mentioned by 57.1% of TK families and 51.5% of non-TK families, suggesting that strong relationships with educators are a shared priority across program types.

Families described this quality in several connected ways: as warmth, love, and patience; as teachers who are attentive to their child's individual needs and personality; and as staff who make children and families feel genuinely welcomed. Families used words like caring, nurturing, dedicated, creative, responsive, qualified, and trusted.

What this tells us: Families are defining quality relationally. They are not simply naming teacher credentials or classroom features; they are describing the quality of the interaction between adults and children.



WHOLE-CHILD LEARNING

Families describe young children's learning as broader than academics alone.

TK FAMILIES

90.9%

NON-TK FAMILIES

84.2%

"How to self regulate; how to get along; how to do what they need to do... They learn through play. Hopefully the teachers are skilled enough to foster a love of learning and curiosity!"

Families described learning as more than academic preparation, emphasizing social-emotional development, independence, relationships, curiosity, creativity, physical development, literacy and language, and learning through play.

Most families also felt that the learning in their child's current program reflected what they consider important for 4–5-year-olds, with similar responses among TK (90.9%) and non-TK families (84.2%).

What this tells us: The survey does not support a simple "academics versus play" interpretation. Families described a broad conception of readiness in which academic foundations, social-emotional development, independence, relationships, curiosity, and play all have a place.



MEANINGFUL, RICH LEARNING

Families value environments that give children many ways to explore, create, and learn.

TK FAMILIES

84.4%

NON-TK FAMILIES

82.2%

"The teacher is wonderful and always finding ways to incorporate the children's interests into the classroom."

Families mentioned books, art, music, outdoor learning, gardening, sensory activities, hands-on learning, creative experiences, and opportunities to follow children's interests.

Overall, 84.4% of TK families and 82.2% of non-TK families said their child had access to enriching learning opportunities and materials.

What this tells us: Families appear to value variety, active engagement, and opportunities for children to explore their interests. Enrichment is not necessarily viewed as an add-on; it can be embedded in the daily learning environment.



FAMILY PARTNERSHIP & BELONGING

Families experience quality when they feel welcomed, informed, heard, and connected.

TK FAMILIES

84.4%

NON-TK FAMILIES

90.1%

"The staff are approachable, communication is open, and I feel comfortable asking questions and participating in conversations about my child's progress."

Overall, 84.4% of TK families and 90.1% of non-TK families said they felt they belonged in their child's school or program community.

TK families were somewhat more likely to answer "Somewhat" or "No" (15.6% versus 9.9% among non-TK families).

What this tells us: The TK/non-TK difference is not evidence that TK families do not feel they belong; most do. Instead, it points to an opportunity to better understand what helps families move from feeling "somewhat" connected to feeling fully included. Communication, family engagement, welcoming practices, and connection to the larger school community may be particularly important areas for further exploration.



WHERE EXPERIENCES DIFFER

Taken together, the survey suggests that Marin families share a broad vision of quality, while encountering different barriers to accessing and sustaining that quality. The strongest differences among subgroups are more apparent in access, fit, and navigation than in the underlying values families express about children's experiences.

> *"If funds were made available to families to choose TK or preschool I'd imagine we'd stay with preschool. I am not totally sure what TK's difference would be."*
>
> ~Family of PreK child







WHAT FAMILIES NEED TO MAKE DECISIONS

Families need usable information—not information alone—to understand their options, compare programs, and choose what works for their child and family.

01 Know what's available
Families need to know: What programs are available

Why it matters: Families cannot choose among options they do not know exist.

02 Know whether they can access it
Families need to know: Who is eligible and when to apply

Why it matters: Enrollment timing can shape whether a family can access a program.

03 Understand the differences
Families need to know: How programs differ

Why it matters: Families want to compare program type, approach, schedule, and experience.



04 Understand the cost
Families need to know: What programs cost and what assistance is available

Why it matters: Affordability can determine whether an option is feasible.

05 Know what the day looks like
Families need to know: What the daily schedule looks like

Why it matters: Hours determine whether a program can work with employment and childcare.

06 Plan for the full day
Families need to know: What happens before and after the school day

Why it matters: School-day access may not meet full-day family care needs.

07 Understand the experience of the child
Families need to know: What children experience and learn—and how families and teachers communicate

Why it matters: Families want to know whether a program aligns with their vision for learning, how they will participate, and stay connected.

SYSTEM OPPORTUNITY

Organize family-facing UPK information around the decisions families need to make, rather than around how programs or agencies are organized internally.





WHAT WE HEARD ACROSS MARIN FAMILIES

01 Families want both quality and access

Families do not experience quality separately from affordability, schedules, availability, or information. A program may offer strong relationships and learning experiences, but if a family cannot afford it, make the schedule work, or understand how to enroll, it may not be a viable option.

02 Families share a relational definition of quality

The strongest qualitative quality theme centers on caring, responsive educators. Families want adults who know their children, respond to individual needs, build trust, and create environments where children feel safe, respected, and supported.

03 Families hold a broad view of learning and readiness

Families described literacy, early math, social-emotional development, self-regulation, independence, creativity, physical development, curiosity, play, and kindergarten readiness. Their responses support a whole-child view of readiness.

04 The system is not experienced the same way by every family

Families have different priorities depending on their program pathway. TK families placed greater emphasis on affordability, while non-TK families more often identified scheduling and navigating program information as important needs. This suggests that a family-centered UPK system should provide multiple pathways of support.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR MARIN'S UPK SYSTEM

Moving from a shared vision of quality to a system that makes that quality accessible

The Marin UPK Family Survey offers a clear message: families share many of the same aspirations for their children, but they do not all experience the UPK system in the same way. Families value caring relationships, whole child learning, individualized support, rich learning experiences, and meaningful family partnership. At the same time, cost, schedules, location, developmental fit, and access to useful information can shape which options are realistically available to them.

These findings suggest several areas for continued attention as Marin strengthens its UPK system.



Make family-defined quality visible across the system

Families are already defining quality in meaningful ways. They want educators who know and care about their children, learning that supports the whole child, opportunities for children to explore and develop their interests, and programs that respond to individual developmental needs. Quality, from families' perspectives, is not a single program characteristic—it is the experience children and families have within a program.

System opportunity: Continue elevating a shared understanding of quality that reflects the experiences families value, while recognizing that quality can look different across program types and settings.



Design access around the realities of family life

The survey shows that families cannot separate the educational experience from the practical realities of accessing and sustaining care. Cost, hours, aftercare, location, and transportation can determine whether a program is a viable choice. These considerations were particularly different for TK and non-TK families, suggesting that families encounter different access conditions depending on their pathway.

System opportunity: Consider the whole family experience when strengthening access to UPK—including not only whether a program is available, but whether families can afford it, get to it, make the schedule work, and sustain it over time.

Move from information sharing toward decision support

Most families reported having enough information to make informed decisions, but non-TK families were less likely than TK families to say they had enough information. Families' responses also suggest that useful information is more than a list of programs. Families want to know their options, compare differences, and understand what children will experience and learn.

System opportunity: Organize family-facing UPK information around the decisions families need to make, helping families understand and navigate their options rather than requiring them to piece information together across programs, agencies, and systems



WHAT THIS MEANS (CONTINUED)



Keep the individual child at the center
Families want programs that recognize children as individuals and respond to their strengths, interests, developmental needs, and differences. Importantly, this priority was shared across TK and non-TK families: 89.6% of TK families and 92.1% of non-TK families said their child's program understands and supports their needs.

System opportunity: Strengthen pathways that help families understand how programs support individual children and help educators and families work together around children's development, strengths, and needs.



Continue listening to families as the system evolves
This survey provides a valuable window into how families experience Marin's early learning and care system. It also demonstrates the value of hearing directly from families about what quality means to them, what supports their decisions, and where they encounter barriers.

System opportunity: Continue creating meaningful ways for family voice to inform UPK planning, communication, quality improvement, and system development.

The larger message
The survey suggests that Marin does not need to create a vision of quality for families; families are already telling us what quality means to them. The opportunity is to build a UPK system that makes that quality more visible, accessible, understandable, and sustainable for families across different circumstances and pathways.

Families want quality. The system's opportunity is to help make the quality they value a realistic choice.



RESOURCES FOR FAMILIES

Marin Child Care Council A non-profit agency in Marin that helps families find, pay for, and access quality early childhood education and care.

https://www.mc3web.org/

UPK Families, Marin County Office of Education A resource webpage for families on Universal PreKindergarten, Transitional Kindergarten, child development, parenting, and early intervention and inclusion.

https://www.marinschools.org/programs-services/services/early-childhood-education/upk/families



My Child Care Plan A statewide search and support website designed to help families in California find and choose licensed child care and preschool programs.

https://mychildcareplan.org/

Marin School Districts Each school district has its own enrollment process. To learn more contact your school district below:

- **Bolinas-Stinson Union School District:**
  - https://www.bolinas-stinson.org/page/enrollment
- **Kentfield School District:**
  - https://kentfieldschools.org/registration/
- **Laguna Joint School District:**
  - https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdmKaSZCyLES2irZeNCp3HrDHFPR31bAPlT6epP744NEEgvUA/viewform
- **Lagunitas School District:**
  - https://www.lagunitas.org/page/enrollment-page
- **Larkspur Corte Madera School District:**
  - https://lcmschools.org/en-US/enrollment-ddcf9044
- **Miller Creek School District:**
  - https://www.millercreeksd.org/parents/enrollment/index
- **Mill Valley School District:**
  - https://www.mvschools.org/enrollment-registration
- **Nicasio School District:**
  - https://www.nicasioschool.org/o/ns/page/enrollment
- **Novato Charter:**
  - https://www.novatocharterschool.org/enrollment/how-to-apply/
- **Novato Unified School District:**
  - https://www.nusd.org/enroll
- **Reed Union School District:**
  - https://www.reedschools.org/parents-and-community-resources/registration-information
- **Ross School District:**
  - https://rossesd.aeries.net/enrollment/
- **Ross Valley Charter:**
  - https://rossvalleycharter.org/admissions/
- **Ross Valley School District:**
  - https://rossvalleyschoolsorg-29-us-west1-01.preview.finalsitecdn.com/student-registration/new-student-registration
- **San Rafael Elementary School District:**
  - https://www.srcs.org/22228_3
- **Sausalito Marin City School District:**
  - https://sausalitomarincity.aeries.net/enrollment/
- **Shoreline Unified School District:**
  - https://www.shorelineunified.org/



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