

Strengthening Early Childhood Care and Education: Arkansas's Local Leads Initiative

Moving Learning Forward

From Policy to Progress:
The LEARNS Act



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When Building Lasting Solutions, Local Is Best

With local lead organizations, Arkansas is betting that communities are best positioned to find homegrown solutions to early childhood challenges.

Strengthening early childhood care and education is a centerpiece of the LEARNS Act. With its complex ecosystem of public, private, and home providers, the sector tends to be siloed. As a result, shared challenges that demand a coordinated response, such as uneven program quality or potential service gaps, can be difficult to address, leaving families with inaccessible or inadequate childcare options.

To help create a more unified, accessible early childhood system, LEARNS established a local leads initiative with community agencies, nonprofits, businesses, and educational institutions. Currently, 26 organizations serve as local leads across 65 Arkansas counties. These local leads engage community stakeholders, identify gaps in childcare support, coordinate efforts by private and public providers, and support strategic decision-making to enhance early childhood programs and access. Funding for local leads begins at \$150,000 and varies based on the number of classrooms in the catchment area. By partnering with local leads, Arkansas aims to shift from a traditional top-down management model to one that prioritizes local ownership of early childhood outcomes.





The local lead effort in Independence County is reshaping how childcare providers work together, solve problems, and advocate for families. Driving the work is the IMPACT Independence County Foundation, a 15-year-old grassroots community organization that partners with the Batesville Area Chamber of Commerce (BACC).

In addition to convening a biannual meeting with all early childhood stakeholders—from local colleges to childcare providers and K-12 educators—Independence County’s local lead hosts monthly working groups for specific cohorts around pressing topics. This year, they also launched [KidConnect.info](https://www.kidconnect.info), an early childhood resource hub with streamlined information for parents and providers.

The coordination is paying off. Recently, a Batesville childcare center serving 60 families gave notice that it would close in 30 days. Given that Independence County already has limited child care availability, the closure could have been a devastating mid-year blow to displaced families. But over the past two years, the Independence County local lead has been building bridges within the childcare provider community, so it was ready to respond. The local leads group met with the center’s director and presented data on open seats from every childcare provider in Independence County. This coordinated enrollment effort was essential because each family has unique requirements—for example, a caregiver’s long work hours or a child with a disability—that can make it difficult to find available programs that meet all of their needs.

“We knew who had openings and in what age groups, and we helped match up nearly every child to a center close to their home or parents’ work so they had continuity of care,” says Novella Humphrey, chief operating officer of the BACC. “That was an early win and something that wouldn’t have been possible before the local leads because the network simply wasn’t connected.”



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From Competition to Collaboration

One of the most inspiring revelations from the local leads work, Humphrey says, has been the genuine enthusiasm for teamwork in the childcare landscape. Each month, Independence County's local lead convenes a school readiness cohort of early childhood providers and elementary educators to discuss topics requested by the group. "Right now, we're in a deep study of neurodivergence," Humphrey says. "Last month, it was supporting children with trauma. Next month, we'll focus on dual language."

Creating structure and space for early childhood leaders to get to know one another has sparked unexpected connections. "Most childcare centers open from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m., so these directors are caring for children 12 hours a day. They don't have time to just be together," Humphrey says. "When we got everyone in the same room and listened to our leaders, we uncovered a lot of shared fears and worries."

In response, they formed a leadership cohort, called a community of practice, to address shared concerns and challenges. Center directors now call each other for advice and ask the local lead to facilitate meetings around collective questions. Humphrey also regularly sends out surveys to crowdsource information. "Last week, a provider called and asked how other centers are handling charges for weather closures," she says. "Where before 15 center directors were having to figure it out on their own, they now look to us to be that resource for the information they need to make decisions for the families they serve."

Initially, the meetings were held on Zoom to minimize the burden on busy participants, but the cohort members asked to meet in person. "They wanted to be together and have that time to collaborate," Humphrey says. "That's probably been the biggest change I've seen. They've gone from being competitors to collaborators."





Independence County’s local lead has also become a critical advocate for families in the early childhood system. After conducting a survey of caregivers, “we got a lot of feedback about the real priorities and problems families are facing,” says Jamie Rayford, BACC’s former chief strategy officer. For one, they learned that an onerous registration process discouraged many families from completing childcare applications. “We were able to elevate those stories and push for change. Before, providers didn’t have time to advocate on behalf of families because they had a business to run. Now there’s someone who can do that for them.”

Independence County’s local lead realized that the biggest barrier to offering quality childcare seats was a lack of facilities in Independence County. “One school had 200 kids on a wait list, and most centers had maxed out their spaces. I’m talking about converting closets and teachers’ lounges into classrooms,” Rayford says. The local lead helped providers explore creative partnerships with churches and elementary schools with extra space and assisted with designing management contracts and writing supply grants for providers to expand into new sites.

These successes came as a result of the more integrated and cooperative early childhood ecosystem that has been cultivated by Independence County’s local lead. “Local leads have brought early childhood leaders together in powerful new ways, helping them share what they do best and build on each other’s strengths,” Humphrey says. “That collaboration is creating better classrooms and better learning experiences for all children in Independence County.”

Recommendations

1. **Build a core team with representation from across the early childhood field.**

Independence County's local lead established a core team of five representatives from private, public, and home-based childcare centers, Head Start, and families to make decisions about budget priorities and programming. "You need data, but you also need to hear from families, providers, teachers, and school district administrators," Rayford says. "You need these voices to keep you centered."

2. **"Get on the ground with people."**

Before you can solve problems together, you have to build trust with providers and families. "You have to spend a lot of one-on-one time with people and do the real work to shift mindsets," Rayford says. "Then, when you bring people together, their guard is down, and collaboration happens organically."

3. **Use data as a compass to chart your priorities.**

Being data-driven isn't a box to check—it's an ongoing practice. Independence County's local lead regularly revisits their Early Development Instrument data to ensure their priorities align with real needs, using new information on growth and dips to recalibrate strategies.

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