



SLO County's Childcare Problem - The Outlook for 2022

A [recent study](#) on the economic impact of child care in San Luis Obispo found that the turmoil of the pandemic has exacerbated the 'trilemma' of challenges that existed before COVID-19 - quality, affordability and accessibility. The "Where's the Care? Tackling our Child Care Challenge" workshop helped bring some of these issues to the forefront of public conversation in May 2019. Since then there has been significant progress and several efforts are under way to combat these key issues.

More people than ever are working together to solve the issue of Childcare in SLO

We Are The Care, the SLO County Office of Education (SLOCOE), CAPSLO, Childcare Resource Connection, First5, Cuesta College, the Childcare Planning Council, local businesses and the SLO Chamber of Commerce are collaborating and spearheading initiatives to solve these problems. Following the 'Where's the Care?' workshop in May 2019, liaisons have been designated from every city council and board of supervisors and they have been meeting regularly to learn about the issues to understand where they can help. "It's a huge accomplishment to get a designated representative from every single city on board and have their attention on these issues," said Raechelle Bowlay, Quality Early Learning Manager of the SLO County Child Care Planning Council. Most recently they discussed how best to allocate funding to support childcare. "Three of the seven cities (Pismo Beach, Grover Beach, Arroyo Grande, and San Luis Obispo?) have set aside dedicated funding and we are working with the others to do the same," added Bowlay.

Quality: Child care workers can work full time and not earn a living wage

The Cuesta study found that the average full-time childcare worker makes only 71% of the living wage for San Luis Obispo county. Ticket2Teach, a local bootcamp run by Cuesta College and SLO Partners (an initiative of SLOCOE), is addressing this issue directly by subsidizing the wages of its graduates, increasing the pay they receive. Other organizations such as San Luis Obispo County Office of Education, CAPSLO Child Care Resource Connection, and First 5 San Luis Obispo County, are also partnering to tackle this issue by contributing funding directly to child care programs and educators. In this

profession, educators work diligently to maintain their certifications and continuing education, which usually takes place on their dime and on their own time. Quality Counts, a local partnership initiative, provides stipends for early care and education providers to pay for this. “Last year, around 170 people received stipends,” continued Bowlay. “We’re currently working on securing more funding to make these available to everyone.”

Childcare providers are also receiving support through business grants, provided by CA Department of Social Services and some regional efforts, which help pay for program expenses. “This is an indirect benefit for the child care workforce,” continued Bowlay. “The grants alleviate expenses so that more money can be allocated to wages and keep costs down for families.”

Affordability: Child care is expensive

According to the Cuesta study, the average cost of child care in SLO County is around \$10,000 per year, which is roughly 18% of the pre-tax earnings of an average worker in the area. The San Luis Obispo Chamber of Commerce has recognized that employers can play a significant role in lessening the financial burden for families and has launched a program on family-friendly policies. “There’s been a childcare crisis in SLO County for a long time and the private sector can do a lot to help alleviate this problem,” said Christina Lefevre Latner, Workforce Development Manager of the Family-Friendly Workplace Accelerator Program, SLO Chamber of Commerce.

The Family-Friendly Workplace Accelerator program was championed by the We Are the Care Initiative and funded by the County of SLO and First 5 SLO County. It supports the implementation of family-friendly workplace policies such as flexible work and scheduling, accommodations and support, and paid and unpaid leave. Implementing these can help reduce childcare costs and create less demand for childcare spaces, increasing accessibility. The program also assists businesses select and implement child care benefits, which can include providing on-site or near-site child care and dependent care flexible spending accounts. These also help increase childcare spaces and reduce costs for families. “Having these policies in place also sets employers apart in what’s currently a super competitive job market,” continued Lefevre Latner.

Accessibility: There's a large need for more child care capacity in SLO - this requires a larger workforce

The Cuesta study estimates there are 2,300 children of working parents who aren't in a childcare program. A central issue is that there are simply not enough childcare spots available. In order to open new programs, more childcare workers are needed. "We've always had a shortage in quality workers," said Lauren Thorne, Director of Early Learning and Educational Support at SLOCOE. After identifying this as a need for the community, SLO Partners partnered with Cuesta College to launch the Ticket2Teach program to train locals to become quality childcare professionals. "We provide grant money to help pay for tuition, textbooks and other incentives to encourage people to enter into this career path," continued Thorne. "We want to grow our own workforce and keep them here."

Paso Robles High School is also helping increase the childcare workforce. The school offers education and child development pathways to tenth through twelfth grade students with its Bearkittens Preschool program. The students are student teachers and gain skills to prepare them for a career working with young children. Looking ahead, this 'earn and learn' debt-free model can be replicated in other school districts to create a sustainable talent pipeline of students entering education careers.

The SLO County Office of Education is also working to get more childcare centers in SLO County through its Early Learning Centers. They provide 140 free part-time spots to SLO County children aged three to five. "We have eight centers across the county and serve all families," added Thorne. "For 2022 we are working on expanding our programs with more hours and increasing capacity to offer more slots to children."

"It's great to see so many different minds and agencies coming together to provide solutions to the issues surrounding childcare," added Bowlay. "We are building and expanding partnerships in a way I haven't seen in the past which is exciting. I have a hopeful outlook for 2022 and beyond."