Impact Report Update
Early Childhood

The early years, from prenatal stages to eight years old, are pivotal for a child's development. Between birth and age five, unmatched brain development occurs, requiring a specialized education approach. Decades of research underscore the wisdom in investing in high-quality early learning programs. The subsequent healthy development forms the solid foundation for educational success, economic productivity, responsible citizenship, lifelong well-being, community strength, and effective parenting. Prioritizing this phase enriches present experiences and establishes the foundation for a thriving and prosperous future.

Blue Ribbons

Statewide Investment in Childcare
Phelps County secured 7 state-funded Child Care Works seats through a $2.5 million statewide investment, leveraging cost-sharing between the state, employers, and families to reduce childcare costs, stabilize providers, and support workforce retention, while expanding enrollment in state childcare subsidies and strengthening regional early childhood advocacy and engagement.

Phelps County Community Foundation Early Childhood Center
Scheduled to open in Fall 2026, the new Early Childhood Center, owned and operated by Rolla Public Schools, will offer full-day programming for up to approximately 360 four-year-olds, expanding access to high-quality early learning for young children. Enrollment will be voluntary, and the district will continue to serve identified three-year-olds through Early Childhood Special Education. The facility will co-locate early childhood education, an Early Childhood Careers Lab supporting workforce development and career pathways, and Parents as Teachers under one roof, strengthening service coordination and family support. In addition, Four Rivers Community Health Center will operate a fully equipped on-site medical clinic, providing comprehensive medical and dental services and reducing barriers to care for families. By consolidating these services, the district will also have free space within existing elementary schools, enabling it to better accommodate future enrollment growth and community expansion.

Rural Schools Early Literacy Collaborative-Phelps County
All five Phelps County school districts are participating in a three-year literacy pilot that is training literacy coaches and 50 kindergarten and first-grade teachers to strengthen early reading instruction. The initiative is supported by The New Teacher Project (TNTP), with a dedicated team of 10 literacy experts conducting monthly, multi-day, on-site coaching throughout the school year. Early data from the first completed year show promising gains, including improved instructional practice and increased teacher confidence in evidence-based literacy strategies, signaling strong potential for sustained early literacy outcomes across the county.

Caution Light – Statewide Investment in Childcare

Although Phelps County secured participation in Child Care Works, the allocation of only seven seats in the first year significantly limits reach and impact, with demand expected to exceed availability and highlighting the need for expanded funding or alternative cost-sharing models. This

limitation is particularly acute given documented infant and toddler shortages across the county.**Red Flags**

Poverty
Growing up in poverty poses a paramount challenge to healthy child development, extending beyond economic concerns to impede cognitive development and hinder learning capacity. The repercussions manifest in behavioral, social, emotional issues, and adverse effects on overall health. Examining statistics for children reveal concerning poverty rates:

- Phelps County: 21.2%
- Missouri: 17.4%
- United States: 16%

These figures underscore the prevalence of childhood poverty in Phelps County compared to state and national averages. Addressing the multifaceted impacts of poverty on early childhood development is crucial for fostering a supportive environment enabling every child to thrive.

Phelps County – A Child Care Desert
Child Care Aware of Missouri defines a child care desert as an area with more than 50 children under age six who have parents in the labor force and either no child care providers or so few options that there are more than three times as many children as licensed child care slots. According to Missouri Economy Indicators (2025), non-metro counties—including Phelps County—average just 3.1 licensed child care slots per 10 children. A 2024 Phelps County community survey found that more than 600 additional infant and toddler slots are needed to meet current demand. Parents and employers consistently report significant challenges securing child care, particularly for infants.

The Economic Impact of Child Care Shortages in Phelps County
Access to quality, affordable child care is essential for children, families, and the local economy. High-quality early care supports healthy child development, allows parents to remain employed, and strengthens the workforce. When child care is limited, businesses lose productivity and communities lose revenue. In Phelps County, inadequate child care access results in $6,476,677 in business losses—an average of $3,727 per impacted worker.

Subsidy Challenges
As of July 2024, Missouri increased childcare subsidy reimbursement rates to the 100th percentile for infants and toddlers and the 65th percentile for preschool and school-aged children. However, many providers continue to decline subsidy participation due to administrative burdens, delayed payments, and workforce shortages. In Phelps County, only 5% of the children who are eligible for the state subsidy program are successfully accessing it.

Unaffordable for Families, Unsustainable for Providers
On average, Phelps County families spend 15% or more of their income on child care. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services defines child care as affordable when it costs no more than 7% of a family's income. With a median household income of $53,242, local families are paying well above the affordability threshold to cover the cost of care for just one child.

In addition to being unaffordable for families, current tuition rates do not reflect the true cost of providing high-quality care. As a result, additional investment from community stakeholders is necessary to sustain and expand access to high-quality child care.

References

Selected Indicators for United States | KIDS COUNT Data Center

Selected Indicators for Missouri | KIDS COUNT Data Center

Missouri Kids Count Data - Phelps County Poverty Level

ChildCare Aware of Missouri - Child Care Deserts Map

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