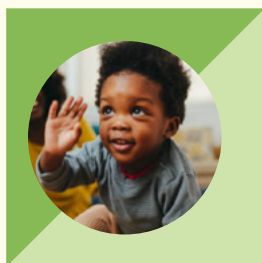




# Family Child Care Networks Pilot Implementation

REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS



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## ABOUT SCHOOL READINESS CONSULTING

The Family Child Care Networks Pilot Implementation Report and Recommendations was prepared by School Readiness Consulting (SRC). As a consulting firm focused exclusively on children from birth through third grade, SRC partners to develop and implement strategies that improve outcomes for children in school and life. SRC believes that improving early childhood and affirming the right for all children to thrive represents the greatest opportunity to create a just society.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**There is broad agreement among the early childhood care and education field on the importance of home-based child care settings. However, despite their well-documented contributions to the early childhood care and education landscape, the strengths, needs, and realities of home-based child care business owners have historically not been centered in initiatives aimed at strengthening early childhood systems.**

**In recent years, public policy has increasingly elevated family child care networks (FCCNs) as an essential strategy for supporting, strengthening, and expanding the home-based child care subsector.** For nearly a decade, the federal Office of Child Care has endorsed states' use of Child Care Development Fund (CCDF) dollars to support FCCNs as a way to build the supply of high-quality child care. These efforts are grounded in research pointing to the efficacy of such networks to improve the quality of home-based child care settings.<sup>1</sup> Based on these promising findings, states have increasingly leveraged a combination of the CCDF, state funding mechanisms, philanthropic investments in innovation, and recent infusions of federal funding through the Preschool Development Grant (PDG) and for COVID relief to build, expand, and support a strong FCCN strategy—**and Michigan is no exception.**

**State legislation was entered in 2022 that mandated a statewide approach to FCCN implementation.** The legislative language draws on both the national discourse surrounding effective FCCN efforts and the specific needs challenges facing home-based child care business owners in Michigan. Meanwhile, in 2022, Michigan launched Caring for MI Future. Caring for MI Future was an investment in new and expanded early childhood care and education settings that aimed to help more Michigan families find quality, affordable child care in their community. This initiative was supported by federal CCDF and American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding, and included resources dedicated to operating FCCNs.

1. Office of Child Care. (2015). Building the supply of high-quality child care (CCDF-ACF-IM-2015-02). Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

The Early Childhood Investment Corporation (ECIC) was selected to administer and oversee the day-to-day operations of FCCNs, and it was awarded \$4,000,000, which was distributed as pilot grant funding to nine organizations across the state that function as hubs and facilitate collaborations with home-based child care business owners to form FCCNs. In alignment with the state legislation, with ongoing support and technical assistance from ECIC, and in partnership with Home Grown—a national collaborative of philanthropic leaders committed to improving quality and access to home-based child care—these networks engaged a one-year pilot program to provide FCCN services.

As the 2023 pilot initiative comes to an end, this report is intended to provide a retrospective that will support decision-making about this strategy going forward. The resulting report was informed by analysis of quantitative data related to topics such as reach, demographics, and investments in various network activities, along with qualitative data from interviews with the ECIC family child care networks project team and other leaders, listening sessions with network grantees, and stories of impact from home-based child care business owners. Based on a synthesis of multiple data sources and the various forms of expertise that stakeholders have contributed to this discussion, the report lifts up the following key themes and recommendations:



## Priority Area 1. Implementing the full range of evidence-based practices

As nationally recognized thought leaders in FCCN design and implementation, Home Grown has established a series of 11 evidence-based benchmarks to describe what network activities and offerings have led to increased quality in home-based child care. Findings reflected in this report suggest that network hubs have successfully implemented some of the evidence-based practices, but that there are opportunities to build their capacity to implement more benchmark-aligned activities.

***Recommendations to strengthen the implementation of the full range of evidence-based practices include:***

### **Recommendation 1.1. Cultivate mindset and practical shifts to support broader implementation of evidence-based practices, by:**

- Deepening professional learning for network hubs to better understand the root causes of barriers that providers face, their role as network leaders, and the opportunities to “think bigger” about potential solutions

- Providing additional guidance and support to network hubs for budgeting that includes investments in the evidence-based practices aligned with the Home Grown benchmarks that providers were less likely to address during the pilot year
- Leveraging network capacity and other key partnerships to engage providers in collaborative opportunities (e.g., elevating small grant opportunities that could support multiple providers, supporting the development of shared resources, etc.)

**Recommendation 1.2. Engage cross-sector partnerships to provide essential services that meet the needs of providers and the families they serve, by:**

- Supporting networks in identifying key barriers within and across regions related to meeting the needs of children and families in home-based programs
- Supporting and systematizing partnership processes by leveraging existing and emerging partners of the network hub lead agencies and/or state-level leaders, as appropriate



## **Priority Area 2. Expanding FCCNs as a cohesive statewide strategy**

The work that networks have prioritized in the pilot year—that is, building provider leadership and elevating provider and family voice—is at the foundation of this strategic effort. In addition, the network hubs have made important strides toward systematizing their approach and contributing to a well-defined statewide strategy. Going forward, in order for the initiative to grow, gain increased recognition within the early childhood system, and offer high-quality support to providers evenly across the state, there will be a need to connect and orient network efforts within a common and agreed-upon strategy.

***Recommendations to expand FCCNs as a cohesive statewide strategy include:***

**Recommendation 2.1. Engage in strategic planning at multiple levels for long-term sustainability, by:**

- Engaging additional capacity at the state level to lead multiyear, multitiered strategic planning. This would require a temporary increase in resources allocated to the overarching initiative alongside a rightsizing of network budgets to reflect their current capacity, followed by a gradual release of resources back to the networks over time.
- Offering professional learning and technical assistance to network hub agencies on topics such as maximizing provider engagement, leveraging community partnerships, and more

**Recommendation 2.2: Position the initiative for ongoing expansion, by:**

- Disseminating communication materials to engage key audiences, telling the story of both the present accomplishments and the future potential of the FCCN strategy, and generating additional demand for FCCN presence and services
- Developing practical resources aimed at systematizing network start-up and overcoming some of the common challenges and bottlenecks that were encountered during the pilot
- Continuing to explore examples of successful initiatives and lessons learned in other states and communities to inform expansion efforts in Michigan



### **Priority Area 3. Embedding and sustaining the work**

The sustained success and growth of the initiative relies on its ability to respond and adapt to changes in the policy environment, and to work alongside related early childhood initiatives. In doing so, initiative leaders have, and can continue to, seek opportunities to embed this work in the larger strategic vision for early childhood care and education and beyond, and to continue elevating home-based child care as an important part of the early childhood system and the social infrastructure.

*Recommendations aimed at embedding and sustaining the work include:*

**Recommendation 3.1. Adopt a systematic approach to evaluation, by:**

- Seeking input from multiple stakeholders as to both the data points and data-collection process are practical and that do not overburden providers or hub agencies with onerous or duplicative data requests
- Identifying common data points across all networks, which will help them make data-driven decisions and deliver high-quality services that match the needs of the home-based provider community, both locally and writ large
- Designing and implementing an evaluation strategy, which could include regular opportunities for storytelling; periodic data-collection efforts; shared analysis between state-level leadership, network hubs, and providers; and a well-developed messaging approach

**Recommendation 3.2. Position FCCNs as a mechanism to participate in PreK for All, by:**

- Ensuring that home-based child care has a presence in whatever pilot model and process is identified for PreK for all, such that pilot outcomes include lessons learned about its implementation in home-based child care
- Initiating an optional community of practice aimed at helping interested home-based providers understand the PreK for All initiative and their potential role. This learning opportunity would also identify steps, trade-offs, and what to expect should they choose to participate.
- Creating messaging to families and/or the broader community about the unique value add of home-based child care to the PreK mixed delivery system







## INTRODUCTION

**There is broad agreement among the early childhood care and education field on the importance of home-based child care settings.** Home-based care is a preferred option (and often the only option) for families seeking care for infants and toddlers, as states and localities across the nation struggle with an undersupply of infant and toddler settings.<sup>2</sup> For low- and middle-income families—including those who are ineligible for funded child care opportunities based on income, but still struggle to afford child care—home-based child care is often a more affordable option than center-based care, due to lower overhead and operating costs. For immigrant families, those who speak a primary language other than English, families of color, and others who have been historically marginalized within the early childhood system, home-based child care within their respective communities can offer a more familiar setting and lead to more cultural responsiveness for young children as well as more peace of mind for families.<sup>3</sup>

**Despite their well-documented contributions to the early childhood care and education landscape, the strengths, needs, and realities of home-based child care business owners have traditionally not been centered in initiatives aimed at strengthening early childhood systems.** For example, home-based providers often face undue barriers to accessing supports like professional learning, facilities enhancements, administrative support, and other opportunities that boost quality and help to position home-based child care as a viable business. Relatedly, licensed home-based child care providers are among the lowest-paid members of the early childhood workforce, despite the multiple roles they must play, the long hours they often work without assistance, the outsized financial impact (based on program scale) of family turnover and nonpayment, and the isolation they tend to face. These challenges hold true to an even greater extent for license-exempt or Family Friend and Neighbor (FFN) providers. While this subsector is arguably the most overlooked and least resourced part of the early childhood system, it represents a critical part of the child care infrastructure—along with the resilience of communities who step up and care for their young children where more formal systems fail to present affordable, accessible, and culturally responsive options.

2. Jessen-Howard, S., Workman, S., Malik, R., & Hamm, K. (2018). Understanding infant and toddler child care deserts. Center for American Progress. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/understanding-infant-toddlerchild-care-deserts/>
3. Paredes, E., Hernandez, E., Herrera, A., & Tonyan, H. (2020). Putting the “family” in family child care: The alignment between familismo (familism) and family child care providers’ descriptions of their work. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 52, 74–85. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2018.04.007>

**Recognizing both the benefits of home-based child care and the challenges facing this sector, leaders and decision-makers nationwide have worked to create more inclusive and equitable conditions, and to stabilize this essential part of the early childhood system.** In recent years, public policy has increasingly elevated FCCNs as an essential strategy for supporting, strengthening, and expanding the home-based child care subsector. For nearly a decade, the federal Office of Child Care has endorsed states' use of Child Care Development Fund (CCDF) dollars to support contracts with lead agencies serving as a FCCN hub to build the supply of high-quality child care. Ongoing efforts in many states are grounded in research pointing to the efficacy of such networks to improve the quality of home-based child care settings.<sup>4</sup> Based on these promising findings, states have increasingly leveraged a combination of the CCDF, state funding mechanisms, philanthropic investments in innovation, and recent infusions of federal funding through the Preschool Development Grant (PDG) and for COVID relief to build, expand, and support a strong FCCN strategy.

**Legislation regarding FCCN implementation entered in 2022 has been a catalyst for the rapid growth of FCCNs across Michigan.** The legislative language draws on both the national discourse surrounding effective FCCN efforts and the specific needs challenges facing home-based child care business owners in Michigan to identify six essential components for a statewide FCCN strategy:



### **1. BUSINESS SUPPORTS**

including tax preparation, policies and procedures, and human resources support



### **2. CONNECTIONS TO PEERS**

including opportunities to share effective practices, reduce isolation, and access peer mentorship



### **3. OPERATIONAL SUPPORTS**

including assistance with licensing, child care scholarship billing, and recruiting families



### **4. PROGRAM QUALITY SUPPORT**

which could include access to materials, resources, and professional development



### **5. TRAINING AND TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE**

including supporting developmental screenings, health and nutrition, program quality, and early childhood mental health consultation



### **6. ENGAGEMENT OF NEW PROVIDERS**

including outreach and support for individuals to establish new FCCN programs

4. Office of Child Care. (2015). Building the supply of high-quality child care (CCDF-ACF-IM-2015-02). Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Jessen-Howard, S., Workman, S., Malik, R., & Hamm, K. (2018).

**In 2022, Michigan launched Caring for MI Future.** Caring for MI Future was an investment that aimed to help more Michigan families find quality, affordable child care in their community by investing in new and expanded early childhood care and education settings. This initiative was supported by federal Child Care Development Fund (CCDF) and American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding, and included resources dedicated to operating FCCNs. The Early Childhood Investment Corporation (ECIC) was selected to administer and oversee the day-to-day operations of FCCNs, and it was awarded \$4,000,000, which was distributed as pilot grant funding to nine organizations across the state that function as hubs and facilitate collaborations with home-based child care business owners to form FCCNs. In alignment with the state legislation, with ongoing support and technical assistance from ECIC, and in partnership with Home Grown—a national collaborative of philanthropic leaders committed to improving quality and access to home-based child care—these networks engaged in a one-year pilot program to provide FCCN services.

**As part of this effort to inform expansion and continuous improvement of the FCCN strategy in Michigan, ECIC partnered with School Readiness Consulting (SRC) to develop a point-in-time implementation report telling the story of the family child care networks pilot and highlighting the impacts, successes, and lessons learned from the initial implementation year.**

To create this implementation report, SRC focused on the following inquiries:

- 1. Who is currently being served by family child care networks?** To what degree do grantees, family child care providers, and communities (children and families) served by the family child care networks strategy include BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color), immigrant and migrant families, low-income families, and others identified as priority populations?
- 2. How do the existing networks' efforts reflect fundamental values and goals of family child care networks** (i.e., includes a focus on organizational culture, providers as equal partners, and equitable service delivery)?
- 3. How do existing networks offer services that meet the true needs of providers and communities served** (i.e., promotes provider well-being, continuous quality improvement, and economic sustainability; and offers families and children access to comprehensive services)?
- 4. How do existing networks reflect evidence-based implementation practices** (i.e., include a focus on relationship-based service delivery, data collection and utilization for evaluation, strategic approaches to staffing, provider recruitment strategies)?
- 5. What outcomes has the family child care networks strategy contributed to?** How does this align with the goals of MiLEAP and the state's birth through five strategy? What has been the human impact of this contribution to the field?
- 6. What are the opportunities to advance the quality, sustainability, and effectiveness of the family child care networks strategy?** What overarching goals, strategies, and actions could define the next phase of Michigan's implementation of the family child care networks strategy?

**Note:** Questions 2–4 reflect Home Grown's quality benchmarks for home-based child care networks; see: <https://homegrownchildcare.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/HomeGrown-Erikson-BENCHMARKS-BRIEF-Final.pdf>.

The resulting report was informed by SRC’s analysis of quantitative data related to topics such as reach, demographics, and investments in various network activities, along with qualitative data from interviews with the ECIC family child care networks project team and other leaders, listening sessions with network grantees, and stories of impact from home-based child care business owners. It includes a set of actionable recommendations regarding the expansion and improvement of the the FCCN strategy in the coming years.

## RESEARCH APPROACH

SRC led a data collection and analysis process that included the following activities:

### April 2024: Quantitative Data Collection

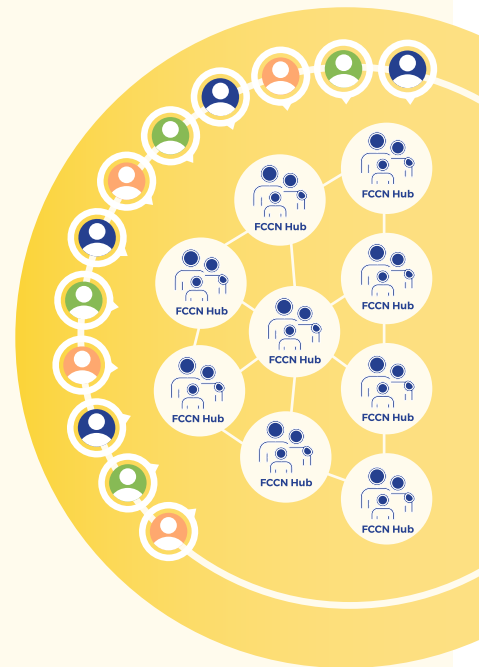
- » A review of documents and extant data sources that provided insight into what supports grantees have received, how funds have been expended so far, and initial exploration into potential disparities in successful implementation of network activities.

### May-June 2024: Quantitative Data Collection

- » Facilitation of two Family Child Care Network Peer Hub Learning Community Listening Sessions to gather insights from network leads and providers on successes, barriers, and lessons learned as being part of the pilot child care network initiative. Representation included 16 representatives across 9 grantee hubs.
- » One-on-one interviews with key leaders supporting the FCCN efforts, including conversations with MiLEAP, Home Grown, and ECIC leadership to better understand their perspective and vision related to the expansion and improvement of the FCCN strategy across the state.
- » A storytelling opportunity with three providers to hear more about the personal and professional impacts of participating in FCCNs.

### July-September 2024: Analysis & Reporting

- » Analysis of quantitative and qualitative data sources collected to synthesize findings and develop actionable recommendations regarding the expansion and improvement of the FCCN strategy in the coming years.



## SRC's Approach to Collecting and Utilizing Data

- Spaces for engagement were designed to spur authentic dialogue amongst peers. For example, the data collection team intentionally separated ECIC staff (the funder) from network hub and provider conversations to allow for candid discussion.
- All data was anonymized or de-identified for the purposes of this report, except for direct quotes used with permission.
- All providers who lent their time and expertise through listening sessions or storytelling interviews were compensated.
- Provider perspectives were synthesized along with other data sources to generate recommendations that center systems change as the goal. As such, providers were not burdened with the responsibility of identifying viable and strategic pathways forward for the initiative, but rather their experiences and perspectives were deeply considered as part of that effort by the part of systems leaders.



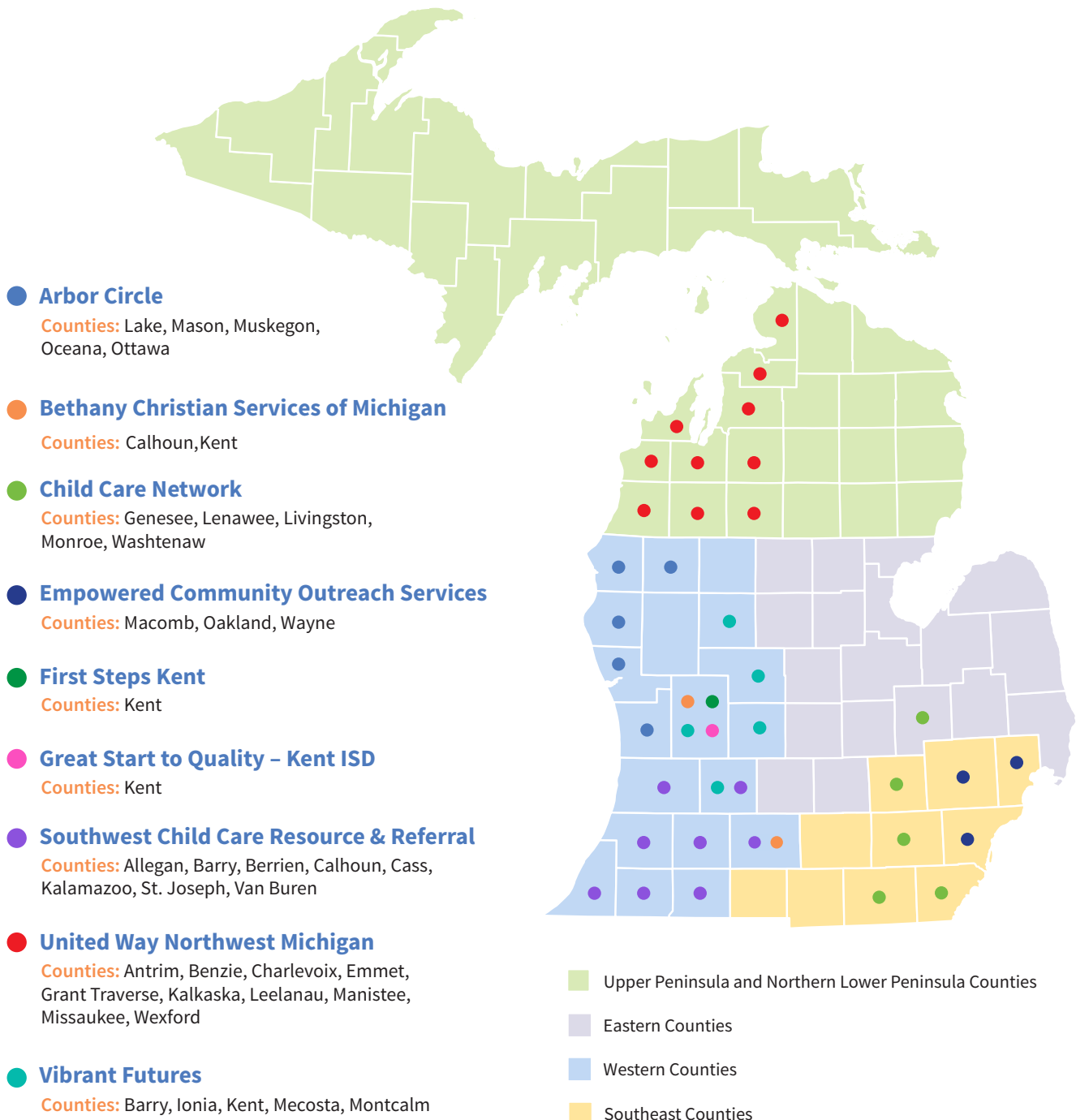
# THE 2023 GRANTEES AND THEIR IMPACT

## THE FAMILY CHILD CARE NETWORK GRANTEES

In 2023, ECIC awarded funding to 9 grantees to support a total of 22 networks, reaching each of the four Early Childhood Support Networks (ECSN) regions. So far, the initiative has reached:

**336 Licensed home-based providers in 24 counties**

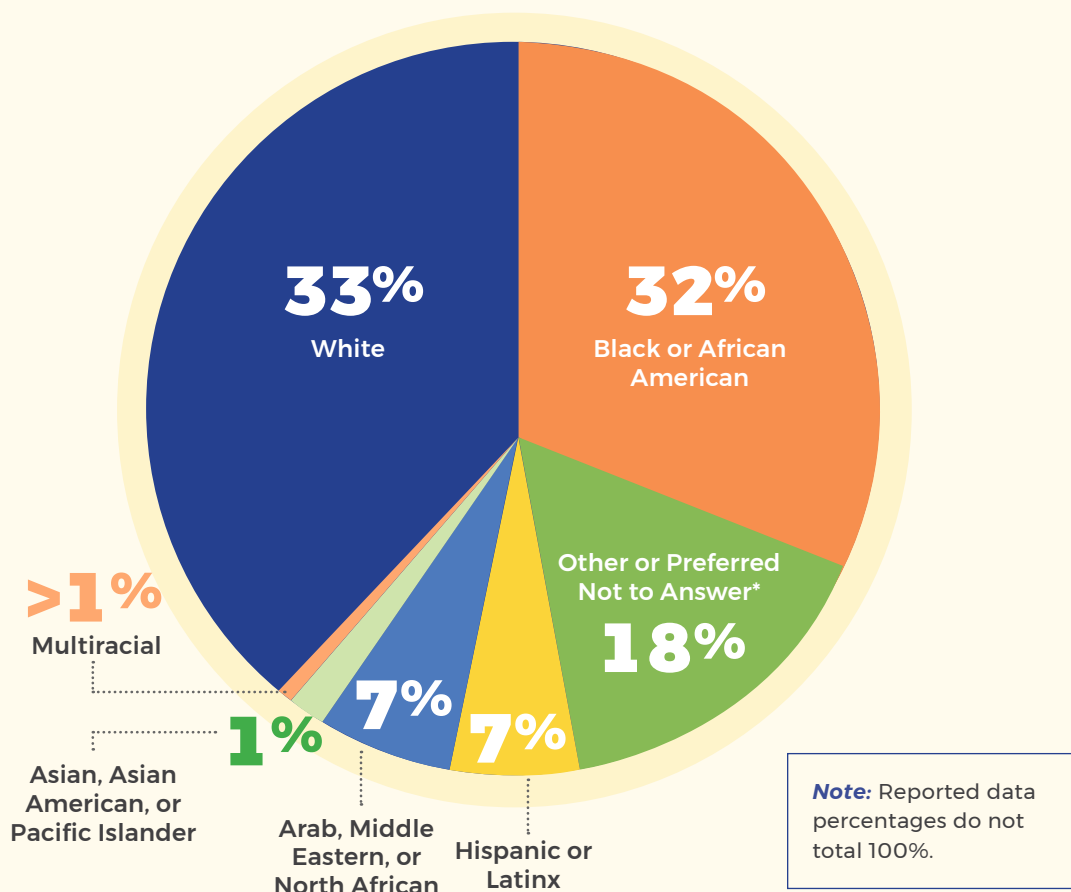
**87 License exempt home-based providers in 9 counties**



## The purpose of the 2023 pilot grant was to:

1. **Build the capacity of family child care networks to support home-based child care providers through** technical assistance, educational and engagement opportunities with decision-makers and policymakers, and connections to additional local and state resources
2. **Connect and support home-based child care programs in the delivery of essential services** to improve program quality and strengthen home-based child care
3. **Improve the policy, economic, and regulatory environments** for home-based child care in Michigan

## Racial and Ethnic Identities of Providers



The pilot initiative has been successful at reaching a diverse body of home-based child care providers, which represents the racial and ethnic diversity of the state of Michigan, along with the intention to support a diverse early childhood workforce. In the coming years, the FCCN strategy will continue to focus on reaching racially marginalized populations, as part of an ongoing commitment to equity.

## Impact on Providers

As a direct result of the 2023 pilot funding:

**108**

new home-based providers have been engaged and have initiated child care services

**43**

home-based providers became licensed

**54**

began participating in *Great Start to Quality (GSQ)*

**55**

began accepting child care scholarships

**406**

received support that helped them to improve the quality of care they offer

**330**

received support that helped ensure their businesses are financially sound and sustainable

**394**

were connected to wraparound services that benefit the provider and/or the families they serve

**369**

engaged in capacity-building activities such as data management, communications support, evaluation, etc.

These important gains reflect significant progress related to the presence, accessibility, and readiness of home-based settings to offer high-quality early childhood care and education within their communities.

## Impact on Children and Families

Through connection with participating home-based providers in 2023:

**292**

children were able to receive care outside of typical business hours

**863**

children who were eligible for child care scholarships participated in child care homes that were supported by an FCCN

**16**

primary languages, aside from English, were spoken by families participating in child care homes supported by an FCCN





Where FCCNs offer supports that strengthen home-based child care businesses, those early childhood care and education settings can in turn offer services that both meet the specific needs of their local communities and strengthen young children and their families.

## The Current Report

As the 2023 pilot initiative comes to an end, this report is intended to provide a retrospective that will support decision-making about this strategy going forward. To do so, the report will tell the story of the FCCN pilot by discussing what successes and prior/concurrent efforts have made way for the ongoing success of the FCCN strategy, as well as opportunities to improve implementation in the coming years. Based on a synthesis of multiple data sources and the various forms of expertise that stakeholders have contributed to this discussion, the report will highlight three priority areas as follows:



**Implementing the full range of evidence-based practices**



**Expanding FCCNs as a cohesive statewide strategy**



**Embedding and sustaining the work**





## PRIORITY AREA 1: Implementing The Full Range Of Evidence-Based Practices

To guide and support the work of network hub agencies to implement an evidence-based strategy, the initiative engaged Home Grown, a national collaborative of philanthropic leaders committed to improving the quality of and access to home-based child care to provide a roadmap and technical assistance in support of FCCN implementation. As nationally recognized thought leaders in FCCN design and implementation, Home Grown has established a series of 11 benchmarks to describe what network activities and offerings have led to increased quality in home-based child care. By intentionally grounding in Home Grown's 11 quality benchmarks, the FCCN pilot successfully introduced network grantees to a theory of change and tools to support their continuous quality improvement. The benchmarks are helping networks assess their organizational culture and values, the services they provide, and how those services are ultimately delivered to home-based providers.<sup>5</sup>

### WHAT EFFORTS AND SUCCESSES CAN WE BUILD ON?

Grounding the initiative in the Home Grown benchmarks has been key to successfully initiating and integrating FCCN into Michigan's mixed delivery system, as it provides a standard of best practice and enables network leaders to point to successful outcomes accordingly. In alignment with the Home Grown benchmarks, networks have focused on high-impact strategies to strengthen the home-based child care sector in their respective regions by leveraging pilot funds in the following ways:



*"I really think the indicators that we used to build the work of the networks are going to be critical in terms of helping us make that argument about the importance of including this as part of our mixed delivery. I think over time, we're really going to be able to show the strength in that."*

*— Lisa Brewer-Walraven, MiLEAP*

5. Erikson Institute & Home Grown. (2022). Strengthening home-based child care networks: An evidence-based framework for high-quality.



*“Having this framework from a respected research institution helps provide some credibility, helps providers. They can lean on the benchmarks when making their case for why their voice matters. And I do think having this framework, I think it gives providers that cover, but I think also having this framework gives us all sort of a common starting point now for what we’re working toward. And so that is one of the reasons we get so excited when we see it incorporated by other entities.”*

*– Karen Tylek, Home Grown*

**Integrating provider voice into network design and activities:** The pilot helped networks intentionally elicit and apply provider voice to inform decisions on spending. Funds also helped more providers be able to participate in network activities, including co-leadership and co-planning opportunities, through the provision of financial incentives, transportation, etc.

**Offering FCCN provider training and technical assistance:** Building on learnings from ongoing outreach and communication with providers, networks have attempted to address the needs of providers in terms of professional learning; guidance and support with licensure, budgeting, and other administrative tasks; and essential peer-to-peer connection. This network function has been identified as foundational for relationship-building, establishing shared high standards for quality practices, and reducing isolation and overwhelm among providers.

**Purchasing resources and materials:** Also in response to the immediate needs gleaned from conversations with providers, networks have focused on the purchasing of resources and materials that providers need. This includes curricula, books, and everyday items that providers need to facilitate engaging early learning experiences and to ensure healthy and safe environments.

**Improvements in language access:** Another critical need that network grantees addressed through grant funds is language accessibility. For example, network hubs are reaching more language-diverse home-based providers and offering more translation and interpretation services based on regional needs. The quality benchmarks and the legislation that allowed this work to go forward have been translated into five languages to increase their reach.

Overall, an emerging strength of the network hubs is their commitment to listening and responding to the voices of providers in their networks. Over the course of the pilot year, the hubs have been successful at establishing trust and effective communication channels with and among providers, and have documented the specific types of challenges that providers are facing. In addition, they have demonstrated a commitment to ensuring that providers are empowered as drivers of the local FCCN strategy, and that they are compensated through stipends and other incentives for the valuable input they provide.



*“One of the things that we did in the very beginning was to present [providers] with the benchmarks in a very distilled down version. We didn’t give them the full set, but we focused on those things that were directly related to them, their business practices, their wellbeing, their programming, their family and community engagement to try to stimulate their thinking about what they would want, how they would want to see those things supported.”*

*– Network hub administrator*



*“The training and support from the network have been life-changing. It’s given me the tools I need to care for the kids better and the confidence to speak up for what’s right. It’s made all the difference.”*

*– Tiffany Daly, Home-Based Child Care business owner*



## WHAT GAPS AND OPPORTUNITIES REMAIN?

While the pilot year has been instrumental in providing the opportunity for critical relationship building and developing necessary capacity within the network hub agencies, there remain opportunities to lean into more of the best practices defined by the Home Grown benchmarks. During the pilot year, network agencies report applying less of a focus toward the evidence-based practices of comprehensive community-facing services, facilitating shared services, and incorporation of other supports that flow directly to providers. Conversations with both network hub leaders and home-based child care providers offered clues as to what the barriers (both real and perceived) are to implementing the full range of evidence-based practices, and have pointed to an important opportunity to facilitate mindset shifts in order to expand on current thinking about what is made possible by an evidence-based FCCN strategy. Some of the prevailing and unhelpful mindsets that were reflected in our conversations include:

### **“Home-based child care can’t be profitable.”**

There is a prevailing mindset that profitability as a home-based child care business is an unattainable goal. The reality is that as part of an effective and functional FCCN strategy, home-based providers can be profitable *and* high-quality to the degree that they are able to utilize shared services, shared resource platforms, sound business practices, and other methods to achieve greater cost efficiency and economies of scale. Furthermore, if the strategy does not prioritize and deliver on more profitability for home-based child care businesses, making it a more attractive and sustainable business venture, then it fails to reach a key benchmark of its potential. Beyond holding space for providers to connect with training and with one another, FCCNs therefore must see their role as an opportunity to create these opportunities and be a key partner in building the financial viability of home-based child care businesses.

### **“We must reserve scarce resources.”**

Even when given a healthy budget, many grantees still feel “strapped for resources,” which may be related to a prevailing scarcity mindset within the broader child care field, and a limited understanding of how funded initiatives work. Though resources for the pilot grant were designed to be flexible to enable a locally driven approach, some network hub agencies demonstrated a reluctance to make long-term decisions and financial commitments based on the uncertainty of future funding. This ultimately led to significant funds being underspent in the pilot while there was untapped opportunity to lean into several of the evidence-based practices defined by Home Grown’s benchmarks. This mindset underscores the need to support networks to think bigger and be less afraid to use available resources.

**“Home-based providers must compete with one another to serve families.”**

Many providers feel they are in competition with their peers for both resources and families in need of care. In reality, Michigan families face a critical shortage of available child care, especially for infants and toddlers—a population that family child care is uniquely positioned to serve. This mindset may also be in the way of providers engaging in shared purchasing and other strategies that will help them be more profitable and sustainable. As such, there is an opportunity for home-based providers to rethink their relationship to one another as less competitive and more collaborative in the work of building the home-based child care sector, and creating a functional network of early childhood care and opportunity in their region.

**“Training is the answer to provider needs.”**

During the pilot initiative, there was a significant emphasis on aligning training to the issues raised by providers. It is recommended that network leads expand their thinking about how to utilize grant funds to empower home-based child care providers with not only the knowledge, but also practical resources to address the barriers they face, including investments in long-term solutions that address the root causes of barriers and lead to long-lasting impact on both the provider and the sector writ large.

**Recommendation 1.1. Cultivate mindset and practical shifts to support broader implementation of evidence-based practices**

Future network expansion in Michigan must include a focus on encouraging networks and providers to think bigger about what is possible for home-based providers and the larger child care sector. They must recognize that resources are being made available to open new doors and possibilities for systemic change. Some specific opportunities by which state-level initiative leaders might support mindset and practical shifts include:

- Deepening professional learning for network hubs to better understand the root causes of barriers that providers face, their role as network leaders, and the opportunities to “think bigger” about potential solutions
- Providing additional guidance and support to network hubs for budgeting that includes investments in the evidence-based practices aligned with the Home Grown benchmarks that providers were less likely to address during the pilot year
- Leveraging network capacity and other key partnerships to engage providers in collaborative opportunities (e.g., elevating small grant opportunities that could support multiple providers, supporting the development of shared resources, etc.)

**Recommendation 1.2.** Engage cross-sector partnerships to provide essential services that meet the needs of providers and the families they serve

In the coming years, state-level initiative leadership and the network hub agencies will need to make a dedicated effort to engage additional sectors (beyond early childhood) that can offer wraparound services. The kinds of services and supports that home-based providers need in order to deliver responsive early childhood care and education programming is beyond what individual network hub lead agencies can offer, but there are opportunities to encourage networks to further interface with comprehensive services such as housing, mental health, transportation, and other overlapping issues that impact children and families served by child care programs. Some opportunities could include:

- Supporting networks in identifying key barriers within and across regions related to meeting the needs of children and families in home-based programs
- Supporting and systematizing partnership processes by leveraging existing and emerging partners of the network hub lead agencies and/or state-level leaders, as appropriate





## **PRIORITY AREA 2: Expanding FCCNs as a Cohesive Statewide Strategy**

As the pilot year comes to a close, the intention to continue, expand, and strengthen this work, and the commitment to doing so, is evident at all levels. Across the board, network leads described initial, predictable challenges in getting the work up and running within a short period of time, and the sense that they are “just hitting their stride” as the initial pilot funding year sunsets. In reflection on the pilot year, there is much progress and success to note, along with some clear untapped opportunities that can help shape the work of further building out FCCNs as a cohesive, statewide strategy.

### **WHAT EFFORTS AND SUCCESSES CAN WE BUILD ON?**

During the pilot year, according to Karen Tylek, Director of Program Operations at Home Grown, the process that networks move through, from reactively filling immediate gaps to meet the most pressing needs of providers (e.g., purchasing updated smoke detectors, providing technical assistance on communicating and enforcing late pick-up policies, etc.) toward more strategic and “big picture” implementation, follows a predictable trajectory, and for good reason. The work that networks have prioritized in the pilot year—that is, building provider leadership and elevating provider and family voice—is at the foundation of this strategic effort.



*“We have to start from a place of focus on providers, providers as partners and equity in order for the other pieces to fall into place and to be meaningful.”*

*— Karen Tylek, Home Grown*



In addition to building a strong, relationship-based foundation alongside providers, the network hubs have made important strides toward systematizing their approach and contributing to a well-defined statewide strategy. Some common efforts in this vein include:

**Creating dedicated staff capacity in networks:** A significant value add of the pilot is its ability to build staff capacity at the network level. Grantees and leaders spoke about the importance of having funds to support dedicated network staff to prioritize the needs of home-based providers and be specifically focused on the quality benchmarks.

**Data collection and reporting:** Network hubs have deployed significant staff capacity during the pilot year to gather and report data that speaks to the growth and efficacy of the strategy. Data about who is being served and the impact of the network activities has enabled the strategy's champions to tell a compelling story about this initiative to all key stakeholders, including potential funders and decision-makers.



*“Because we’ve been operating for a while with some of the funding, we’ve been building up our database to specifically accommodate the case [for supporting FCCNs] and noting the needs of the network.”*

*– Network hub administrator*

**Maximizing resources:** Lead agencies have connections within their communities and can tap into additional resources (e.g., training and materials funded by school districts and other community partners, made available at no cost to home-based child care providers). This has the potential to maximize flexible funding in ways that both meet providers’ needs and advance the strategy, while also creating visibility for home-based child care and FCCNs through interaction and partnership with other local institutions.



## WHAT GAPS AND OPPORTUNITIES REMAIN?

A potential role that the network hubs might grow into in the coming years is that of a strategic partner to the family child care businesses in their regions, as well as their role as part of a larger, cohesive initiative. Ultimately, in order for the initiative to grow, gain increased recognition within the early childhood system, and offer high-quality support to providers evenly across the state, there will be a need to connect and orient network efforts within a common and agreed-upon strategy. As such, there are opportunities to build the capacity within and among the network hubs to think and act strategically. Presently, some of the specific barriers to systematizing and strengthening the statewide initiative include:

### **Overreliance on providers to drive network activities**

While providers are an important primary source of information about what is needed to strengthen home-based child care, it should not be incumbent upon them to define the strategy, nor should the strategy be limited to what opportunities providers know of and seek out. The opportunity is to cultivate deeper co-leadership practices that empower and support providers as leaders while appropriately leveraging the knowledge, positioning, and power of the network hubs.

### **Lack of consistency across network efforts**

Relatedly, where network activities are driven primarily by decisions and interpretations of the Home Grown benchmarks made at the network level with provider input, differences in network hub agency capacity and positioning can lead to uneven quantity and quality of service provision, and ultimately fail to meet the broader outcomes of the initiative writ large. While individual networks or network hubs will have specific strengths and focus areas in terms of implementation, additional oversight should ensure that the quality-of-service provision is consistent across the strategy.

### **Uneven capacity within networks for the pursuit of a strategic, long-term vision**

Network hub agencies and provider leads could be strengthened in their capacity to apply analysis across multiple data sources, knowledge of evidence-based practices and existing resources, and strategic thinking to integrate what they are hearing from providers into a comprehensive approach aimed at strengthening the home-based child care subsector in their respective regions.

### **Not all areas of the state have access to FCCNs**

While the pilot initiative was intentional and successful at reaching much of the state, and has a presence in all four ECSN regions, there are still broad areas of the state that have not been reached. This includes the Upper Peninsula, where there is already a significant lack of services and supports for early childhood writ large, and where demographic and geographic characteristics may present specific challenges.



*“My five-year vision is that we are strongly operating networks across the state, that all home-based family providers are participating in those networks, and that those networks continue to be provider led because I think that’s really the only way that we can make sure they’re meeting their needs, that we’re engaging them, supporting them, and helping them be successful.”*

– *Lisa Brewer Walraven, MiLEAP*

## **Recommendation 2.1** Engage in strategic planning at multiple levels for long-term sustainability

There is a clear need to prioritize long-term visioning and planning to ensure that the expansion of the FCCN strategy is sustainable, and that resources are applied evenly to reach the goals of the initiative. This could include planning for expansion and improvement at the overarching initiative level; regional planning to ensure that the FCCN strategy is informed by the pilot initiative and embedded as an integral part of the early childhood care and education system; and/or planning at the network level to maximize and build network agency capacity to think and act strategically. Some potential next steps in this direction include:

- Engaging additional capacity at the state level to lead multiyear, multitiered strategic planning. This would require a temporary increase in resources allocated to the overarching initiative alongside a rightsizing of network budgets to reflect their current capacity, followed by a gradual release of resources back to the networks over time.
- Offering professional learning and technical assistance to network hub agencies on topics such as maximizing provider engagement, leveraging community partnerships, and more



*“The keys to success are having a coordinator who is mission aligned, bringing in experts to support the strategic planning process, and providing peer support from other networks to offer support and inspiration to provide an example of where they might be able to go as an organization.”*

– *Karen Tylek, Home Grown*

## Recommendation 2.2 Position the initiative for ongoing expansion

The pilot initiative successfully reached 23 Michigan counties. The opportunity for expansion includes reaching the remaining 60 counties in the state and forming deeper connections for networks that are running separately within counties. In addition, the pilot shed light on some clear opportunities to facilitate scale-up, including:

- Disseminating communication materials to engage key audiences, telling the story of both the present accomplishments and the potential for the FCCN strategy, and generating additional demand for FCCN presence and services
- Developing practical resources aimed at systematizing network start-up and overcoming some of the common challenges and bottlenecks that were raised during the pilot
- Continuing to explore examples of successful initiatives and lessons learned in other states and communities to inform expansion efforts in Michigan





## PRIORITY AREA 3: Embedding and Sustaining the Work

As the FCCN initiative matures, there will be a need to continuously reflect on and prioritize network offerings and the initiative's positioning within the dynamic context of Michigan's early childhood system writ large. The sustained success and growth of the initiative relies on its ability to respond and adapt to changes in the policy environment, and to work alongside related early childhood initiatives. In doing so, initiative leaders have, and can continue to, seek opportunities to embed this work in the larger strategic vision for early childhood care and education and beyond, and to continue elevating home-based child care as an important part of the early childhood system and the social infrastructure.

### WHAT EFFORTS AND SUCCESSES CAN WE BUILD ON?

There are some important opportunities that have surfaced related to embedding and sustaining the work of FCCNs, both within and concurrent to the FCCN pilot initiative. State-level and initiative leaders and network hubs have worked effectively in partnership with one another to position family child care and initiative for growth by:

**Integrating FCCNs into Child Care Development Fund planning:** Building on the 2022 legislation that drove initial pilot implementation, and with the support of initial data provided by the network hubs, the strategy has been embedded into the state's CCDF plan—meaning that state funds will be allocated to the initiative for at least five years, starting in FY 25.

**Building the legitimacy and visibility of home-based child care:** Leaders spoke about how networks are helping home-based providers move from being license-exempt and/or operating unlicensed care to being recognized by the state as small business owners who provide a critical service for families. These changes at the provider level ultimately help build the supply and visibility of home-based providers in the state so that more families have increased access to care. When providers make this shift, it also opens the door for them to access more information on improving program quality. For example, some network hubs used grant funds to provide concrete guidance and elevate best practices that help home-based providers go further than what is required by *Great Start to Quality* indicators.



*“The guidance and support from [Agency] were exactly what I needed. They didn’t just offer advice—they gave me the tools and confidence to stand up for my business. Having a network that understands the unique challenges we face as family child care providers made all the difference. I no longer feel alone in this journey.”*

*— Rebecca Keller, Home-based child care business owner*

Meanwhile, leaders look ahead to new opportunities that have implications for family child care and the FCCN initiative, including:

**Ongoing efforts surrounding coordinated enrollment:** Efforts are underway at MiLEAP to strengthen coordinated eligibility and enrollment and the technological infrastructure to support it, including updates to the GSQ child care search feature. This effort represents a potential opportunity to streamline recruitment and enrollment processes within and across networks to ensure that families are connected to settings that meet their needs, and that providers have more visibility for their programs to boost enrollment.

**Preparing for PreK for All:** The governor’s PreK for All plan establishes a goal that every four-year-old in Michigan, regardless of income or geographic location, will have access to state-funded PreK through the state’s mixed delivery system by 2027. This presents an important opportunity to consider how FCCNs can be positioned to prepare the home-based child care subsector to participate substantially in this initiative, and for families to have the opportunity to choose home-based child care as their preferred PreK setting.

## WHAT GAPS AND OPPORTUNITIES REMAIN?

Despite an emphasis from the outset on the continued growth and sustainability of the initiative, there remain some significant challenges to overcome in the next few years. Home-based child care as a sector faces particular barriers to stability, sustainability, and recognition within the already marginalized field of early childhood care and education. When it comes to embedding and generating support for home-based child care and the FCCN strategy, leaders of the initiative must contend with:

### The need for ongoing data to drive the initiative

While initial gathering and analysis efforts during the FCCN pilot were instrumental in strengthening the initiative and taking important steps toward sustainability, there is a clear need to strengthen the approach to utilizing data to tell the story and make the case for this ongoing work. The impact of FCCNs on providers and families is profound, and the strategy

shows great promise due to its efficacy to address root causes of challenges facing the home-based child care sector. However, sustainability relies on the effectiveness of hubs to consistently collect, synthesize, and report data, and of initiative leadership to elevate stories of impact and meaningful data trends to decision-makers.

### **A lack of broad recognition of home-based child care as part of the early childhood care and education system**

Despite the crucial role home-based child care plays in early childhood care and education, it remains underrecognized and undervalued within the broader system. This is evidenced by the reality that home-based providers still face challenges such as limited access to professional development resources, insufficient quality supports, and chronic isolation. This lack of support undermines the quality and sustainability of home-based child care services, which in turn limits the professionalization of this subsector and keeps home-based child care in a pattern of sub-optimal recognition.



*“When they denied my request to expand, it felt like a door slammed shut on my dreams. I was just trying to serve more families, but instead, I was left feeling powerless and hesitant to approach the city for anything else. It was like they didn’t understand or value the work we do.”*

*– Kim Spiegel, Home-based child care business owner*

### **A distance to go to prepare home-based providers to participate in PreK for All**

Though the opportunity for home-based providers to participate in this massive PreK scale-up is exciting, it calls upon the FCCN initiative to act quickly and strategically to position home-based child care as a well-recognized, well-prepared player in this effort. Due to the chronic undervaluing and underrecognition of the home-based child care sector, the present home-based child care workforce may not be fully prepared to participate in this opportunity at scale.



*“I think that the thing I would want to see going forward is the piece that helps networks who are working with groups of business owners and nonprofits that want to be able to participate in pre-K for all, and that they would specifically join a network with that purpose”*

*– Joan Blough, ECIC*

### Recommendation 3.1 Adopt a systematic approach to evaluation

As it becomes clear what data trends and impacts are of high interest to stakeholders and of all kinds, state-level and hub-level leaders can work together to develop an aligned approach to data collection, sharing, analysis, and communication. This would incorporate data that integrates evidence-based practice (via the Home Grown benchmarks), along with data that is relevant to providers, to network hub agencies, and to state-level initiative leadership and decision-makers. Some essential components of adopting a systematic approach to evaluation include:

- Seeking input from multiple stakeholders to ensure that both the data points and data collection process are practical and do not overburden providers or hub agencies with onerous or duplicative data asks
- Identifying common data points across all networks, which will help them make data-driven decisions and deliver high-quality services that match the needs of the home-based provider community both locally, and writ large
- Designing and implementing an evaluation strategy, which could include regular opportunities for storytelling; periodic data-collection efforts; shared analysis between state-level leadership, network hubs, and providers; and a well-developed messaging approach



*“I really think the indicators that we use to build the work of the networks are going to be critical in terms of helping us make that argument about the importance of including this as part of our mixed delivery. I think over time, we’re really going to be able to show the strength in that.”*

*– Lisa Brewer Walraven, MiLEAP*





### **Recommendation 3.2** Position FCCNs as a mechanism to participate in PreK for All

In the coming years, there will be a general need to build awareness and to demystify for home-based providers the opportunity that exists with PreK for All. Presently, the role of the home-based sector in the mixed delivery system is largely untapped and not well understood by the broader community, but FCCNs are well positioned to effect the changes needed to make home-based child care a viable platform for PreK at scale. Some important steps could include:

- Ensuring that home-based child care has a presence in whatever pilot model and process is identified for PreK for all, such that pilot outcomes include lessons learned about its implementation in home-based child care
- Initiating an optional community of practice aimed at helping interested home-based providers understand the PreK for All initiative and their potential role. This learning opportunity would also identify steps, trade-offs, and what to expect should they choose to participate.
- Creating messaging to families and/or the broader community about the unique value add of home-based child care to the PreK mixed delivery system

