

The Northeast Early Childhood Council (NECC)

Local Needs Assessment

June 30, 2026



**Brooklyn, Canterbury, Killingly, Plainfield,
Putnam, Sterling & Thompson**

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Local Governing Partner (LGP): Northeast Early Childhood Council (NECC)

Service Area: Brooklyn, Canterbury, Killingly, Plainfield, Putnam, Sterling, and Thompson, Connecticut

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Fiduciary Organization: EASTCONN

Date Submitted to Shine: June 30, 2026

The Northeast Early Childhood Council utilized a collaborative approach to complete this Local Needs Assessment (LNA), engaging a variety of stakeholders who bring diverse perspectives on the needs of young children and families throughout the region. Participants included:

- Local Governing Partner (LGP) Liaisons
- Parent Ambassadors
- Preschool Special Education Staff
- Public School Staff
- Service Providers, including representatives from Access Agency
- Community Partners, including EASTCONN Head Start

These stakeholders participated through meetings, surveys, focus groups, and data review activities to help identify regional strengths, challenges, and priorities related to early childhood services and supports.

The Local Needs Assessment was informed by a combination of quantitative and qualitative data sources to provide a comprehensive understanding of the needs, strengths, and opportunities impacting children and families across the seven-town region. State and regional data included datasets provided by the Office of Early Childhood (OEC) and birth data by town from Day Kimball Hospital. Community input was gathered through multiple surveys, including the New Parent Survey, the *What Do You and Your Family Need?* Survey for parents and caregivers, the Early Education and Childcare Survey for parents and caregivers, and childcare provider surveys completed by family child care homes, childcare centers, and public school programs. Additional stakeholder perspectives were collected through Community Table discussions held in October 2025 and April 2026, as well as focus groups with Early Start Connecticut public school programs, Early Start Connecticut educators, childcare centers, and family child care providers. The combination of state-level data, community surveys, stakeholder interviews, Community Table discussions, and focus groups provided a well-rounded assessment of the current landscape and helped identify priorities for supporting children, families, and early childhood providers throughout the region.

The Local Needs Assessment was developed through a collaborative planning process that engaged Community Table members and key stakeholders throughout the region. The LNA framework was first shared with the Community Table membership, which consists of approximately 20 active members, and members were invited to express interest in serving on the LNA Subcommittee.

During March and April, the subcommittee worked closely with a consultant to review, organize, and analyze regional and town-level data sets. This included examining existing Northeast Early Childhood Council (NECC) data, organizing information from the Office of Early Childhood (OEC) data toolkit into a more user-friendly format for team members, and utilizing AI tools to assist with summarizing and synthesizing data while carefully verifying accuracy. Subcommittee members participating in the Data Dive Team were also provided with data notebooks to support deeper analysis and discussion. Throughout the process, the group engaged in ongoing technical assistance and consultation with the consultant to strengthen data interpretation and inform the Local Needs Assessment.

Two in-person subcommittee meetings, attended by nine members, were held on April 21, 2026, and May 19, 2026. Committee members individually reviewed data using their notebooks and note-taking tools to discuss observations, strengths, gaps, alignment with existing NECC data, and emerging themes.

In addition, focus groups were conducted during two Community Table meetings, with participation from more than 35 parents, early childhood providers, and community stakeholders. At the October Community Table meeting, participants broke into smaller facilitated discussion groups to take a deeper dive into the findings from the "What Do You and Your Family Need?" survey and explore the factors contributing to those results. At the April Community Table meeting, participants again met in small focus groups to discuss childcare access, affordability, and barriers to care.

Key findings and discussion notes from both Community Table meetings were used to inform the Local Needs Assessment (LNA) process and guide discussions during the April and May LNA Subcommittee meetings.

Findings and emerging themes were reviewed with Community Table members at the June 3, 2026, meeting. In addition, a draft of the LNA framework was shared electronically with Community Table members for review and feedback prior to submission. To support transparency and ongoing participation throughout the process, a shared Google Drive was established where members could access meeting materials, data resources, notes, and draft documents at any time.

Executive Summary:

Children and families across Northeast Connecticut are navigating a variety of challenges while working to build healthy, stable lives. Through data analysis, community surveys, focus groups, and conversations with families, providers, educators, and community partners, a consistent picture emerged of both the strengths that exist across the region and the barriers that continue to impact family well-being.

Throughout the assessment, participants spoke about the increasing pressures facing families. Rising costs for childcare, housing, food, healthcare, and other everyday expenses have made it difficult for many households to make ends meet. Many families described feeling caught between earning too much to qualify for assistance programs but not enough to comfortably afford the resources and services they need.

Access to childcare remains a significant concern across the region. Families reported difficulty finding care that meets their needs, particularly infant and toddler care, full-day programs, flexible scheduling options, and services for children with diverse developmental, behavioral, or medical needs. Providers also shared challenges related to staffing shortages, operating costs, and maintaining program capacity, all of which contribute to waitlists and limited availability.

The assessment also highlighted broader concerns related to mental health, family stress, social isolation, housing stability, and access to information and resources. While many valuable services and supports exist throughout the region, families often reported not knowing what is available, how to access services, or where to turn when they need help.

At the same time, the region benefits from many strengths. Participants consistently highlighted the dedication of local providers, schools, Family Resource Centers, healthcare organizations, community agencies, and families themselves. Strong partnerships and a shared commitment to supporting children and families provide a solid foundation for future planning and community action.

Together, these findings lead us to 3 focus areas (which will be addressed in detail later in this report):

- 1) Childcare Access, Affordability, and System Advocacy
- 2) Family Engagement, Resource Awareness, and Connection to Supports
- 3) Community Collaboration, Shared Leadership & Regional Coordination

Children and Family Characteristics

Participants: The conversations took place during the April 21, 2026, Local Needs Assessment (LNA) Subcommittee meeting. Multiple perspectives were shared by the attendees, which included Kris Cicchetti (Liasion), Chris Rosati Randall (Liasion), Sam Withers (Parent Ambassador), Melissa Kennedy (Parent Ambassador), Sally Sherman (ESCT Preschool Director, Killingly), Courtney Langlois (ESCT Preschool Director, Canterbury), Patty Bryant (ESCT Preschool Director, Putnam), Kim Mansfield (ESCT - Director of Headstart), and Deb Adams (Consultant).

Short Narrative: Children and families across the Northeast region are experiencing overlapping economic, social, and environmental challenges that impact overall well-being and access to supports. Key themes identified through data review and community discussions included rising financial hardship, limited access to affordable childcare, increasing mental health concerns, housing and environmental health issues, and growing isolation among families. Significant differences also exist between towns, with each community facing unique needs and barriers. Stakeholders noted concerns about declining birth rates, families leaving the region, and increasing disconnection from traditional systems and services. While many of these challenges are systemic, the Northeast Early Childhood Council (NECC) and community partners identified opportunities to strengthen regional collaboration, improve access to resources, elevate family voice, and advocate for policies and investments that better support children and families.

Data Sources:

OEC Provided Data:

- Data Birth rate over time
- Population Size
- Household composition
- Median Household income
- Population below federal poverty level

Notes:

Discussion participants generally felt the data aligned with what they are seeing in the community, particularly regarding affordability challenges, mental health concerns, and barriers to accessing services. However, several important data gaps were identified, including information related to mental health, special education, housing instability, father engagement, and families who may not be connected to traditional systems. Participants emphasized the importance of supplementing available data with

family surveys, focus groups, and local partner input to better understand needs and inform future planning, advocacy, and resource coordination efforts.

Relevant findings from surveys, focus groups, and any other local data collection

Birth Data from local hospital - when compared to state birth data, we realized that 50% of our families are giving birth outside of our local hospital, which means either at the other local hospital or over the border in RI or MA.

Data Interpretation:

The group identified several systemic challenges and notable trends that paint a picture of families facing overlapping economic, educational, and environmental hurdles:

- **Demographic Shifts:** There is a regional decline in birth rates leading to lower school enrollment, with communities noting that young families are leaving or choosing not to settle in the area.
- **Town-by-Town Disparities:** Community needs vary significantly by municipality. Larger towns like Killingly and Plainfield have high needs due to population size, while smaller towns face distinct challenges, such as extreme affordability concerns in Canterbury or severe economic disadvantage in Putnam.
- **Economic Hardship:** Families are facing intense economic struggles, with poverty rates ranging from 35% to 58% in some communities, resulting in heavy reliance on school feeding programs.
- **Childcare Affordability and Capacity:** Subsidized childcare remains unaffordable for many, and families just outside income guidelines struggle significantly. Additionally, there is a severe lack of childcare and support services equipped to serve children with disabilities or complex special needs.
- **Mental Health & Isolation:** Parent isolation and mental health concerns (for both children and parents) are highly prevalent.
- **Housing and Environment:** Elevated lead levels are a significant issue, particularly in towns like Putnam, exacerbated by the fact that in some communities, 35% of homes were built before 1960.
- **System Disconnection:** Families appear to be increasingly disconnecting from traditional systems, evidenced by an increase in homeschooling and families simply "walking away" from available services.

What is missing (Gaps) The subcommittee noted that smaller towns often have less available formal data, making local trends harder to capture. Specific missing data points include:

- **Economic & Demographic Data:** Unemployment rates, education levels, and family income trends.
- **Health & Well-being Data:** Child and parent mental health data, infant mortality rates, and prenatal care data.

- **Child Welfare & Family Dynamics:** DCF substantiated cases, breakdown of male vs. female caregivers in DCF cases, and accurate homelessness data.
- **Education & Support Needs:** Special education data, childcare capacity for children with special needs, home visiting data, language diversity needs, and formal homeschooling figures.

So, now what? (Interpretation & Next Steps) The overarching consensus from the interpretation is that while these conditions are systemic and cannot be fixed by the Northeast Early Childhood Council (NECC) alone, the NECC can position itself as a catalyst for systemic influence, advocacy, and connection.

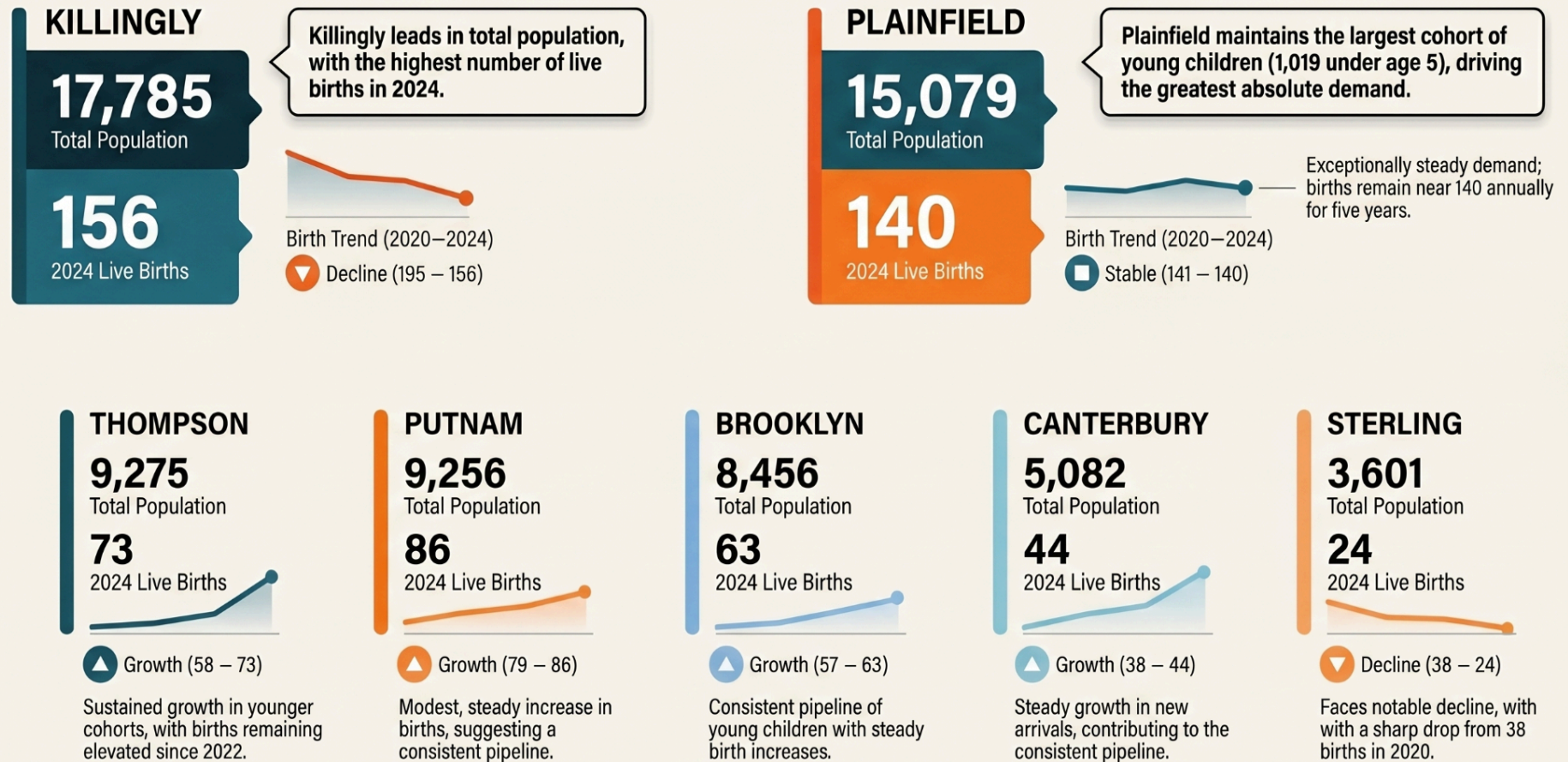
Overall Consensus / Potential Community Planning

- Influencing systems and policies
- Connecting families to resources
- Raising awareness of supports and services
- Advocating for funding and policy changes
- Convening partners to address shared challenges
- Gathering family voice through surveys and focus groups

Figure 1: Regional Snapshot

A Regional Snapshot: Population and Birth Trends Across Seven Towns (2020–2024)

Comparing total population and 2024 birth data to identify demand centers and trajectories for family and early childhood services.



Source: Analysis based on 2020–2024 regional data.

NotebookLM

Child and Family Basic Needs, Health, and Well-Being

Participants: The conversations took place during the April 21, 2026, Local Needs Assessment (LNA) Subcommittee meeting. Multiple perspectives were shared by the attendees, which included Kris Cicchetti, Chris Rosati Randall, Sam Withers, Melissa Kennedy, Sally Sherman, Courtney Langlois, Patty Bryant, Kim Mansfield, and Deb Adams.

Short Narrative: The data only tells part of the story. Through surveys, focus groups, and community conversations, families and providers shared concerns about affordability, housing, mental health, transportation, and access to services. While these challenges look different from town to town, they are affecting families throughout the region. The Northeast Early Childhood Council is well positioned to bring partners together, increase awareness of available resources, identify gaps in support systems, and advocate for solutions that help children and families thrive. Looking across the seven towns, several patterns emerge. Killingly, Plainfield, and Putnam consistently show higher levels of need across multiple data points, including household income, housing affordability, participation in public assistance programs, and utilization of early intervention services. Sterling also appears to face significant challenges, although some of the available data should be interpreted cautiously due to small sample sizes and larger margins of error. While Brooklyn, Canterbury, and Thompson generally fare better on many indicators, affordability concerns were evident across all communities. Housing costs, in particular, continue to impact families throughout the region, regardless of income level.

Data Sources:

OEC Provided Data:

- Housing & Homelessness
- Health and Economic
- Childhood Poverty
- Alice Data
- B-3 data

Notes:

The family surveys, holiday needs assessments, focus groups, and Community Table discussions provided valuable insight into the experiences of families across the region and helped validate themes that emerged in other data sources. While some datasets had limitations and may not fully capture local realities, the findings were generally consistent across multiple engagement efforts. Overall, the information was useful for identifying trends, informing interpretation, and guiding future community planning efforts.

Relevant findings from surveys, focus groups, and any other local data collection

We utilized NECC Holiday Needs Survey, NECC Family Needs Survey and Community table conversations from October. Based on the 2022 and 2025 Family Needs Surveys and the 2024-2025 Holiday Needs Assessments, the following are the brief relevant findings for Regional Trends and Barriers:

- The "Affordability Cliff": Many families earn too much to qualify for state assistance but cannot afford market-rate childcare or specialized therapies.
- Mental Health Crisis: Anxiety is the top-reported concern for both parents and children, increasingly viewed as a primary barrier to early learning.
- Transition Gaps: Families feel "lost" regarding developmental supports, such as speech, OT & PT, and once children age out of the Birth to Three program at age three.
- Resource Awareness Gap: Approximately 46% of respondents in the holiday survey reported not knowing how to access local or regional resources for help during holidays.

Data Interpretation

The data and community discussions paint a picture of our region where many families are working hard to meet their basic needs but continue to face significant challenges related to affordability, housing stability, transportation, mental health, and access to services. While the severity of these challenges varies across communities, common themes emerged throughout the region.

One of the strongest themes was financial strain. Although some towns report relatively high median household incomes, community members consistently described the impact of rising housing, childcare, transportation, and everyday living costs. The data suggest that many families may be experiencing the "affordability cliff," earning too much to qualify for public assistance while still struggling to meet basic needs. This highlights that economic hardship is not limited to families living below the poverty line and may be affecting a broader segment of the population than traditional measures capture.

Housing instability and homelessness also emerged as concerns. Committee members questioned whether current homelessness data accurately reflect the experiences of local families, noting that many families may not identify themselves as homeless or may be living in unstable housing situations that are not captured in existing data. This suggests that the true extent of housing insecurity in the region may be underrepresented.

Mental health and family well-being were identified as ongoing concerns across the region. Community members discussed challenges accessing mental health services, a lack of awareness of available resources, and increasing social isolation among parents and caregivers. These concerns were echoed in other community engagement efforts and suggest a need for continued investment in mental health supports, outreach, and community connections.

The discussion also highlighted the importance of early identification and support for children with developmental delays, disabilities, and special education needs. While services such as Birth to Three and preschool special education provide critical support, participants expressed concern about gaps in data, transitions between systems, and the availability of resources for families as children grow older.

A recurring theme throughout the discussion was that resources may exist, but families often do not know they are available or how to access them. Participants consistently identified awareness, navigation, and referral pathways as barriers. This suggests that improving communication, strengthening referral networks, and making resources easier to find may be just as important as expanding services themselves.

Several important data gaps were identified during the review process. Participants noted the need for additional information related to housing instability, transportation barriers, mental health service utilization, special education and Individualized Education Program (IEP) data, prenatal and infant health indicators, and Birth to Three eligibility and service utilization. The group also identified opportunities to supplement existing Office of Early Childhood data with information from schools, healthcare providers, community agencies, libraries, shelters, Head Start, family surveys, and parent focus groups.

So, now what? (Interpretation & Next Steps) Overall, the data suggest that many children and families in Northeast Connecticut benefit from strong community programs, partnerships, and support services. At the same time, families continue to face challenges that can affect their health, stability, and ability to access needed resources.

- Strong community partnerships and programs provide valuable support to children and families across the region.
- Families continue to experience challenges related to health, well-being, basic needs, and access to services.
- Awareness of available resources remains a barrier, with many families reporting difficulty finding or navigating supports.
- Opportunities exist to strengthen coordination and communication among service providers to improve access and reduce duplication of efforts.
- Ongoing engagement with families and community partners is important to better understand emerging needs and identify opportunities for collaboration and improvement.

Overall Consensus / Potential Community Planning

- Increase awareness of available supports and resources.
- Strengthen coordination and communication among service providers.
- Improve access to information and resource navigation. Continue engaging families and community partners to identify needs, gaps, and opportunities.
- Build on existing community strengths and partnerships to support children and families.

Figure 2: What Families Shared

What Families Shared: Top Topics from Our Community Table

Families spoke openly about the challenges they face and the support they need to thrive.



1 Mental Health Needs & Anxiety Among Children & Families



- Widespread concerns about anxiety, bullying, and family stressors
- Children carry the emotional load from parents
- Long waitlists and limited local providers
- Fear of stigma
- Limited early childhood mental health services, especially for ages 0–5



Families want more support before challenges become crises.

2 Barriers to Accessing Resources & Services



- Hard to navigate systems (SNAP, health insurance, school-based services, referrals)
- Fear of asking for help due to potential DCF involvement
- Difficulty getting appointments or services covered
- Programs don't always connect or refer effectively



Families want clear pathways and help navigating the system.

3 Financial Stress, Housing, Food Insecurity & Cost of Daily Living



- Even families not on public benefits are struggling
- High cost of food, transportation, sports, and healthy activities
- Housing insecurity
- Lack of transportation
- Stretching every dollar just to get by



Financial pressure affects every part of family life.

4 Physical Health Access & Healthy Lifestyle Challenges



- Long waitlists and high costs
- Limited playgrounds and local activities
- Challenges cooking healthy meals while working
- Lack of education about conditions like asthma
- Hard to find time and resources to be active



Families want healthy choices that are affordable and accessible.

5 Need for Strengthened Community Connection & Trust-Building



- Strong desire for parent connection and non-clinical peer spaces
- Events that bring families together
- Programs available outside regular work hours
- Building trust between schools and families is essential



Connection and trust help families feel supported, not alone.



Overall Summary

Across both breakout groups and the whole-group discussion, families voiced that stress, worry, and lack of accessible support systems are major drivers of mental and physical health challenges.



Financial Pressure



Food Insecurity



Housing Issues



Transportation Barriers



Mental Health Challenges



Confusing Systems

Families want help, but often do not know where to go, worry about judgment or DCF involvement, or find services inaccessible when they try.



Families deserve support that is easy to find, free of judgment, and designed with their real lives in mind.

What Families Said They Need Most



More coordinated community resource networks



Clear, simplified resource guides and referrals



Programs and supports offered outside of work hours



Parent connection opportunities to reduce isolation



Efforts to reduce stigma and build trusting relationships between schools, families, and service providers



FREE Resources That Can Help



211 Connecticut

Free, confidential help finding local resources. Dial 2-1-1 or visit 211ct.org



CT Talk It Out Line

Emotional support for any concern. Call or text 833-258-5011



WIC (Women, Infants & Children)
Healthy food, support, and resources.
ct.gov/wic



Northeast Early Childhood Council (NECC) Family Guide
Local programs, supports, and events for families.
necc.org/family-guide



Local Food Pantries & Meal Programs
Free food and meals for families in need. Call 211 for locations.



Stronger Together

When families, schools, and community partners work together, everyone thrives. Let's keep listening, connecting, and building a stronger community for all children and families.



Availability and Affordability of Early Care and Education

Participants: The conversations took place during the May 19, 2026 Local Needs Assessment (LNA) Subcommittee meeting. Multiple perspectives were shared by the attendees, which included Kristine Cicchetti (Liaison), Chris Rosati (Liaison), Melissa Kennedy (Parent Ambassador), Sally Sherman (Director, ESCT Pre-k program Killingly), Patty Bryant (Director, ESCT Program Putnam), Bethaney (Access Agency).

Data Sources:

OEC Provided Data:

- OEC Childcare C4K Data Sets
- Early State CT Data Sets
- State Head Start Data Sets
- Total Population under 5
- 211 Inquiries related to Childcare and parenting
- Childcare Data
- Number of licensed centers, group homes, family childcare homes, exempt programs

Notes:

Focus group participants consistently identified affordability, availability, and accessibility as the greatest challenges facing families seeking early care and education. Significant gaps were noted for infant and toddler care, before- and after-school care, summer programming, non-traditional hours, and inclusive care for children with special medical or behavioral needs. Participants also highlighted the impact of the "missing middle" affordability gap, workforce shortages, and transportation barriers, particularly in rural communities, resulting in many families piecing together care arrangements or choosing options based on cost and availability rather than quality.

Relevant findings from surveys, focus groups, and any other local data collection

- NECC Childcare and early Education Needs Survey - 98 Responses (May 2026)
- NCCN 2025 Childcare Center Survey (18 responses)
- NECC 2025 Preschool Needs Survey
- NECC 2021 (82 responses) & 2023 Childcare Needs Survey (75 Responses)

- Focus Groups with Public School Administrators and school staff

Discussions with families, providers, and community partners highlighted affordability, staffing, and access as some of the most significant challenges facing the region's early childhood system. Families consistently described childcare costs as a major financial burden, with many reporting that the cost of care rivals housing expenses. Participants noted that some families earn too much to qualify for assistance programs but still struggle to afford care, while others face additional costs for supplies, transportation, and extended care needs.

Providers shared concerns about the rising cost of operating childcare programs, including staffing, food, insurance, and other expenses. At the same time, staffing shortages continue to limit the number of children programs can serve. Several providers reported having available classroom space but being unable to open additional slots due to difficulties recruiting and retaining qualified staff.

Families also reported challenges finding care that aligns with their work schedules. Many expressed a need for full-day, full-year programming, as well as before- and after-school care and other flexible options. Access can be even more challenging for families of children with special needs, developmental delays, or behavioral concerns, as programs often lack the staffing, training, or resources needed to provide specialized support. Transportation barriers and difficulty finding information about available childcare options were also identified as ongoing challenges, particularly in some of the region's more rural communities.

CHILDCARE DEMAND:

Short Narrative: Demand for childcare remains strong throughout the region, particularly in Killingly, Plainfield, and Putnam. The greatest need continues to be for infant and toddler care, as well as programs that can support children with behavioral, developmental, or special needs. Families consistently reported needing full-day care, before- and after-school programming, summer care, and options that accommodate non-traditional work schedules. Long commutes and varying work hours often make part-day programs difficult for working families to utilize.

At the same time, the subcommittee recognized that part-day preschool programs can play an important role in expanding access to quality early learning opportunities. While full-day programs are often preferred by working families, part-day programs can allow providers to serve more children and families, increasing exposure to high-quality early childhood experiences for a greater number of preschool-aged children. Balancing the need for full-day care with the benefits of broader access through part-day programming remains an ongoing consideration for the region.

Data Interpretation

Demand - Local Families' Preferences

- **Proximity and Logistics:** Families highly prefer childcare that is located close to their home or work. A significant driver of demand is the need for care that aligns with parents' work and school schedules, including long commutes.
- **Full-Day and Flexible Scheduling:** There is a desperate need for full-day programming, "wrap-around services" (such as before and after school care), and summer programs. Families specifically express the need for extended or non-traditional hours (after 5:00 PM) to accommodate irregular shifts.
- **Infant and Toddler Care:** Across the region, including towns like Killingly, Plainfield, and Putnam, the highest demand is for infant and toddler slots, which are incredibly difficult to secure.
- **Inclusive and Specialized Care:** Families with children who have special medical or behavioral needs heavily rely on local programs, but there is a severe shortage of providers equipped or willing to handle these populations.
- **Trust and Culture:** Families value strong relationships and trust with their providers. In areas like Plainfield, there is also an identified preference and need for bilingual providers who can offer culturally and linguistically aligned care.

CHILDCARE AVAILABILITY:

Short Narrative:

While the need for childcare remains high, families often face challenges finding care that meets their needs. Many families rely on multiple providers or programs to cover a full workday because comprehensive care options are limited. Public school-based programs frequently face space, transportation, and staffing constraints, which can limit enrollment opportunities. Private providers are also experiencing staffing shortages that affect capacity and contribute to waitlists. *Families of children with challenging behavioral, developmental, or social-emotional needs face even greater barriers, as childcare providers with the staffing, training, and resources needed to support these children are extremely limited throughout the region.*

Availability can be especially challenging across the region. Families in more rural communities, such as Canterbury and Sterling, often have limited local childcare options and may need to travel to neighboring towns to access care. Data from the U.S. Child Care Desert Map also indicate that communities with higher concentrations of children and economic need, including Killingly, Plainfield, and Putnam, experience shortages in available childcare slots relative to demand. These combined factors contribute to ongoing challenges with both accessibility and availability of early care and education throughout the region.

Data Interpretation:

Availability - Child Care Providers by Setting

- **Public Schools:** Public school early childhood programs are widely viewed as high-quality options for families. However, many districts face space and staffing limitations that restrict the number of children they can serve. In an effort to maximize access to early learning opportunities, some programs offer half-day or part-day schedules, allowing more children to benefit from quality preschool experiences. While this approach expands access, it can create challenges for working families who need full-day care or wraparound services.
- **Center-Based and Family Providers:** Centers struggle to operate at full capacity due to a severe "staffing crisis" and an inability to offer competitive wages. Because of this, centers maintain lengthy waitlists, particularly for infants and toddlers. Furthermore, providers note a lack of 1-on-1 aides and funding to properly support children with special needs.
- **Rural Barriers:** In smaller, rural towns like Canterbury and Sterling, the supply of childcare is extremely limited, forcing families to commute to neighboring towns.
- **Fragmented Settings:** Because single settings rarely offer comprehensive, full-day wrap-around care, families are often forced to "piece together" childcare from multiple different providers, including family and friends
- **Note: Feedback from providers suggests that participation in Care 4 Kids may be influenced by factors beyond family demand, including administrative requirements, payment timelines, and reimbursement rates. Several providers expressed concerns that reimbursement levels in Northeast Connecticut do not adequately reflect the cost of care, which may limit their ability or willingness to expand subsidized slots. As a result, the structure of the subsidy system itself may present barriers to increasing access for families.**

CHILDCARE AFFORDABILITY:

Short Narrative: Affordability emerged as one of the most significant challenges facing families throughout the region. Many participants described the struggles of families who earn too much to qualify for programs such as Care 4 Kids, but not enough to comfortably afford the cost of childcare. As childcare expenses continue to rise, families are often forced to make difficult decisions about employment, work schedules, and the type of care they can access.

Providers are facing similar challenges. Rising costs for staffing, food, insurance, and other operating expenses make it difficult to keep tuition affordable for families while maintaining program quality and financial stability. *Participants also noted concerns about state reimbursement rates and funding levels, particularly in Eastern Connecticut, where providers report that current rates do not adequately reflect the true cost of care.*

As a result, families are often making childcare decisions based on availability and affordability rather than the program that best meets their needs or preferences. These challenges continue to affect both families seeking care and providers working to sustain high-quality early childhood programs.

Data Interpretation:

Affordability – Program and Cost Details

- **The "Missing Middle":** A recurring systemic issue is the "missing middle", families who earn too much to qualify for state subsidies like Care 4 Kids (C4K) but do not earn enough to afford the high market rate of childcare.
- **High Cost Burden:** The cost of childcare is cited as the single biggest burden for local families. For many, the high cost of living combined with steep tuition means families cannot afford to work, as childcare consumes much of their income.
- **Provider Financial Strain:** While families feel the cost is too high, providers are facing a "financial cliff." Rising costs for wages, insurance, and food make it nearly impossible for providers to keep tuition affordable while remaining solvent.
- **Subsidy and Funding Gaps:** The Care 4 Kids system is described as "awful" by providers because delayed reimbursements threaten their business sustainability. Furthermore, subsidized slots are not plentiful enough to meet demand, and **Eastern CT has the lowest reimbursement rates across the state.** Public schools also note that school funding is lacking, making it difficult to balance slots to receive full grant awards

So, now what? (Interpretation & Next Steps)

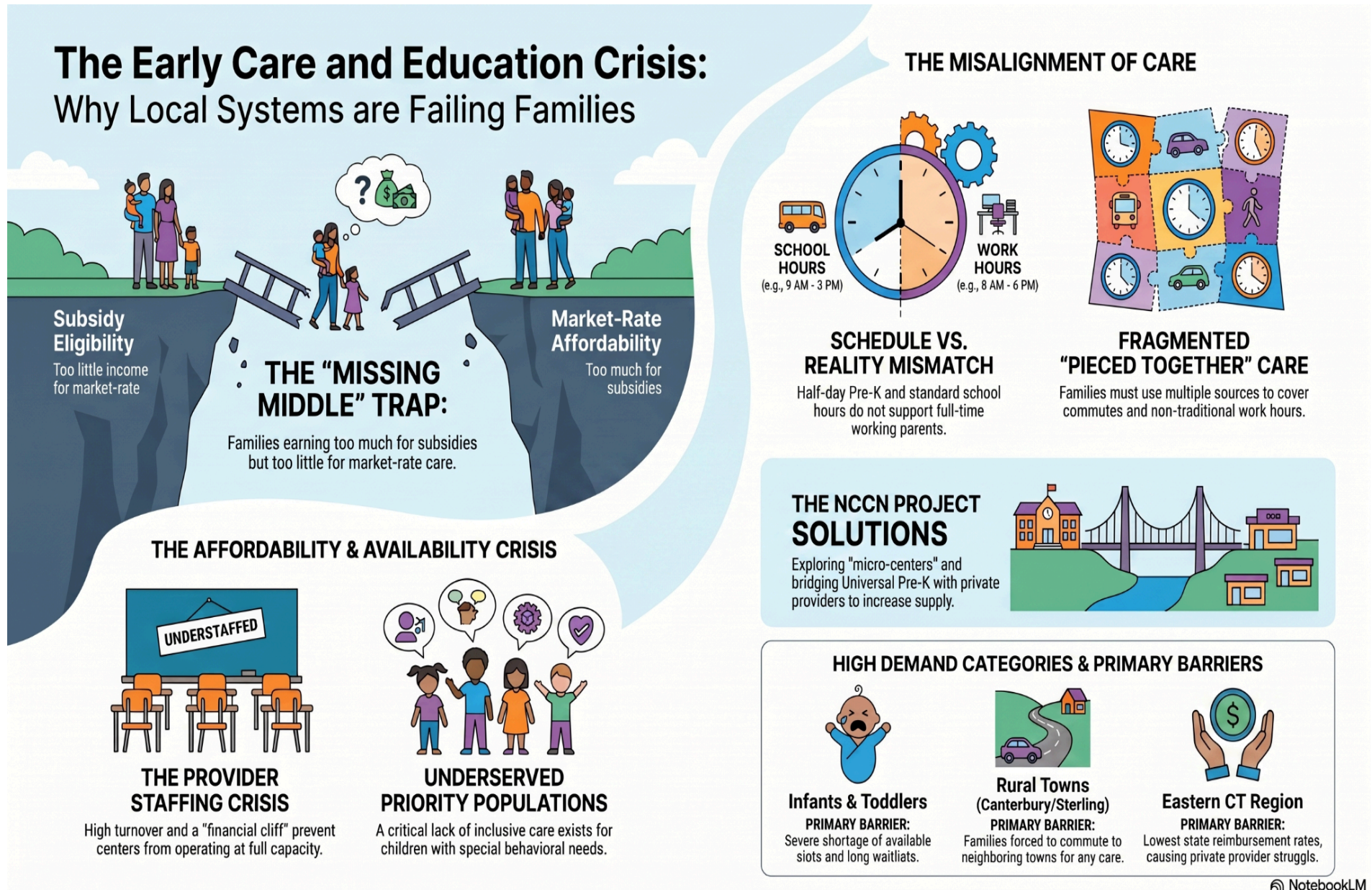
The findings from this Local Needs Assessment make it clear that there is no single solution to the childcare challenges facing families in our region. Families continue to struggle to find affordable childcare that meets their needs, particularly for infants and toddlers, full-day care, and children with specialized needs. At the same time, providers are working hard to meet demand while navigating staffing shortages, rising operating costs, and funding limitations.

As a community, there is an opportunity to build on existing strengths and work together to address these challenges. Continued collaboration among childcare providers, schools, community organizations, employers, and state partners will be important as we look for ways to expand access to care, support and retain the early childhood workforce, improve services for children with diverse needs, and help families better navigate available resources. While these challenges are complex, the feedback gathered through this process provides a clear direction for future planning, advocacy, and partnership efforts.

Overall Consensus / Potential Community Planning

- Advocate for policies and funding that improve childcare access, affordability, and sustainability.
- Strengthen partnerships and collaboration among providers, schools, employers, and community organizations.
- Increase family awareness of and access to early childhood resources and supports.
- Elevate parent voice and family engagement in community planning and decision-making.
- Promote strategies that improve access to care for infants and toddlers, children with diverse needs, and families in underserved communities.

Figure 3: The Early Care & Education Crisis:



Quality of Early Care and Education

Participants: The conversations took place during the May 19, 2026 Local Needs Assessment (LNA) Subcommittee meeting. Multiple perspectives were shared by the attendees, which included Kristine Cicchetti (Liaison), Chris Rosati (Liaison), Melissa Kennedy (Parent Ambassador), Sally Sherman (ESTCT Pre-k program), Patty Bryant (ESCT Program), Bethaney (Access Agency).

Short Narrative: While there are examples of high-quality early care and education programs across the region, access and affordability remain the most immediate concerns for families and providers. The northeastern CT region currently has no accredited family childcare providers, highlighting an opportunity to strengthen quality supports within this sector. Discussions with providers also identified concerns about the accuracy of some state data, including whether available data fully reflects the quality of local programs. As the region continues to gather and review data, there is interest in identifying effective supports and incentives that encourage quality improvement and participation in quality initiatives.

Data Sources:

OEC Provided Data:

- Elevate Data Sets
- NAEYC Accreditation Data
- OEC Registry Data
- Kindergarten Readiness Data

Notes:

Discussion participants identified several strengths, including accredited programs located throughout the region, strong participation in the Elevate system, and high-quality district-based preschool programs. However, concerns were raised regarding the accuracy of some quality-related data, particularly accreditation and Elevate reporting, suggesting a need for continued validation of available datasets. Significant gaps remain in accredited family child care, workforce capacity, and understanding whether the early childhood workforce reflects the languages and cultures of the families served. Participants also emphasized the need to better understand and strengthen incentives for accreditation and quality improvement efforts.

Relevant findings from surveys, focus groups, and any other local data collection

N/A

Data Interpretation

When discussing quality, the subcommittee identified both strengths and challenges within the region's early care and education system. Based on the available data, Killingly and Plainfield appear to have the highest concentration of accredited programs, and every town is reported to have at least one accredited program. However, several members questioned whether the data accurately reflect the current landscape. Committee members noted discrepancies between what is reported in state systems and what is known locally, leading to concerns about the reliability of some quality-related data. As a result, the group felt it was important to balance the available data with local knowledge and provider experience.

The subcommittee recognized several strengths, including the presence of accredited programs throughout the region, participation in the Elevate system, and the high-quality preschool opportunities available through local school districts and Family Resource Centers. At the same time, members noted for parents looking for programs, quality is often overshadowed by more immediate concerns related to access, affordability, and workforce shortages.

One topic that generated significant discussion was the lack of accredited family child care programs in the region. Members questioned what incentives currently exist for family child care providers to pursue accreditation, particularly given the time, cost, and effort involved. Similar concerns were raised about workforce development. While professional development opportunities and supports are available, members discussed the limited incentives for paraeducators and other early childhood staff to pursue credentials such as a Child Development Associate (CDA). In many cases, earning additional credentials does not result in increased compensation, making it difficult to encourage staff to invest the time and resources needed to advance their qualifications.

Overall, the subcommittee felt that additional conversations are needed around how quality is measured, how data are collected and reported, and what incentives exist for providers and staff to pursue higher levels of quality. Members agreed that meaningful quality improvement efforts will require both accurate data and stronger supports that recognize and reward professional growth and program quality.

Overall Consensus and Potential Community Planning Opportunities

The subcommittee agreed that the region has many high-quality early childhood programs and dedicated professionals serving children and families. However, members also recognized that quality cannot be viewed in isolation from broader challenges related to access, affordability, workforce recruitment and retention, and the availability of reliable local data.

Potential community planning opportunities include:

- Continue engaging providers and community partners in discussions about quality improvement and workforce development.
- Support efforts to better understand and communicate quality indicators available to families.
- Share local perspectives and experiences to help inform state and regional discussions related to quality measurement and reporting.
- Explore opportunities to strengthen pathways and incentives for early childhood professionals pursuing credentials and professional development.
- Continue monitoring trends related to family child care, including barriers to accreditation and participation in quality initiatives.
- Remain engaged in local and statewide advocacy efforts related to the early childhood workforce, compensation, and program sustainability.
- Continue partnering with the Northeast Connecticut Child Care Network (NCCN) and other regional initiatives to better understand provider challenges and identify strategies that support a strong and sustainable early childhood system.

Additional Supports for Children and Families

Interpretation: The conversations took place during the May 19, 2026 Local Needs Assessment (LNA) Subcommittee meeting. Multiple perspectives were shared by the attendees, which included Kristine Cicchetti (Liaison), Chris Rosati (Liaison), Melissa Kennedy (Parent Ambassador), Sally Sherman (ESTCT Pre-k program), Patty Bryant (ESCT Program), Bethaney (Access Agency).

Short Narrative: Northeast Connecticut has a strong network of supports available to children and families, including state programs, community-based services, family resource centers, home visiting programs, and local organizations. Survey data showed that WIC was one of the most utilized and valued resources, with nearly half of respondents reporting they had used the program. Connecticut Paid Leave (34%) and Birth to Three (33%) were also commonly used supports. Families shared positive experiences with local resources such as TEEG, the IHSP Diaper Bank, Together We Blossom, and Family Resource Center programs.

While many supports exist, families consistently reported challenges finding, accessing, and navigating available resources. Participants noted that parents often learn about services after they would have been most helpful, particularly during pregnancy and the first year of a child's life. Although tools such as the Sparkler app are available to support child development, community data suggest that ongoing engagement remains low, with activity rates below 30% in most towns. Families also expressed a desire for more opportunities to connect with other parents, particularly through playgroups, peer support, and activities offered during evenings or weekends.

Mental health emerged as another area of concern. While resources are available, awareness remains low, particularly for support and crisis lines. For example, 79% of survey respondents reported they had never heard of the Talk It Out Line. Overall, the discussion highlighted a need for stronger outreach, earlier connections to resources, and easier ways for families to find information. Many participants felt that a more centralized approach to sharing resources could help reduce information overload and make existing supports easier to access.

Data Sources:

OEC Provided Data:

- Number of Children served through home visiting
- Children age 1-5 who receive developmental screenings
- ASQ Data
- Sparkler Data

Notes:

Discussion participants noted that the region has a strong foundation of family supports, including WIC, Birth to Three, CT Paid Leave, and a variety of local resources. However, families continue to report difficulty navigating services, feeling overwhelmed by fragmented information, and lacking awareness of available supports, particularly related to mental health. Key opportunities identified included improving resource coordination and outreach, expanding supports for working parents and fathers, strengthening peer connections, and collecting additional demographic data to better understand unmet needs.

Relevant findings from surveys, focus groups, and any other local data collection

NECC New Parent Survey 2026 - January through March - 76 Parents across region

Based on the survey responses of 76 parents in our region, a few themes stood out. Families expressed a strong interest in information and support related to infant and child development, parenting, and mental health. The most requested topics included breastfeeding support, car seat safety, child development and milestones, childcare options, postpartum mental health support, and ongoing emotional support for stress, anxiety, and feeling overwhelmed. Parents also highlighted the importance of practical support such as diapers, food, clothing, and opportunities to connect with other parents through support groups and peer networks. Comments reinforced the need for information that is easy to access and available when families need it, particularly during the demanding first year after a child's birth.

The survey also revealed a significant opportunity to increase awareness of available resources. While respondents who had used local and state programs generally reported positive experiences, many families indicated they had either never heard of or never used several services, including home visiting programs, maternal mental health supports, and family resource programs. Feedback from families who participated in programs such as Nurturing Families Network, WIC, Strong Like a Mother, and Together We Blossom was overwhelmingly positive, with several respondents describing these supports as invaluable during pregnancy and the postpartum period. Overall, the findings suggest that families value both practical resources and emotional support, and that greater outreach and resource navigation could help more families connect with the services available in the region.

Data Interpretation:

A recurring theme throughout the discussion was parental isolation, particularly during pregnancy and the early years of parenting. Families expressed interest in additional opportunities for peer connection, support groups, and community activities. Mental health also emerged as an important concern, with participants noting that many families remain unaware of available support and resources.

So, Now What? (Interpretation and Next Steps)

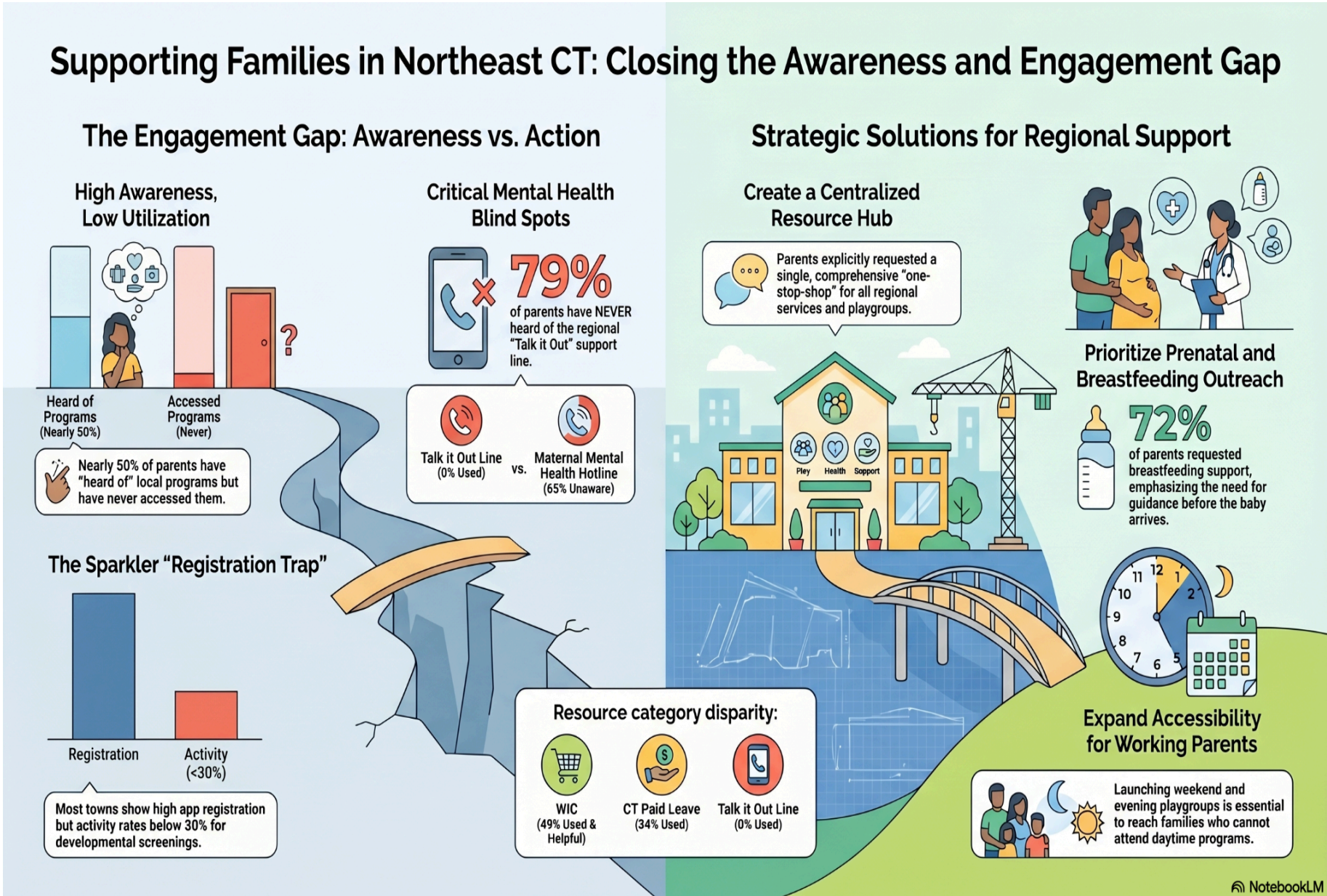
The discussion suggests that our NE region's greatest challenge is not necessarily a lack of services, but rather helping families learn about, access, and navigate the supports that already exist. Families consistently described feeling overwhelmed by information and uncertain about where to begin when seeking help. This points to a need for stronger outreach, earlier connections to resources, and more coordinated communication among community partners.

Participants also highlighted the importance of reducing social isolation and strengthening connections among families. Opportunities to connect with peers, access mental health supports, and engage in family-friendly activities were viewed as important components of overall family well-being. Working families may benefit from additional evening and weekend opportunities, while fathers and other caregivers may benefit from more intentional outreach and inclusive programming.

Overall Consensus and Potential Community Planning Opportunities:

- Strengthening outreach to expectant and new parents through healthcare providers and community partners (working on “new parent resource kit” - in development phase)
- Expanding awareness and promotion of existing family supports, mental health resources, and developmental tools (in progress already)
- Continuing to enhance resource navigation efforts through centralized and easy-to-access information (in progress)
- Exploring additional opportunities for parent support groups, playgroups, and peer-to-peer connections (parent ambassadors just started this)
- Increasing the availability of evening and weekend programming to better meet the needs of working families (PA's already incorporated this into parent meetups)
- Identifying strategies to engage fathers and other caregivers in family support services.
- Continuing to gather family feedback to better understand emerging needs and barriers to access.

Figure 4: Supporting Families in Northeast CT



LGP Structure

How do we make decisions as an LGP?

As a regional collaborative with more than 20 years of experience, the Northeast Early Childhood Council (NECC) is committed to collaborative decision-making and strives to reach consensus whenever possible. When consensus cannot be reached and a formal decision is required, actions are determined by a majority vote of members present.

We are intentionally structured to include representatives from across the region, including parents, Early Start Connecticut programs, Family Resource Centers, school districts, community agencies, and other stakeholders. Every effort is made to ensure representation from each of the seven NECC towns so that regional decisions reflect the needs and perspectives of the communities served. This approach helps ensure that all towns have a voice in decisions related to priorities, planning, and the use of resources.

To maintain transparency and avoid conflicts of interest, any member who has a financial interest in a matter being considered must disclose the conflict and abstain from voting on that item. This helps ensure that decisions are made in the best interest of the region and the children and families served by the NECC.

What is the role of Liaison(s), if multiple, how do they divide up responsibilities? What is the role of Parent Ambassador(s)?

LGP Roles	Responsibilities	Notes
Liaison: Regional Director	Serves as the primary point of contact for the LGP, managing grant administration, reporting, budgets, staff and parent ambassador supervision, and coordination with the Office of Early Childhood (OEC). The position also leads community engagement efforts by building partnerships, connecting families to resources, facilitating regional meetings and events, and supporting the	Part Time Position (Contracted)

	development and implementation of the Local Needs Assessment and Community Plan.	
Liaison: Regional Coordinator	Supports the implementation of NECC initiatives through family outreach, resource distribution, data collection, survey management, and community engagement activities. Responsibilities include coordinating Early Learning and Social Emotional Learning (SEL) Kits, supporting Parent Ambassadors, maintaining communication and resource systems, organizing outreach events and parent workshops, and helping build partnerships that connect families to services and strengthen early childhood supports throughout the region.	Part-Time Position (Contracted)
Liaison: Quality Assurance	The Quality Assurance Monitor supports continuous quality improvement across ESCT-funded programs by conducting site monitoring visits, providing coaching and technical assistance, and helping programs meet ESCT and Office of Early Childhood requirements. The position also facilitates collaboration among program directors, participates in regional planning and leadership activities, and works closely with early	Part Time - Contracted

	childhood providers to strengthen program quality and share information across the region.	
Parent Ambassador(s) We have 4 to cover our region	Parent Ambassadors provide the parent voice in NECC's work by sharing lived experiences, building connections with families, and helping identify community needs and priorities. They participate in meetings, training, outreach events, and parent leadership activities, while supporting communication efforts, hosting parent meet-ups, and helping connect families to resources and opportunities throughout the region.	

Who is part of our Community Table and how often does it meet? Are there any small-group or committee structures?

The Northeast Early Childhood Council (NECC) utilizes a two-tiered Community Table structure to support regional planning, decision-making, and community engagement. The Community Table serves as the primary leadership and decision-making body and consists of 20 active members representing a broad range of sectors, including Early Start Connecticut programs, parents, Family Resource Centers, Head Start, social service agencies, regional liaisons, healthcare partners, and the fiscal agent. This group meets 6-8 times per year to guide strategy, review data, monitor progress, and support implementation of regional priorities.

The broader Community Table serves as an open membership forum that brings together parents, early childhood providers, community organizations, schools, healthcare partners, and other stakeholders from across the seven-town region. Meeting 2-3 times annually, this group provides valuable feedback, identifies emerging needs, shares resources, and helps ensure that community planning efforts are informed by the perspectives and experiences of families and providers.

In addition, NECC convenes several workgroups and communities of practice throughout the year to focus on specific priorities and initiatives, including Early Start Connecticut Program Director meetings, Mental Health Task Force meetings, and project-based workgroups that support activities such as the Local Needs Assessment, Community Plan, and family engagement initiatives.

Describe and interpret the data:

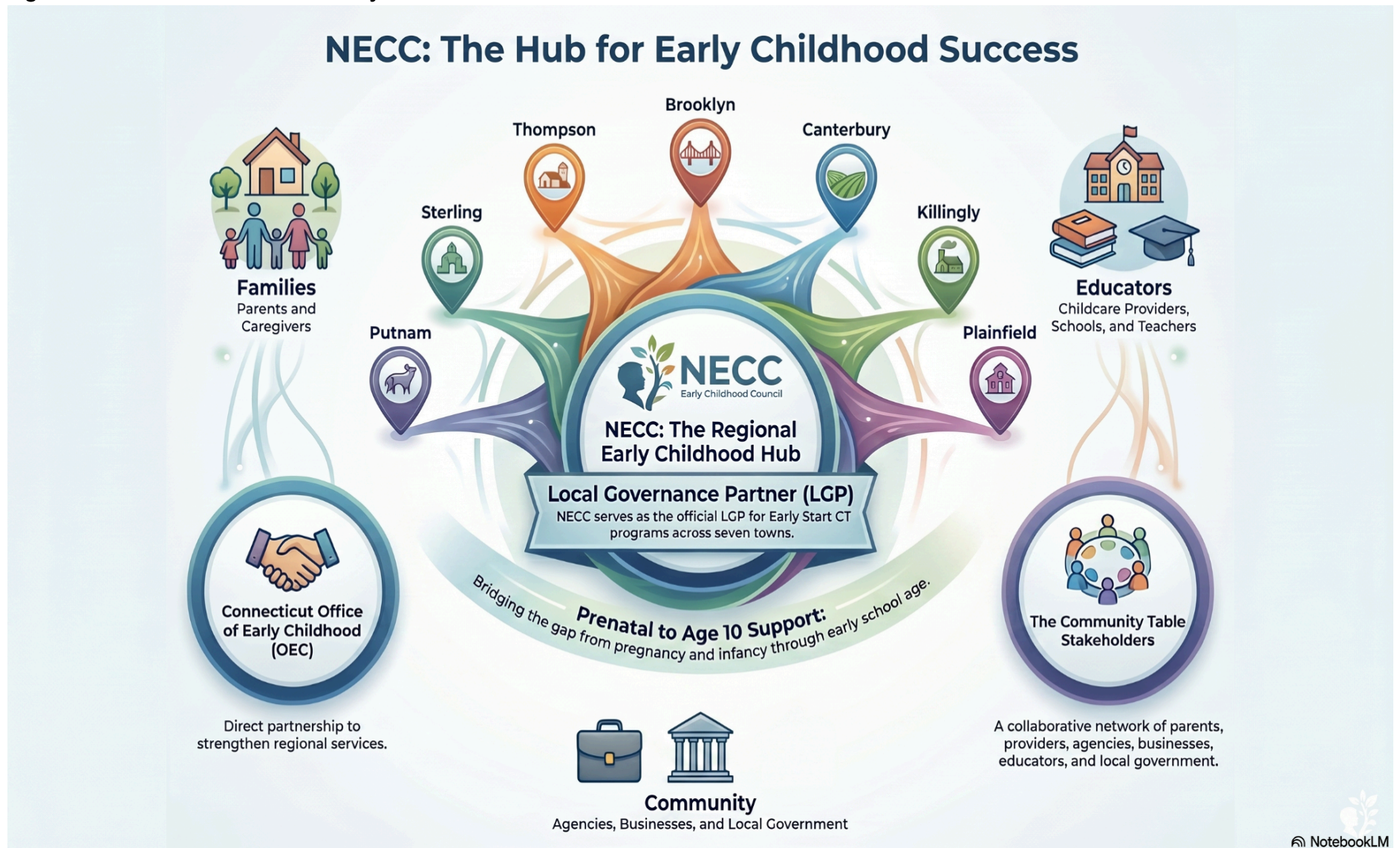
The Northeast Early Childhood Council (NECC) has established a strong regional structure to support collaboration, communication, and decision-making across the seven-town region. Our structure includes multiple liaison roles, including a part-time Regional Director, part-time Regional Coordinator, and Quality Assurance Monitors. These individuals have longstanding involvement with the Council and have developed trusted relationships with families, providers, schools, and community partners throughout the region. Their deep knowledge of the community, combined with years of relationship-building and collaboration, has helped strengthen regional engagement efforts and support ongoing coordination across the early childhood system.

Family voice is strengthened through four strategically placed Parent Ambassadors who represent diverse communities across the region and serve as trusted connections between families and local resources. Two Parent Ambassadors have served in their roles for more than three years, providing continuity, leadership, and valuable insight into the evolving needs of children and families. Through outreach, relationship-building, and community engagement, Parent Ambassadors help ensure that family perspectives remain central to regional planning and decision-making.

The Community Table includes 20 active members representing Early Start Connecticut programs, parents, Head Start, Family Resource Centers, social service agencies, regional liaisons, and the fiscal agent. Additional engagement occurs through monthly Program Administrator meetings, the Mental Health Task Force, project-specific workgroups, and a regional listserv of more than 100 community partners and stakeholders. Family engagement extends beyond formal meetings through a parent listserv of more than 1,000 families across the region's seven towns, developed through outreach events, workshops, and community networking. NECC also maintains active Facebook and Instagram platforms to share resources, gather feedback, and engage families in regional early childhood initiatives.

The data suggest that NECC has built a strong foundation for regional collaboration and family engagement. Multiple opportunities exist for families, providers, and community partners to inform planning and decision-making. As a rural region, continued outreach and relationship-building will remain important to ensure that diverse voices and perspectives are represented in the council's work.

Figure 5: NECC “The Hub” for Early Childhood Success



Strengths, Gaps, and Focus Areas

Throughout this assessment, families, providers, educators, and community partners shared many of the same concerns. Families are working hard to meet their basic needs while navigating rising costs for housing, childcare, food, healthcare, and other daily expenses. Many described feeling caught in the middle, earning too much to qualify for assistance programs but still struggling to make ends meet.

At the same time, our region has many strengths to build upon. Participants consistently highlighted the dedication of local providers, schools, Family Resource Centers, healthcare partners, and community organizations that work together to support children and families. However, many families reported not knowing what resources are available, how to access them, or where to turn when they need help. Challenges related to mental health, social isolation, and transitions between services were also recurring themes.

These findings reinforce the importance of continued collaboration across the region. By strengthening partnerships, improving communication and resource navigation, elevating family voice, and advocating for policies that address barriers facing children and families, the Northeast Early Childhood Council can continue to play an important role in connecting communities and helping families access the support they need to thrive.

Early Care and Education Findings

Regarding the Early Care and Education Discussion, the most significant gaps between supply and demand continue to be infant and toddler care, full-day programs with flexible or non-traditional hours, and care for children with complex behavioral, developmental, or medical needs. The most underserved populations include "missing middle" families who do not qualify for assistance but struggle to afford childcare, families in rural communities such as Canterbury and Sterling who often need to travel outside their town for care, and children with disabilities or specialized needs. Providers reported that limited funding, staffing, training opportunities, and access to additional supports can make it challenging to fully serve children who require more individualized attention. Furthermore, the childcare system is impacted by rising operating costs, staffing shortages, and reimbursement rates that do not reflect the true cost of care, resulting in reduced capacity and lengthy waitlists across the region.

If state, federal, or **FY28 Early Start CT funding** becomes available, the community should prioritize investments in the following three areas:

- **Expand Infant, Toddler, and Full-Day Care:** Direct funds to address the severe shortage of infant and toddler slots, and help programs who can offer full-day, wrap-around care, including extended and non-traditional hours, that aligns with working parents' schedules.
- **Support Children with Diverse Needs:** Provide dedicated funding and resources, such as 1-on-1 aides, to build the capacity of local early childhood programs so they can safely and effectively support children with complex behavioral, developmental, or special medical needs.
- **Stabilize the Early Childhood Workforce:** Focus funding and advocacy on improving state provider reimbursement rates (such as Care 4 Kids) and offering competitive wages to solve the ongoing staffing crisis, ensuring early learning programs remain financially viable for providers and affordable for families.

Focus Areas

Focus Area 1: Childcare Access, Affordability, and System Advocacy

Families, providers, employers, and community partners consistently pointed to childcare access and affordability as some of the biggest challenges facing the region. Across surveys, focus groups, and community discussions, participants shared concerns about the limited availability of infant and toddler care, a shortage of options for children with special needs, and the lack of programs that meet the needs of families working non-traditional hours. Many families also reported struggling to find care that is both available and affordable.

Participants recognized that these challenges are connected to larger issues affecting the childcare system, including workforce shortages, rising operating costs, reimbursement rates, and the challenges faced by families who earn too much to qualify for assistance but still cannot afford the cost of care. There was strong agreement that continued advocacy and collaboration among providers, community partners, employers, and policymakers will be important in addressing these challenges and supporting a stronger childcare system.

Additional discussions highlighted the importance of supporting program quality, expanding specialized care options, and strengthening the early childhood workforce to help meet the current and future needs of children and families across the region.

Focus Area 2: Family Engagement, Resource Awareness, and Connection to Supports

Families across the region shared that finding help can be challenging, even when services are available. Many parents said they are not always sure what resources exist, who to contact, or where to start when they need support. Childcare, developmental and behavioral health services, parenting resources, assistance with basic needs, and timely referrals were among the most frequently discussed needs.

Families also emphasized the importance of personal connections and trusted relationships when seeking support. Participants expressed a desire for more outreach that helps families feel welcomed, informed, and connected to available resources. They also noted the importance of engaging all caregivers, including fathers, grandparents, and others who play a role in raising children.

Focus Area 3: Community Collaboration, Shared Leadership & Regional Coordination

The Community Table and LGP structure were viewed as important tools for bringing people together to address the needs identified through this Local Needs Assessment. Participants highlighted the value of having families, providers, schools, healthcare partners, community organizations, municipalities, and other stakeholders at the table to share information, discuss challenges, and work toward common goals.

Given the rural nature of Northeast Connecticut, participants recognized that no single organization can address these issues alone. There was strong agreement that the Community Table plays an important role in fostering collaboration, building relationships, and creating opportunities for different sectors to learn from one another. Participants noted that bringing diverse voices together helps broaden perspectives, strengthen advocacy efforts, and support more coordinated responses to community needs. Stakeholders also emphasized the importance of continuing to include family voice in planning and decision-making. Hearing directly from families helps ensure that priorities, strategies, and future investments reflect the realities and experiences of those most impacted by the challenges identified throughout the assessment.

LGP Structure Needs

NECC engages community members and partners in a variety of ways, including the Community Table, workgroups, task forces, Parent Ambassadors, family leadership initiatives, and project-specific committees. As a regional organization serving seven towns, we understand that not every partner can regularly attend meetings. Because of this, we place a strong emphasis on building relationships and staying connected with organizations and individuals throughout the region.

NECC strives to continuously assess and expand its network of partnerships to ensure we are engaging the people and organizations needed to advance our mission.. This includes outreach to libraries, healthcare providers, employers, housing organizations, transportation providers, faith-based organizations, family child care providers, and families from diverse backgrounds. While not all of these partners participate directly in Community Table meetings, their input helps inform our work and identify opportunities to strengthen representation and engagement across the region.

The current Local Governance Partner (LGP) structure effectively supports providers and families throughout the region by creating multiple opportunities to gather community input, identify emerging needs, and respond to local priorities through targeted workgroups and collaborative planning. The flexibility to establish project-based committees and task forces has enabled the Northeast Early Childhood Council (NECC) to address a variety of issues, including mental health, family engagement, Local Needs Assessment activities, childcare access, and resource development. A particular strength of the current structure is the intentional inclusion of parents as active partners in planning and decision-making, ensuring that family perspectives help shape regional priorities and initiatives.

The Northeast Early Childhood Council (NECC) utilizes a variety of communication strategies to reach childcare providers, community partners, and diverse groups of families throughout the region. These include Community Table meetings, program administrator meetings, email distribution lists, social media, Parent Ambassadors, the NECC website, resource guides, community events, workshops, and partnerships with local organizations. While these strategies provide multiple avenues for communication and reach many families and providers, the Local Needs Assessment findings indicate that communication and awareness remain ongoing challenges. Some families continue to report difficulty finding information about available services, childcare options, and community resources. The findings suggest that additional outreach strategies are needed to engage families who are not currently connected to schools, childcare programs, healthcare providers, or social service agencies. Continued collaboration with trusted community partners and the use of multiple communication channels will remain essential to improving awareness and access to information across the region.

The Northeast Early Childhood Council (NECC) has effectively leveraged its current resources by bringing together funding, partnerships, and community assets to support children, families, and early childhood providers across the region. Through Early Start Connecticut funding, grants, donations, community partnerships, Parent Ambassadors, family engagement activities,

community events, and resource-sharing efforts, the council has responded to emerging needs and developed initiatives such as the New Parent Resource Kit, mental health supports, Early Learning and Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) Kits, budgeting workshops, parent leadership training, and Northeast Child Care Network (NCCN) childcare projects. While these efforts have strengthened the region's early childhood system, the Local Needs Assessment also identified opportunities to build on this work by further strengthening partnerships, increasing awareness of available resources, and expanding outreach to families who are not yet connected to services. Moving forward, NECC will continue exploring new funding opportunities, engaging partners from underrepresented sectors, and identifying additional ways to connect families, providers, and community resources throughout the seven-town region.

The Local Needs Assessment identified several opportunities where additional support from SHINE, the Office of Early Childhood (OEC), and community partners could strengthen the work of the Local Governance Partner and increase meaningful parent engagement.** Parent Ambassadors expressed interest in professional development opportunities focused on facilitative leadership, effective communication, meeting facilitation, and conflict resolution to build confidence in leadership roles and community discussions. Participants also emphasized the importance of offering trainings in different regions of the state whenever possible, as regional locations can reduce travel time and make participation more accessible for parents and community members, particularly those living in rural areas. In addition, access to childcare during OEC and SHINE trainings and meetings was identified as a key support that would help parents of young children participate more fully. For parents with school-aged children, scheduling trainings during school hours, after morning drop-off and before afternoon pick-up, was also identified as an effective strategy to reduce barriers to participation and increase attendance.

Action Step	Potential Lead/Owner
Continue recruitment of underrepresented Community Table members	Community Table members, staff and parent ambassadors
Expand outreach efforts to families who are not currently connected to services	Staff, PA's & Community Partners
Continue collaboration with NCCN to address childcare access, affordability, and workforce challenges	NECC Staff, NCCN Partners, Community Table
Promote and expand use of the NECC website, resource guide, and family resource tools	NECC Staff & Parent Ambassadors
Seek additional funding and partnership opportunities to address identified community plan needs	Community Table, Fiduciary Agent & NECC Staff
Use Local Needs Assessment findings to inform the next Community Plan and workgroup priorities	Community Table, Staff and Parent Ambassadors