



Investing in Providers,
Strengthening Communities

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From Policy to Practice: Building Equity in Universal Child Care

A New Chapter in Child Care, New Mexico Leads the Way

New Mexico is the first state to offer universal child care, a historic win for families and children. Beginning this November, every family will be eligible for free child care regardless of income. While this is a landmark victory, universal child care can only succeed if we also invest in the people behind the work. Providers are the heart of the system. Ensuring they are valued, supported, and ready to meet rising demands will determine whether universal child care truly reaches every community. This newsletter explores what universal child care means for access, workforce readiness, and racial and gender equity in New Mexico.

Policy Highlight

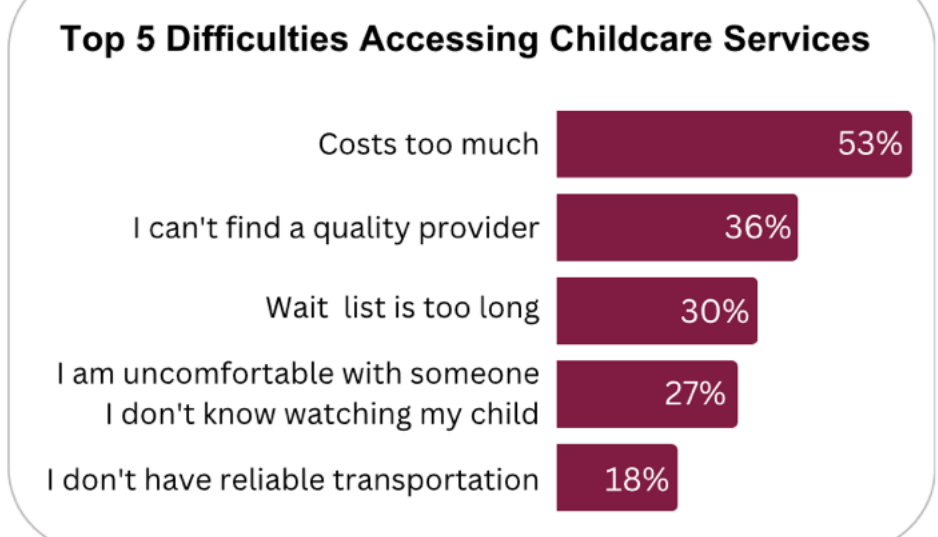
On September 8, 2025, Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham and the [New Mexico Early Childhood Education and Care Department \(ECECD\)](#) announced that starting **November 1, 2025**, child care will be offered at no cost to families across the state [\(1\)](#). Previously, free or subsidized child care was limited to families earning up to 400% of the federal poverty level. Under this expansion, all parents are technically eligible for free child care, regardless of income. Families are expected to save an average of \$12,000 annually, easing financial burdens and opening new opportunities for children. The program will be funded through the Early Childhood Trust Fund, which is sustained by revenues from oil and gas. This investment ensures affordability for families but raises important questions about how the workforce will keep pace.

Despite widespread support for the policy's intent, stakeholders have emphasized the importance of systems sustaining the expansion over time. The state's new wage and career ladder establishes a clear wage scale tied to experience and education, helping to improve compensation and retention in the workforce [\(2\)](#). Some also note that expanding eligibility to all income levels could unintentionally affect access for lower-income families who have historically faced the greatest barriers to care.

Who Will Provide the Care?

As New Mexico expands access to universal child care, a major concern remains: all families may not benefit if there are not enough workers to meet the demand. In Doña Ana County, there are 12,595 children under age 5 and 9,674 childcare slots potentially available to children up to the age of 13 [\(3\)](#). Of those, only 61% are currently in use, which may reflect staffing shortages, enrollment challenges, or other systemic barriers [\(4\)](#).

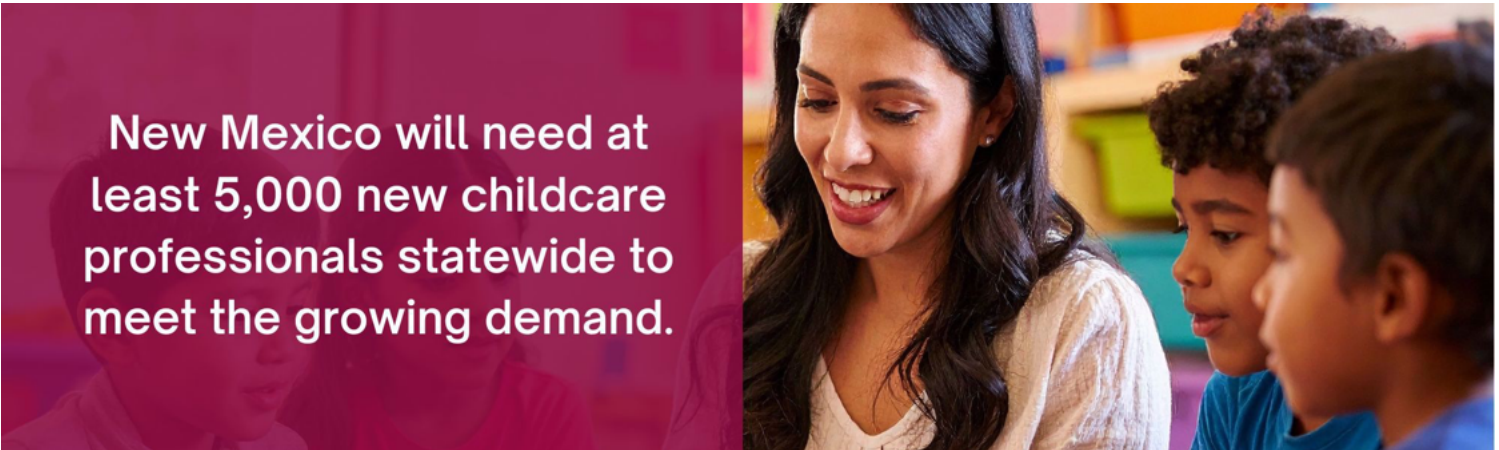
Our analysis of the 100% Community Survey, led by the [Anna, Age Eight Institute](#) and the [Doña Ana County Resilience Leaders](#), found that difficulty accessing care increased from 31% in 2019 to 42% in 2024 [\(5\)](#). Families cited long waitlists and a lack of quality providers as major barriers, issues deeply tied to workforce capacity.



Source: 100% Community Survey for Doña Ana County, 2024.

The ECECD estimates that 16,000 children in the state will enter the system this year, including 12,000 infants and toddlers, who require the most intensive support [\(6\)](#). To meet this growing demand, New Mexico will need at least 5,000 new childcare professionals statewide. One key factor driving the shortage is low wages. [Childcare workers earn around \\$34,000 annually](#), far below a livable wage [\(7\)](#). Recruiting and retaining staff is challenging, especially when other jobs offer higher pay for less demanding work.

Despite these challenges, the childcare workforce has grown substantially in recent years. In Doña Ana County, childcare workers nearly doubled between 2023 and 2024, rising 96% from 250 to 490 [\(8\)](#). Statewide, the workforce also experienced strong growth, increasing 59% from 2,180 to 3,460. This growth suggests that recent wage increases, professional development programs, and public investments are beginning to strengthen the early childhood workforce.



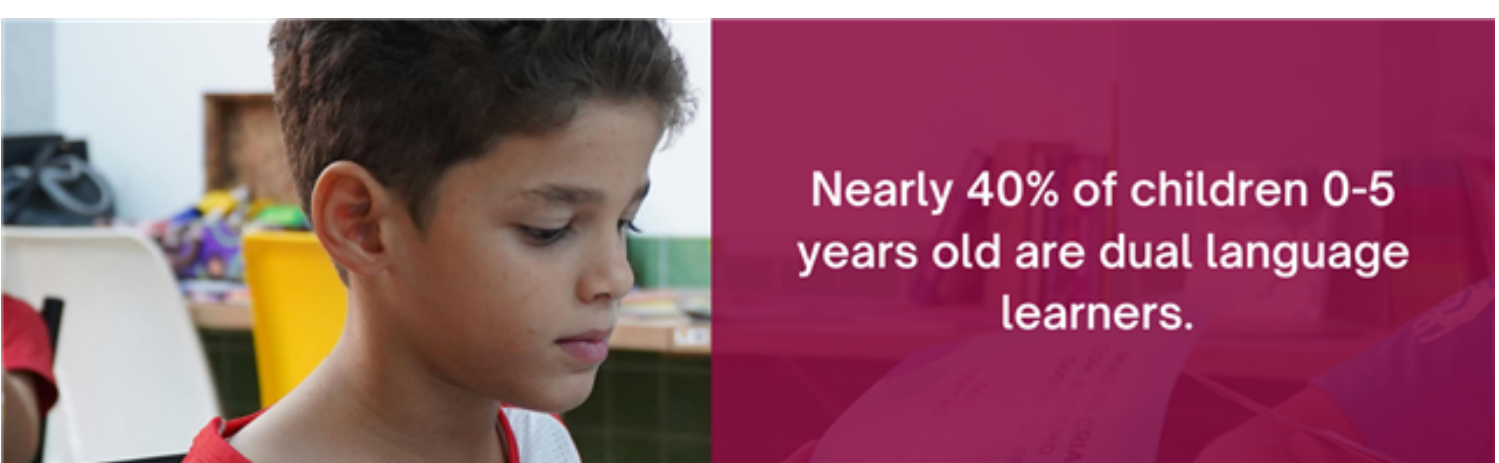
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Gender and Racial Equity in the Childcare Workforce

Child care is the foundation of early learning and a test of equity in our state. In New Mexico, 91% of childcare workers are women, and 72% are people of color [\(9\)](#). Like other female-dominated, racially diverse fields, the sector has long faced low wages, limited benefits, and few opportunities for advancement. With the new changes, providers who commit to paying entry-level staff a minimum of \$18 per hour, well above the state's \$12 minimum wage, and who offer 10 hours of care per day, five days a week, are eligible for additional incentive rates that reflect the true cost of child care [\(10\)](#). This change is a step toward recognizing providers' essential role in families' lives.

Click here to visit our updated ECE Workforce Dashboard

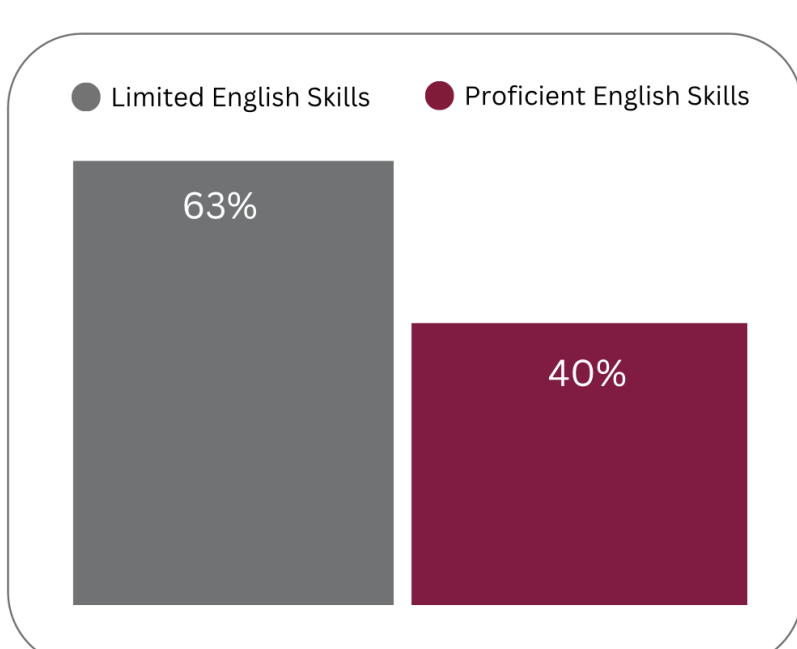
New Mexico also faces a pressing need for more culturally and linguistically responsive training. Forty percent (40%) of children between the ages of 0 and 5 in New Mexico are dual language learners [\(11\)](#), and many providers speak languages other than English at home [\(12\)](#). Yet a 100% Community Survey finding shows families with limited English skills face the greatest barriers to accessing care.



Nearly 40% of children 0-5 years old are dual language learners.

Sixty-three percent (63%) reported difficulties, compared to 40% of English-speaking families [\(13\)](#). This disconnect points to deeper structural challenges, especially in the education and training of providers. Despite the diversity within the workforce, most Early Childhood Education (ECE) courses are only offered in English. For Spanish-speaking providers, this creates barriers to earning credentials and advancing in the field, **ultimately limiting children's access** to culturally relevant care.

Percentage of Respondents in Doña Ana County Who Needed Childcare Services and Experienced Difficulties Obtaining Them, by English Proficiency (2024)



Note: Pearson chi-square tests showed respondents with limited English proficiency are more likely to report difficulties accessing child care (p=0.02). Source: 100% Community Survey for Doña Ana County, 2024.

However, solutions are beginning to take shape. For example, [Santa Fe Community College's APRENDE](#) program offers degree pathways entirely in Spanish, allowing providers to advance their education without language barriers. More initiatives like APRENDE would strengthen New Mexico's workforce and ensure a system that truly reflects the state's cultural and linguistic diversity.

Local and Statewide Initiatives

Local initiatives are gaining momentum to expand child care across New Mexico. In Las Cruces, [Ngage New Mexico](#), backbone partner in the [Success Partnership](#), has launched [Reaching for the Stars](#), a two-year accelerator program helping ten Registered Home Providers advance to licensed 3-star status, boosting quality and access in the region. The Partnership also supports community engagement through the [ECE Coalition](#) and the **Workforce is Supported Action Network**. Click [here](#) to join these efforts and [register](#) for the **ECE Coalition's Quarterly Meeting on November 5, 2025**.

At the **state level**, the ECECD has introduced a **\$12.7 million low-interest loan fund** to help providers renovate, expand, or build licensed child care facilities. The fund aims to strengthen infrastructure growth, particularly in underserved areas, and [applications](#) are open until **November 3, 2025**.

Sources:

- (1) [New Mexico is first state in nation to offer universal child care](#)
(2) [New Mexico is leading the way on child care-now we must deliver](#)
(3) [ECECD Data Dashboard](#)
(4) [NAEYC Survey Shows Child Care Crisis Worsening After Federal Funding Expired](#)
(5)(13) [CCA Presentation: 100% Community Survey Doña Ana County: Need and Access to Services](#)
(6) [Universally free early childcare will increase demand](#)
(7)(8)(9) [CCA Dashboard: Early Childhood Education Workforce in Doña Ana County and New Mexico](#)
(10) [New Mexico is the first state to offer free universal child care. Who's paying for it?](#)
(11) [A Data Profile of Young Dual Language Learners in New Mexico and Implications for Early Childhood Programs](#)
(12) [Center for the Study of Child Care Employment: Primary Language Spoken at Home by Early Educators. By State, 2022](#)



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