

SURVEYING THE LANDSCAPE:

*Early Childhood
Education in
Mississippi*



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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This research was initiated by the SECAC Standards Committee while discussing committee goals and the plan to reach those goals. After the committee decided that a survey of childcare directors was needed to understand usage of and access to the Mississippi Early Learning Standards and Guidelines, NSPARC was asked to provide assistance in conducting the formal research. This research, however, does not address how childcare directors understand the Mississippi Early Learning Standards and Guidelines. Each month after the start of the research project, SECAC was briefed on progress. This report is a culmination of the responses from childcare providers.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is a compilation of the process and the results of a research project undertaken by the Standards Committee of the State Early Childhood Advisory Council (SECAC) and conducted by NSPARC in Mississippi. From the first week in August until the middle of September 2015, the Standards Committee conducted a survey evaluating the early childhood landscape throughout the state to gather input from early childcare directors regarding early learning standards and guidelines, educational and professional credentials, and day-to-day center operations. This study will inform the committee and help with the development of future committee goals centered on early childcare providers understanding of the early learning standards and guidelines. Of the 1,612 childcare directors invited to take the survey, 635 participated. More than half of the surveyed childcare directors indicated that they are currently utilizing Mississippi's Early Learning Standards and Guidelines. Although using the standards and guidelines is voluntary, directors believed that more on-site training and electronic communications would increase participation. Furthermore, the majority of respondents have received technical assistance for various programs and are interested in receiving more assistance. Nearly all directors indicated that they provided some variation of developmental feedback.

While the surveyed directors stated that the majority of their childcare center staff lacks either a certificate or a college degree, the majority of center directors are college educated, with some having multiple degrees. Nearly half of the directors with bachelor's degrees hold a degree in early childhood education, indicating that directors place a high value on specializing in the unique needs of young children. Moreover, directors considered seeking credentials and accessing professional development very important.

In addition, directors indicated their staff is better positioned to facilitate early learning and development and provide family support than to address mental health, health, and nutrition needs. Directors tended to state that centralizing early childhood education under a single agency is preferable to multiple agencies, but opinions on who should have oversight vary widely.

Based on the findings, this report makes the following recommendations to improve early childhood education in the state:

- Future research should examine conceptual and content understanding of the Early Learning Standards and Guidelines as well as how they are being used. This initial statewide survey was limited to questions regarding the use and access of the standards and guidelines. While answers to these questions were likely connected to levels of understanding among early childhood practitioners, additional inquiry in this direction would provide the necessary data to investigate this relationship. The effects of standards and guidelines usage on providers' assessment and progress monitoring practices also merit further analysis.
- Early childhood stakeholders should investigate potential pathways to help early childhood educators obtain certification and degrees. Further research is needed to determine the primary reasons that reported percentages are so low. Factors such as high industry turnover, lack of access to formal education, and financial hardship may be at play.
- The research team recommends that this survey be done annually. As the state moves forward in advancing early childhood initiatives, results of an annual survey can then be used to track longitudinal growth in learning standards and guidelines usage, training levels, and professional development efforts across every region of the state.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of Mississippi’s Early Learning Standards and Guidelines is to provide a roadmap for early childhood best practices that is aligned with the standards-based expectations of public school at kindergarten entry. Because adopting the standards and guidelines is a voluntary endeavor, it is challenging to determine whether and where standards and guidelines are being implemented and valued across Mississippi’s early childhood landscape. The State Early Childhood Advisory Council (SECAC), convened and appointed by Governor Phil Bryant of Mississippi, identified “implementing high quality standards for early education across the state” as one of its primary goals and set an objective to “establish a plan to ensure ongoing awareness and use of Mississippi Early Learning Standards and guidelines for parents and providers” (Mississippi Blueprint for Education, 2014). To inform this process, a Standards Committee comprised of SECAC members made the decision to create a statewide survey on current usage and perceptions to be conducted by an independent research team.

The survey was designed to reach out to all 1,612 of Mississippi’s licensed childcare facilities, and viewed as an opportunity to gather information from a large number of early childhood professionals at one moment in time. The survey was also viewed as a vehicle to encourage the inclusion of additional questions that could paint a broader, more accurate picture of the early childhood landscape. This large-scale study addressed standards and guidelines, educational and professional backgrounds of childhood practitioners, strategies for closing gaps in staff knowledge and child outcomes, early childhood governance, and other operations questions.

The information in this report represents the viewpoints, practices, and operational realities of early childhood education and care providers in all nine childcare districts outlined by the Mississippi State Department of Health. This report includes feedback from directors of both private and non-private organizations, non-profit and for-profit entities, and those serving small ($n < 20$) through large ($n < 100$) child populations. The research study utilized a 20-minute telephone-assisted and web-based survey to answer descriptive questions, resulting in 16 key findings that can inform and help develop early childhood education and care policies.

STUDY METHODOLOGY

Survey Instrument Design

The survey was developed using core questions provided by subject matter experts of the SECAC Standards Committee. These questions represented the primary “unknowns” about the state of Mississippi early childhood education and care settings that the committee believed necessary to help inform public policy.

Each question was analyzed to determine possible response patterns that might require clarification, and in many instances, follow-up questions were developed to gather additional information.

The survey was designed to be administered both by telephone and via online formats. The final version of the survey consisted of 39 questions divided into the following six sections: (1) early learning standards and guidelines, (2) professional expertise and strategies to close the gap, (3) governance models, (4) director educational profile, (5) childcare provider staff profile, and (6) childcare center profile. Appendix A contains a copy of the survey.

Survey Pilot

To test the validity of the survey instrument, a representative sample of 25 early childhood care providers was invited to review the survey content in June. This resulted in a focus group of 11 providers who provided feedback regarding the questions, answer choices, and corresponding terminology. Focus group participants were provided with copies of the proposed survey and met in person to discuss and suggest revisions and clarifications. This information was then used to fine-tune the survey before it was administered.

Population and Recruitment

The target population for this study was all 1,612 directors from licensed childcare providers in the state. Data from the Mississippi State Department of Health and the Mississippi Department of Human Services were used to compile the target population. Participants were recruited through letters mailed to their respective center's address on record. Directors were contacted via telephone during regular hours of operation. Multiple efforts were made to reach each eligible director.

As a result of these recruitment efforts, a total of 635 directors participated in the survey, with representation from all nine regions of the state as defined by the Mississippi State Department of Health (see Appendix B). Approximately three-fourths of surveyed directors oversee private centers, either non-profit or for-profit (34 and 42 percent of respondents, respectively). About one-fifth of directors supervise public preschool, Head Start, or Early Head Start locations. A small percentage of directors identified themselves as "other" (6 percent). Survey participants represented a wide range of center sizes, from small centers licensed to serve less than 20 children (14 percent) to those licensed to serve populations of more than 100 children (17 percent). The majority of directors in this survey employ 10 or fewer staff members working with children. More detailed information about the characteristics of the 635 survey respondents is shown in Table 1.

Data Collection

The survey instrument was administered from July 6 to August 12, 2015. All 1,612 directors of licensed early childhood care providers on record throughout the state were eligible. Directors were given the option of completing the survey via telephone interview or online. Providers who requested web links received follow-up calls every three days until completion of the survey. Voicemails were left for providers who could not be reached, and requested callbacks were scheduled at the convenience of the provider. The telephone- and web-based options of Voxco, a comprehensive suite of electronic data collection tools, were used to manage the process.

From the targeted 1,612 childcare directors, a total of 635 directors completed the survey via telephone or online web link, yielding a response rate of 39.4 percent and a cooperation rate of 86.2 percent.

Table 1: Characteristics of Participating Directors

	N	PERCENT
MSDH REGIONS (N=635)		
Region 1	56	8.8
Region 2	80	12.6
Region 3	59	9.3
Region 4	65	10.2
Region 5	165	26.0
Region 6	49	7.7
Region 7	28	4.4
Region 8	55	8.7
Region 9	78	12.3
CHILDCARE CENTER SIZE (N=584)		
< 19	84	14.3
20-49	202	34.4
50-99	203	34.5
100-199	86	14.6
200 +	9	2.2
STAFF MEMBERS AT CENTERS (N=621)		
< 5	200	32.5
5-10	232	37.7
11-20	122	19.8
> 20	67	9.9
CHILDCARE CENTER PROFILE (N=622)		
Early Head Start/Head Start	53	8.5
Public Pre-K	58	9.3
Private, For Profit	263	42.3
Private, Not for Profit	210	33.8
Other	38	6.0

DATA ANALYSIS

The quantitative analysis of the survey data uses descriptive statistics to paint a picture of the early childhood care landscape. Offering the survey to the entire licensed childcare provider population and obtaining a high overall response rate of 39.4 percent and an 86.2 cooperation rate suggest these survey data have strong reliability. SECAC's role as the expert panel to generate survey questions and the use of a pilot study with a focus group provide a measure of construct validity for the data. The researchers held frequent calibration sessions to ensure that data interpretation and presentation were consistent and to account for all collected information.

Data Integrity

Data integrity was a high priority during the analysis process. Several efforts were made to contact any directors with incomplete surveys so that they could be retained in the survey population. Crosschecks were done to ensure that an individual's answers to interrelated survey questions were consistent. A minimum cut-off value of 20 answered questions served as an additional inclusion criterion and resulted in survey results from 635 directors.

Missing Data

Not every survey question was relevant to every director, depending on the roles played and populations served. Efforts were made to report response rates for individual questions as accurately as possible; this information is provided in Appendix C. Additionally, the purposely optional nature of each question allowed for respondents to skip or ignore any question. In cases where voluntary non-response appeared high (>10 percent), an additional category, "not answered," was included in the question analysis. It is important to recognize that "not answered" is not the same as a negative response. There are many possible reasons for not answering a question, such as confusion about what the question is asking, a belief the question is not applicable, a privacy concern, or even time pressures related to completing a lengthy survey during work hours.

Data Grouping

During data collection, the 39 survey questions were presented to directors in six separate sections: early learning standards and guidelines, professional expertise, governance models, director educational profile, childcare staff profile, and childcare center profile. During data analysis, the responses to these questions were systematically regrouped according to specific areas of interest, as shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Survey Questions Grouped by Areas of Interest

Survey Section Answered by Directors	Early Learning Standards and Guidelines	Professional and Educational Background	Day-to-Day Operations
Section 1	Questions 1-15		
Section 2		Questions 16, 17	
Section 3			Question 18
Section 4		Questions 19-25	
Section 5		Questions 27-34	
Section 6			Questions 35-39

Study Limitations

Survey research relies on self-reported data, which are subject to the possibility of misrepresentation or incomplete information. A survey respondent may feel compelled to share only the information that paints the most positive picture of themselves and their center, especially if he or she is fearful of possible repercussions of sharing unfavorable information. To reduce this likelihood, the research team took multiple steps to assure participants that no identifying information would be released with the report and that information would only be reported in aggregate.

A respondent's answers could also be limited by the options in the multiple choice and ranking questions, thereby failing to capture the most accurate data. While the use of follow-up questions, a comments option, and a full review by a childcare expert panel were all implemented during survey design, this limitation still could have occurred.

Finally, the issue of missing data as discussed in the previous section, may have underlying patterns that are not easily discernable and may impact the representative nature of the aggregate responses. A decision to administer this survey on an annual basis and specifically target questions with lower response rates for revision and further analysis would allow this potential limitation to be further addressed.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

As discussed in the previous section, the results of this statewide survey are clustered around three areas of interest: early learning standards and guidelines, educational and professional credentials of early childhood care professionals, and day-to-day center operations. Within each of these areas, key findings are highlighted and explained using data provided by the 635 early childhood care directors who participated in this study.

Early Learning Standards and Guidelines

Mississippi's Early Learning Standards and Guidelines are of potential value for every childcare or preschool facility serving three- and four-year-old children. However, only some have chosen to follow the voluntary standards and guidelines, making usage rates potentially difficult to track. Responses to this section of the survey provided statewide insight into assimilation rates, perceived usefulness, barriers to usage, and preferred communication channels for training and materials. Additionally, information was also gathered on the use of technical assistance programs and collaboration efforts with local school districts to identify potential relationships for furthering early learning standards usage and school-readiness communication with parents.

The six key findings within this area are:

- Usage and utility of Mississippi's Early Learning Standards and Guidelines is quite high.
- Site visits and electronic communications could raise participation even further.
- Technical assistance and mentoring organizations are desirable information conduits.
- Many directors see value in partnering with local school districts, but there is room for growth.
- Educational curriculum decisions are intentional and locally focused.
- Progress monitoring is an integral, varied practice that merits additional research.

Usage and utility of Mississippi's Early Learning Standards and Guidelines is quite high

The survey results demonstrate a high level of voluntary standards and guidelines implementation, with 70 percent of early childhood care directors reporting usage. Only 15 percent of directors reportedly did not use them, and another 15 percent did not respond (see Figure 1). Additionally, 96 percent of all directors who use the standards and guidelines rated them as "very useful" (66 percent) or "somewhat useful" (33 percent). Only four percent of directors indicated the standards are "not very useful" (see Figure 2). The 15 percent of directors who reported that they did not use the standards were asked whether lack of access, training, funding, and/or technical assistance played a role in their decision. Of these, the program's voluntary nature and lack of training were the most cited reasons (see Figure 3).

Site visits and electronic communications could raise participation even further

Eighty-one percent of surveyed directors agreed they would like to receive additional information on Mississippi's Early Learning Standard and Guidelines, with electronic media as the predominant method of choice. Online access, which is already available, was requested by 43 percent of providers, while 30 percent asked for portable media (see Figure 4). On-site training was the format directors requested most (31 percent), followed by weekend training (28 percent) and electronic methods such as webinars (23 percent) (see Figure 5).

Technical assistance and mentoring organizations are desirable information conduits

More than half of all responding directors (60 percent) have received technical assistance from programs included in the Early Years Network, which represents the most expansive reach of any technical assistance program addressed within the survey. As shown in Figure 6, multiple other state organizations were identified as resource providers as well. Nearly

a third of directors (32 percent) have received technical assistance from Mississippi Building Blocks. Childcare providers who met program qualifying criteria also reported working with the Mississippi Low Income Childcare Initiative (17 percent) and Mississippi Head Start (15 percent) as well as the Mississippi Department of Education's public preschool collaboratives (11 percent). Furthermore, given the opportunity, the majority of directors were interested in receiving future assistance (see Figure 7) from Mississippi Building Blocks (57 percent), MDE Pre-K Collaboration (56 percent), and the Early Years Network (53 percent).

Many directors see value in partnering with local school districts, but there is room for growth

When it comes to meeting the needs of the children they serve, nearly two-thirds of directors report collaborating with their local school districts (73 percent, see Figure 8). Collaboration efforts most often take the form of information and materials sharing (85 percent), followed by some form of kindergarten transition day (75 percent). Collaborative work is also taking place through serving children with special needs (73 percent) and shared training efforts (57 percent, see Figure 9). Half of these directors also reported they share an aligned report card or checklist with their local school district. Frequency of collaboration varied widely, with an appreciable amount of directors selecting as needed (34 percent), annually (31 percent), monthly (19 percent), and weekly (15 percent) (see Figure 10).

Educational curriculum decisions are intentional and locally-focused

While specific curriculum choices varied among directors, the decision to implement one was widespread, with 86 percent reporting they used either a formally published curriculum (21 percent), a teacher-created curriculum (16 percent), or a combination of both (49 percent) (see Figure 11). The clear preference for a blend of the two suggests that directors seek to meet the instructional needs of the individual children they serve while also being open to the supplemental benefits that an established curriculum product might provide.

To that end, it may be beneficial to offer directors some evaluative information regarding which formally published curriculums on the market best support Mississippi's Early Learning Standards and Guidelines. These findings suggest that use of the Early Learning Standards would be easier to achieve in instances where the purposely chosen curriculum content is already aligned.

Many of the curriculum titles that directors cited were well established, such as *Creative Curriculum*, *High Scope Preschool*, *Between the Lions*, and *Handwriting Without Tears*. Others were written for specific audiences, such as *Therapeutic Wonder Years*, designed for young children with behavioral needs, or *A Beka*, a Christian curriculum that was mentioned frequently (see Appendix D).

Progress monitoring is an integral, varied practice that merits additional research

Almost all surveyed directors (90 percent) indicated they provide feedback to parents on their children's development, with many doing so in a variety of ways. Developmental checklists, progress reports, and competency checklists as survey options were cited, but "Other" formed its own significant category (20 percent) with parent-teacher conferences and informal mouth-to-mouth communication commonly shared. For more formal communication purposes, 79 percent of directors relate developmental information to parents at least quarterly, with some centers sharing progress with parents on a daily (16 percent) or weekly basis (16 percent) (see Figure 12). No information was collected on the types of assessments used by early care providers to inform parents (informal, formal, standardized, teacher-created, and so forth) or their own center practices. Appropriate and accurate assessment of young children is a complicated matter, though integrating multiple sources of such information could provide a holistic understanding of the child's progress. Since learning objectives and assessment practices should be very closely tied to one another for both formative and summative purposes, future research should be done to examine the extent to which the standards and guidelines impact directors' progress monitoring efforts and information sharing with parents.

Figure 1: Directors Indicating Usage of Mississippi's Early Learning Standards and Guidelines (n=537)

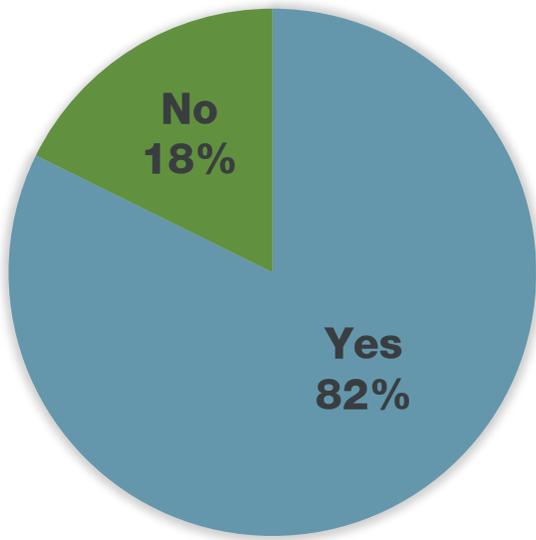
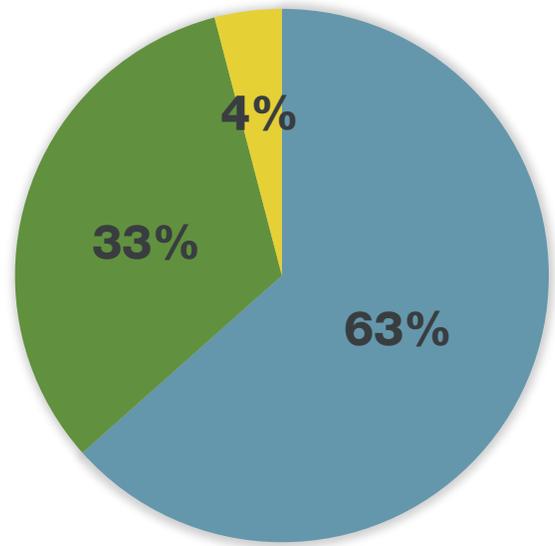


Figure 2: Perceived Usefulness of Standards among Directors Who Implement (n=444)



■ Very Useful
■ Somewhat Useful
■ Not Very Useful

Figure 3: Reasons for Non-Use of MS Early Learning Standards and Guidelines (n=93)

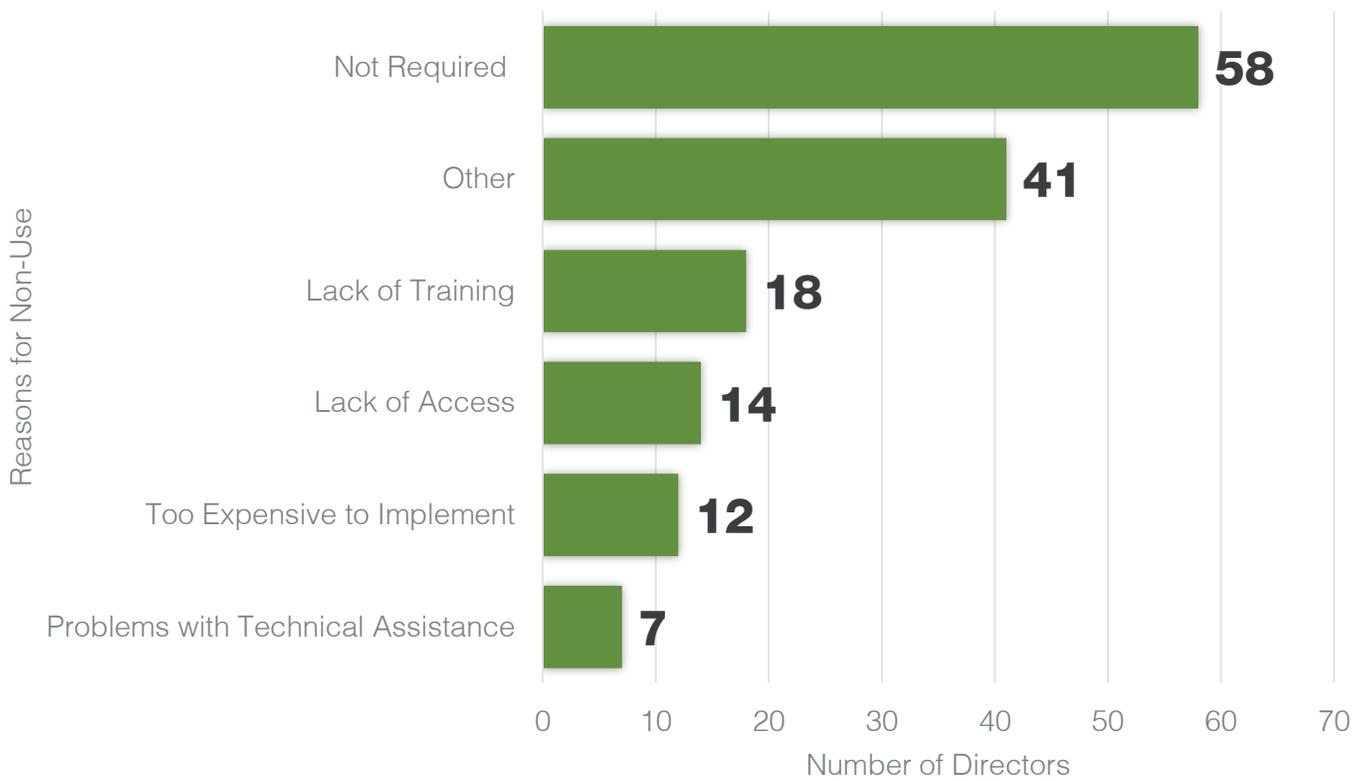


Figure 4: Best Method to Receive MS Early Learning Standards and Guidelines (n=525)

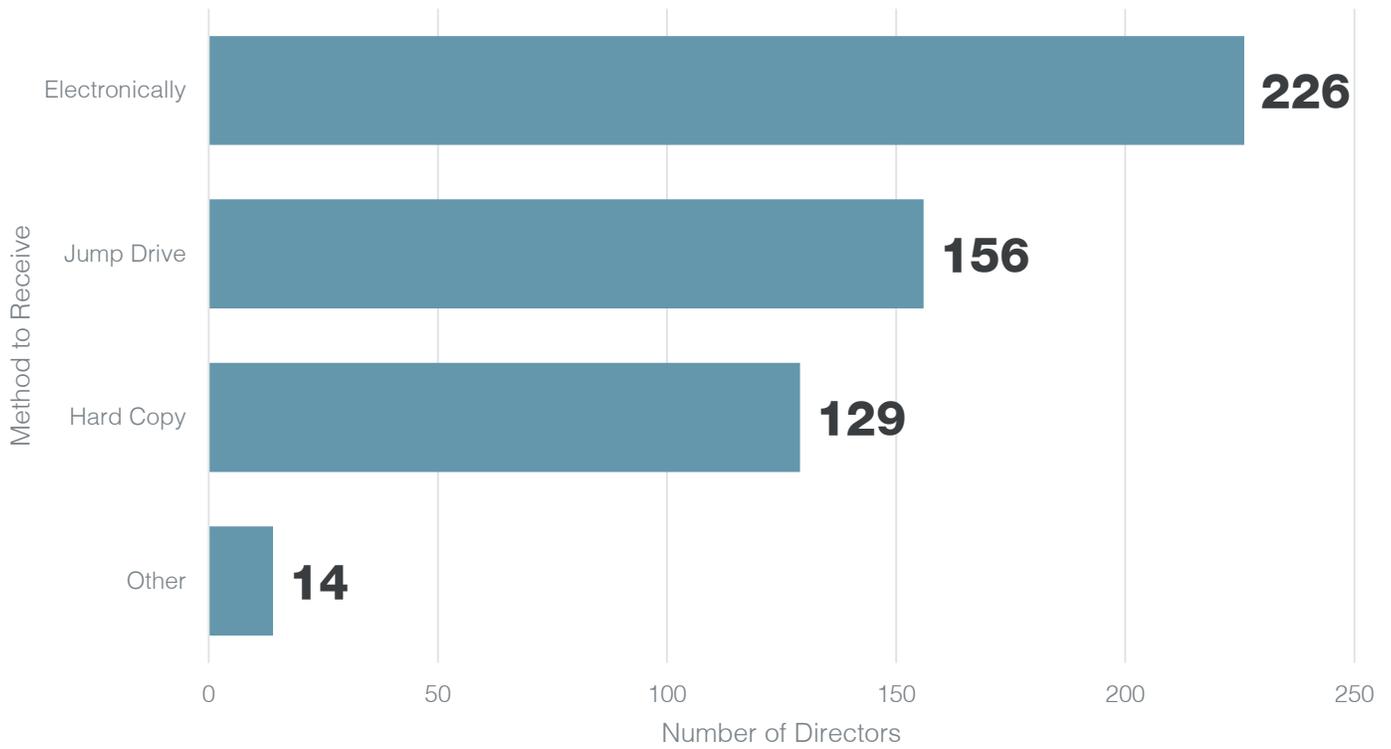


Figure 5: Most Effective Training Method (n=522)

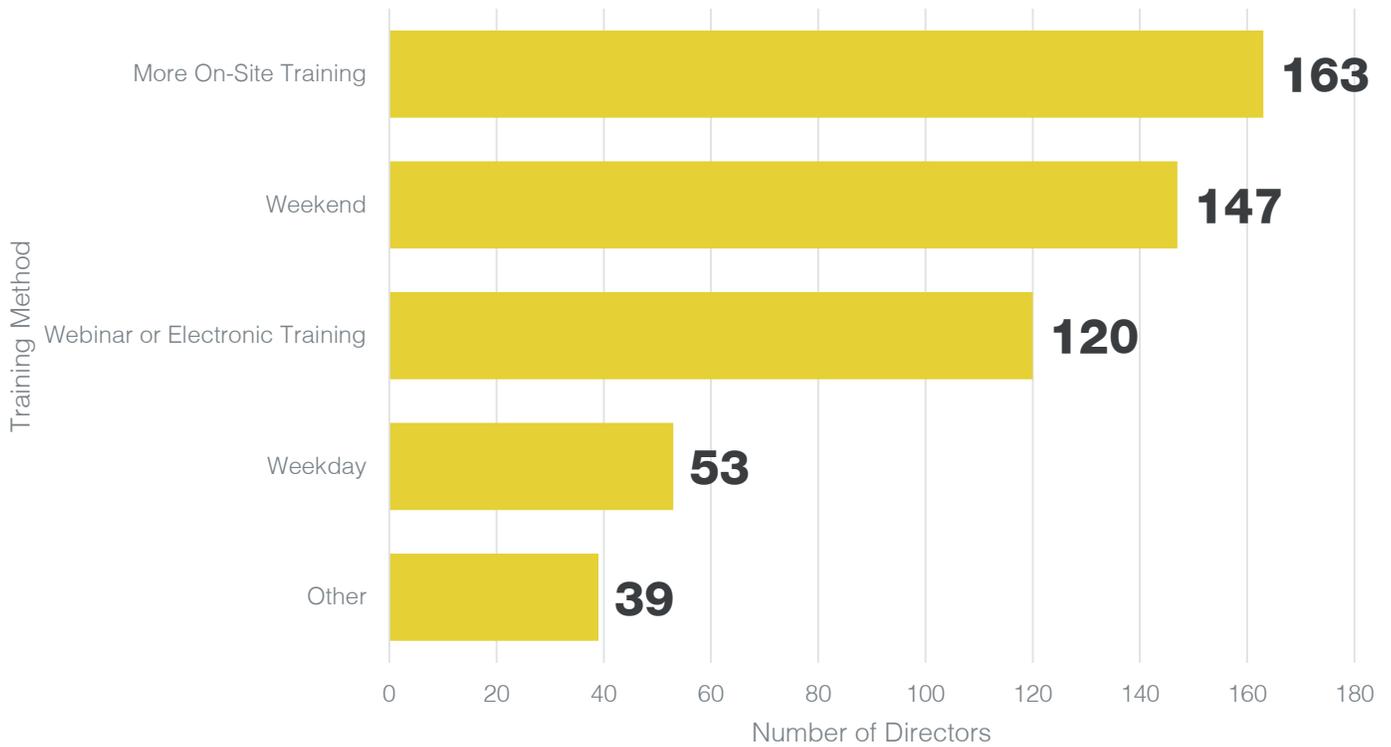


Figure 6: Directors Who Have Worked with a Specific Technical Assistance Program (n=634)

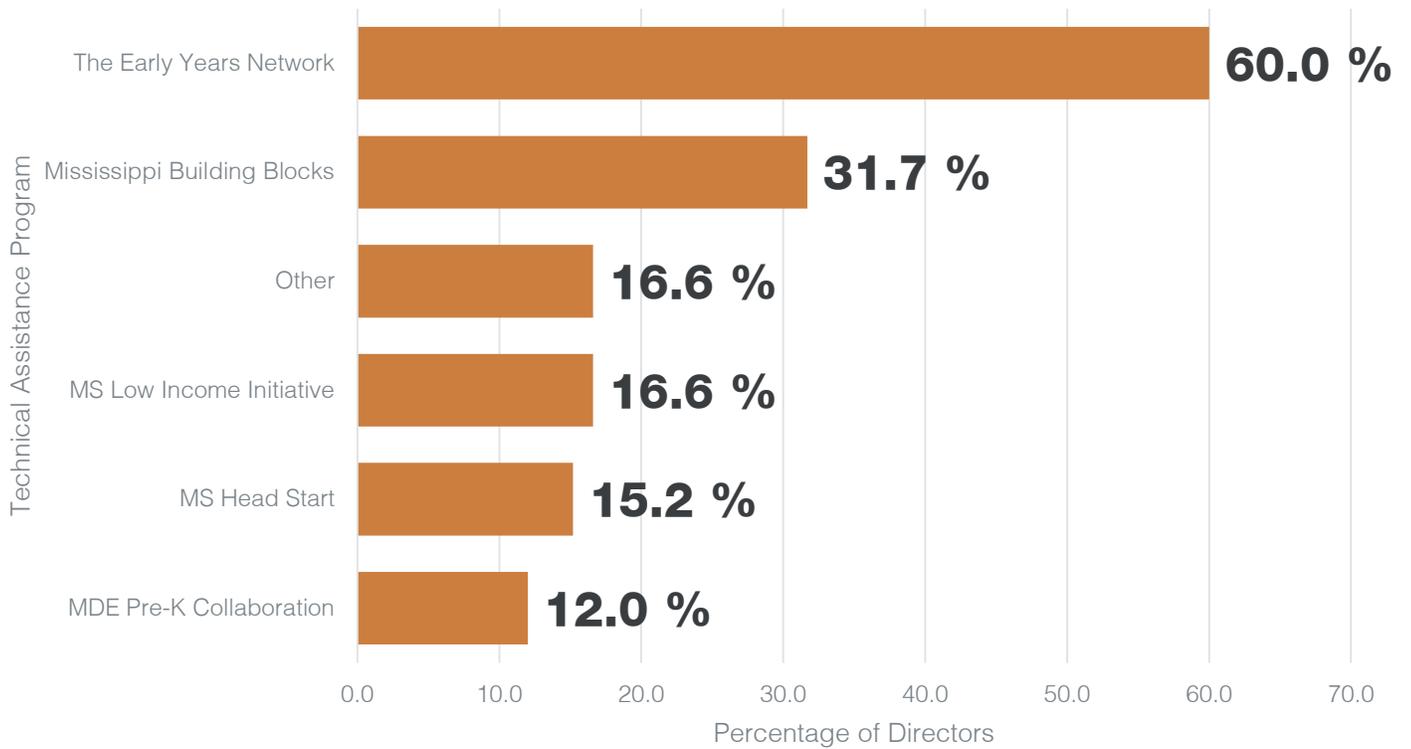


Figure 7: Directors Interested in Working with a Specific Technical Assistance Program (n=467)

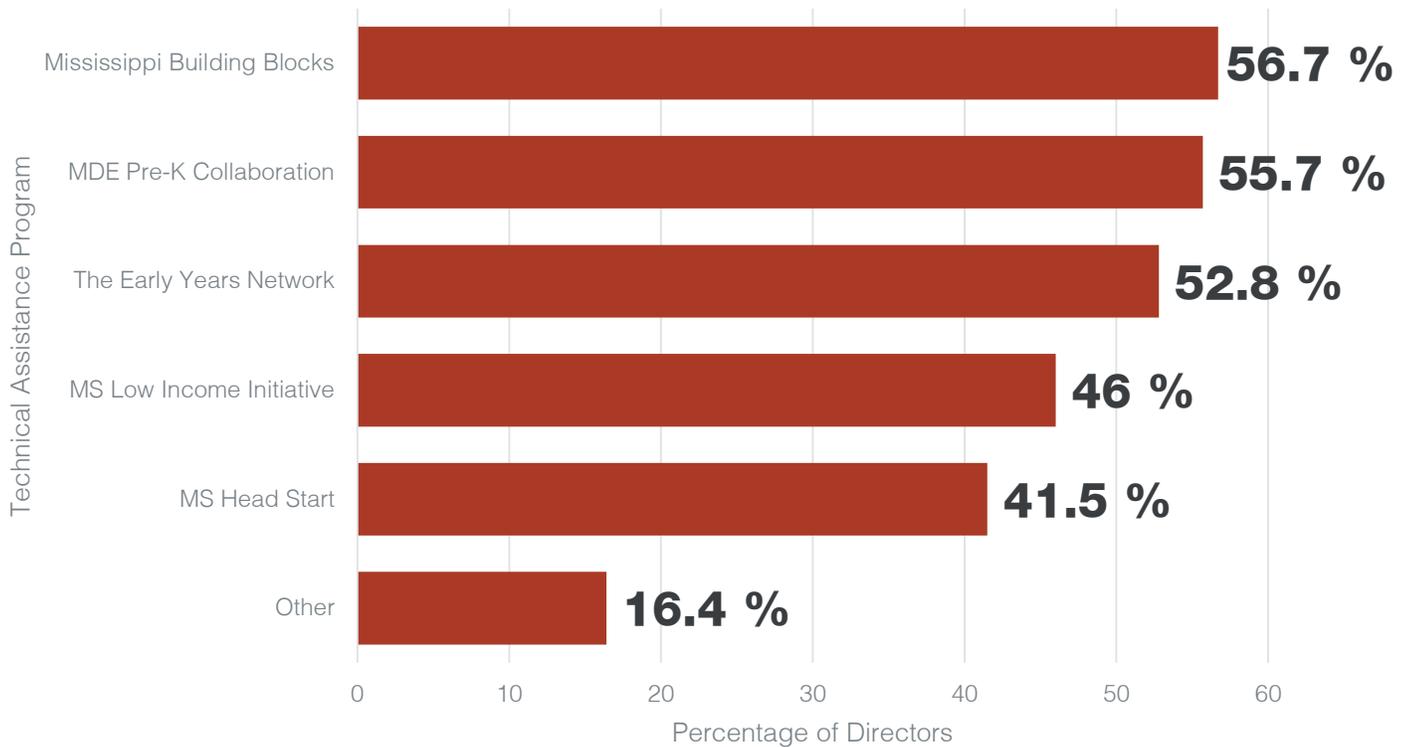


Figure 8: Provider Collaboration with Local School Districts (n=629)

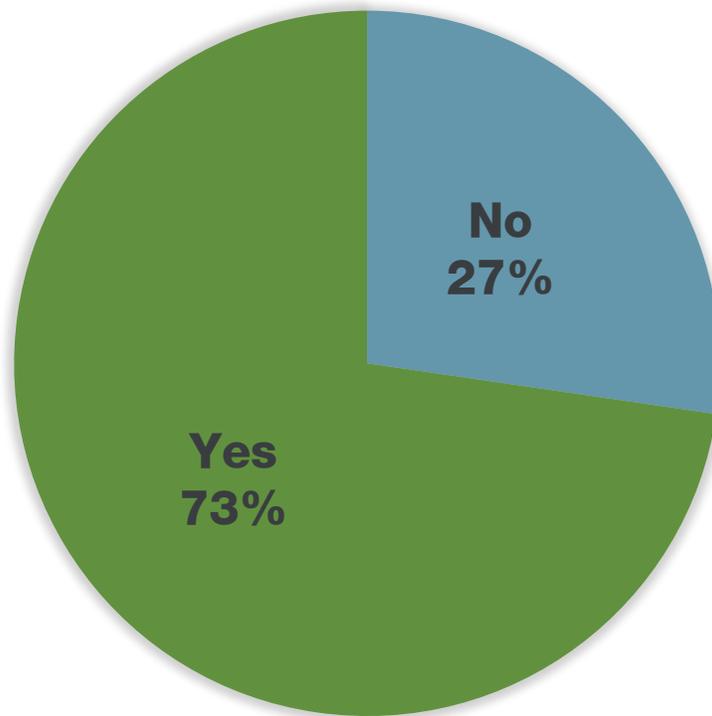


Figure 9: Types of Collaboration with Local School Districts (n=427)

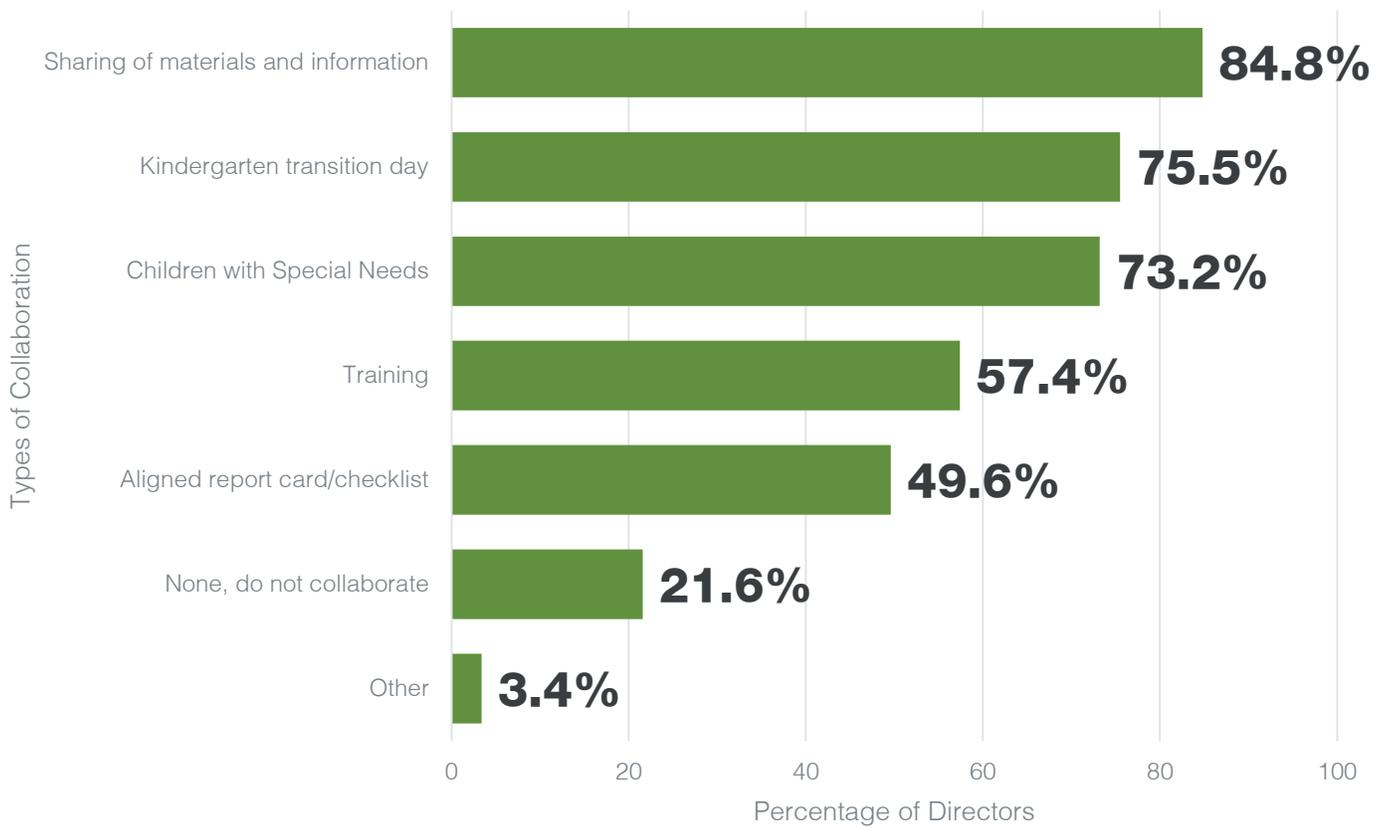


Figure 10: Frequency of Collaboration with Local School Districts (n=457)

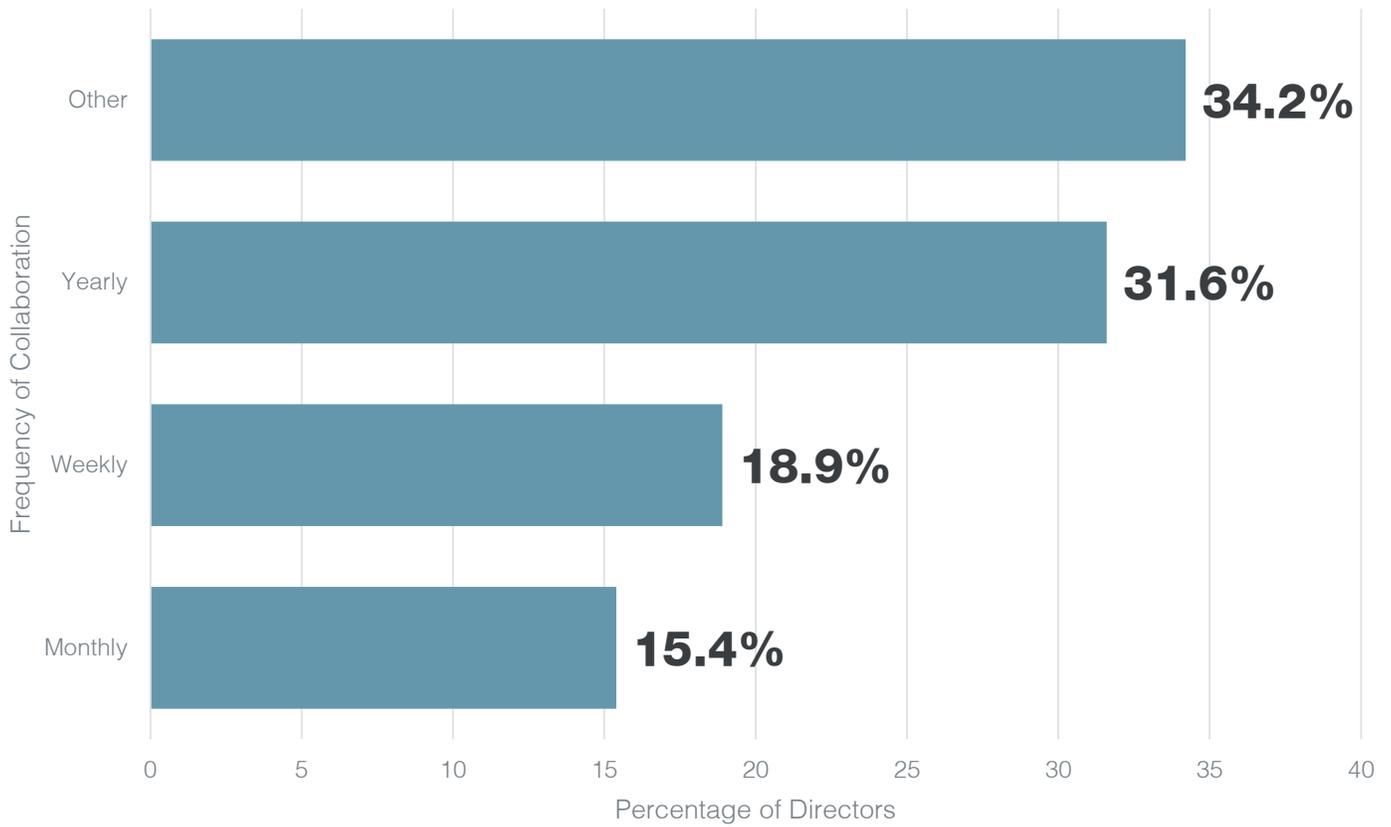


Figure 11: Type of Educational Curriculum Currently in Use (n=549)

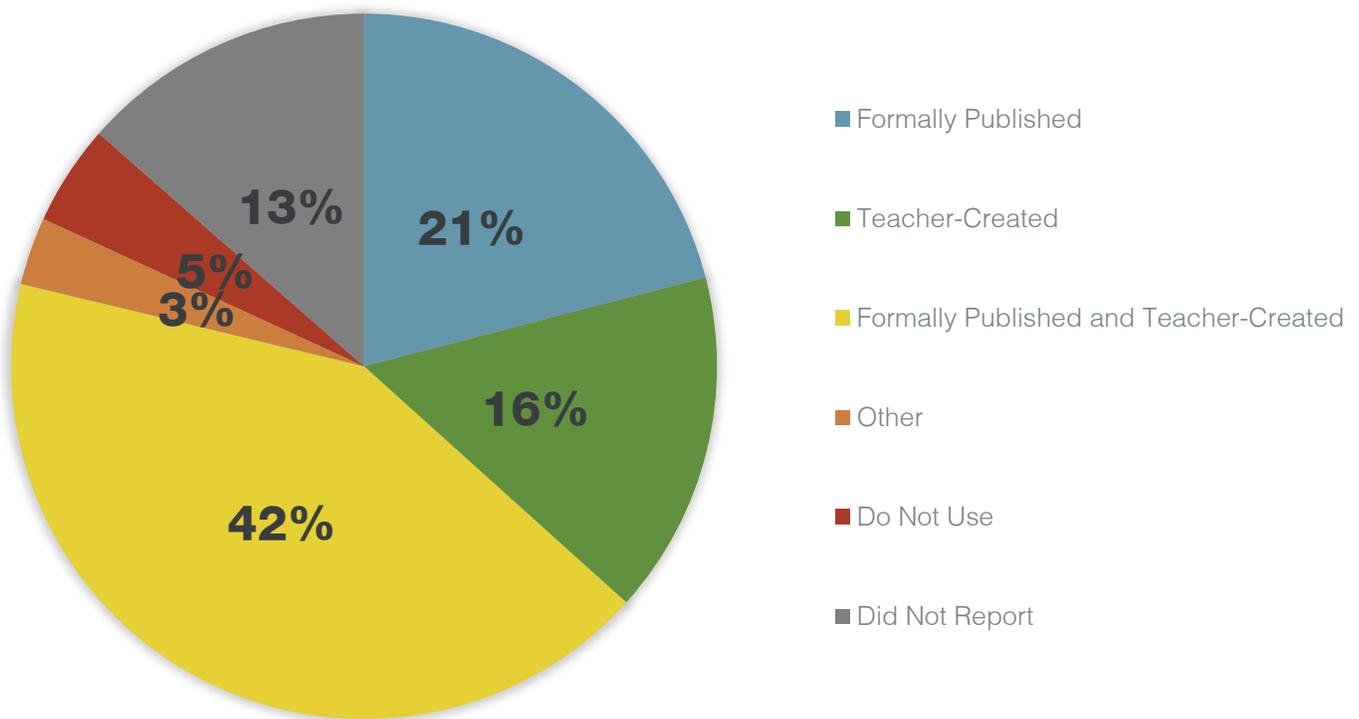
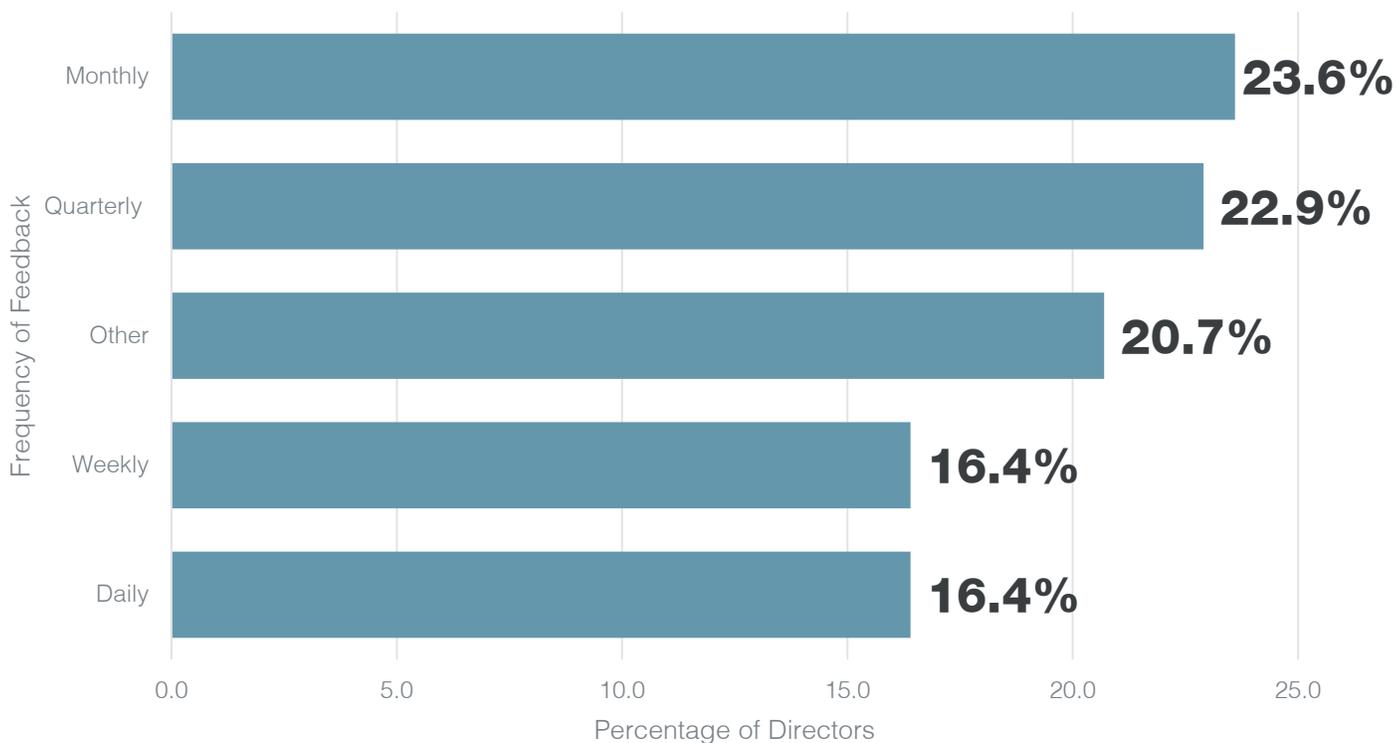


Figure 12: Frequency Developmental Feedback Is Received (n=628)



Educational and Professional Credentials

Mississippi's Blueprint for Early Childhood Education (2014) seeks to provide high quality care and improve school readiness for all children in the state. Yet the realities of the early childhood care profession often involve high turnover and low wages, raising concerns about retention of high-quality educators and caregivers. As part of this survey, center directors answered questions regarding their own educational backgrounds, ongoing professional development efforts, and current professional memberships. They also shared information regarding the qualifications of their staff and what they believe would be the most effective professional development strategies to achieve school readiness for all children.

The five key findings within this area follow:

- The majority of center directors are college-educated, some with multiple degrees.
- Not all center directors have a degree in early childhood, but many do.
- Directors see value in seeking credentials and accessing professional development.
- National and state professional organizations are reaching Mississippi directors.
- The majority of childcare staff lack a college degree, and more than a fourth lack certification.

The majority of center directors are college-educated, some with multiple degrees.

Approximately half of all directors (48 percent) reported holding a four-year degree or higher. As shown in Figure 13, 20 percent of directors have earned a graduate degree, and 29 percent have received a bachelor's degree. Another 21 percent hold an associate's degree, and still another 17 percent reported having attended "some college." Only 10 percent of directors reported high school graduation as their highest educational level.

Not all center directors have degrees in early childhood, but many do.

The 335 center directors who reported having a bachelor’s degree or higher also answered a follow-up question to indicate how much of their formal education focused on expertise working with and educating young children. Results showed that 44 percent of these directors currently hold either a bachelor’s or graduate degree in early childhood education, with another three percent pursuing a graduate degree in this area (see Figure 14). These results suggest that many survey respondents place a high value on specializing in the unique needs of young children, beyond their managerial responsibilities.

Directors see value in seeking credentials and accessing professional development.

Mississippi recognizes and offers a wide range of certification programs for multiple aspects of childcare and education. Surveyed directors almost universally cited their certifications in CPR and first aid (96 percent). The large majority of directors also reported carrying a director’s credential (81 percent) as well as ServSafe certification (75 percent). Additional certifications, such as the Child Development Associate (CDA), were also mentioned, as shown in Figure 15. While the average number of certifications held was 4.4, the median number of certifications held was 5. This finding indicates that half of these directors hold five or more certifications, even as others hold very few.

Currently, Mississippi’s licensing expectation for center directors is set at 15 hours of qualified professional development and training per licensing year. More than three-quarters of survey respondents (77 percent) reported that they had already surpassed this minimum requirement within the current calendar year (see Figure 16).

National and state professional organizations are reaching Mississippi directors.

When asked about membership in professional organizations, 68 percent of directors said they belonged to at least one regional or national organization. While not all respondents provided the names of the organizations to which they belonged, the most commonly cited memberships were in Mississippi Early Childhood Association (Mseca), National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), and Head Start Association (HSA).

The majority of childcare staff lack a college degree, and more than a fourth lack certification.

Unlike directors, only 26 percent of staff working with children ages 0 to5 hold a four-year degree or higher. Results from surveyed directors also indicated that only five percent of staff earned a graduate degree. According to the survey, 20 percent of staff hold a bachelor’s degree, and another 21 percent hold an associate’s degree. The largest percentage of staff (28 percent) lack either a degree or a certificate (see Figure 17). In a recent study on Mississippi’s quality rating system, childcare providers across the state expressed a need for monetary assistance to be able to afford formal education, which may partially explain these survey results (Javorsky, Pittman, K. L. Risman, & Sergi, 2015).

Figure 13: Director Educational Level (n=625)

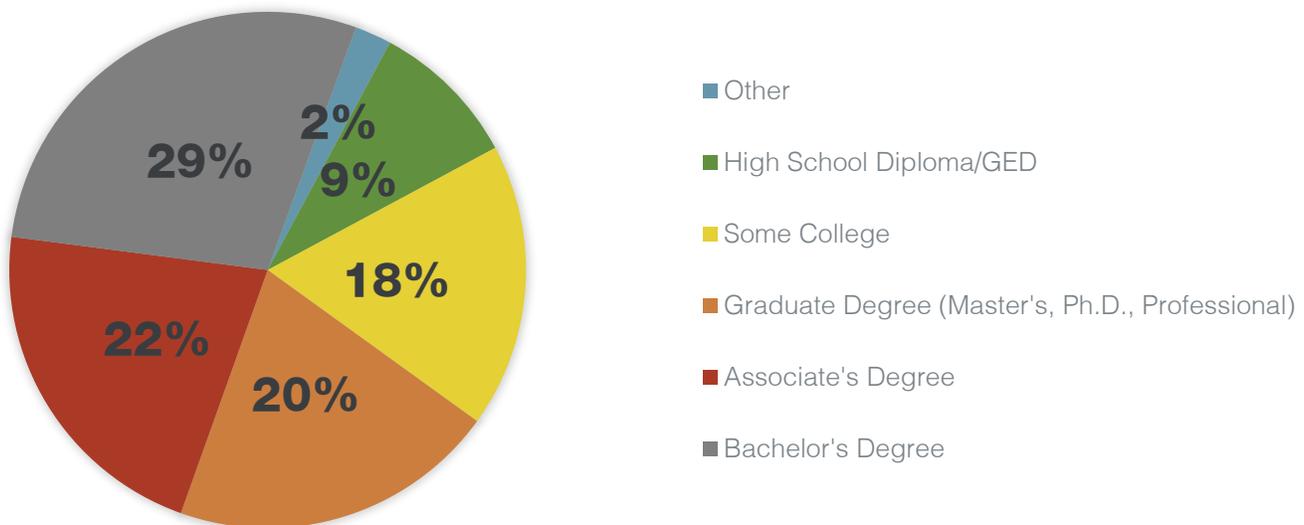


Figure 14: Directors Holding at Least One Degree in Early Childhood Education (n=335)

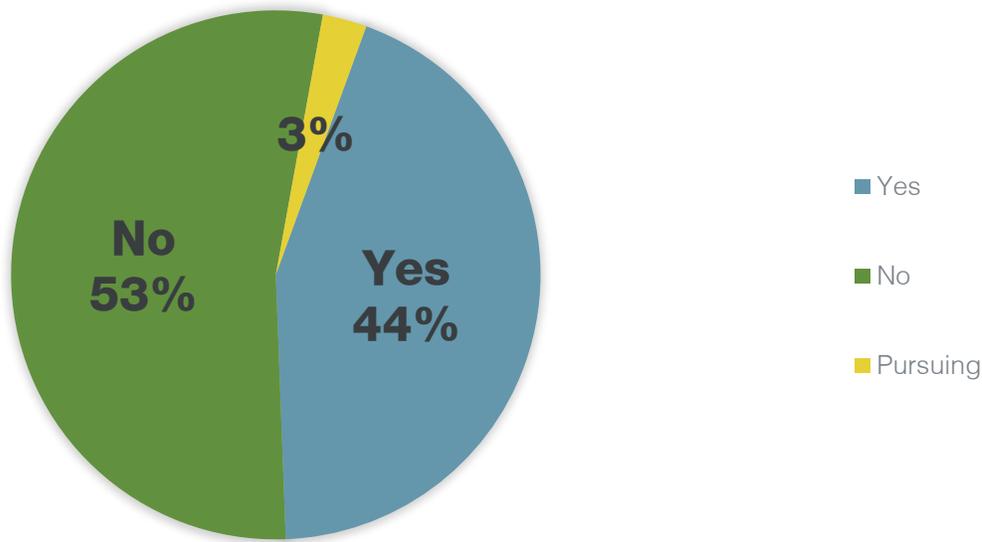


Figure 15: Directors Who Report Holding a Specific Credential (n=627)

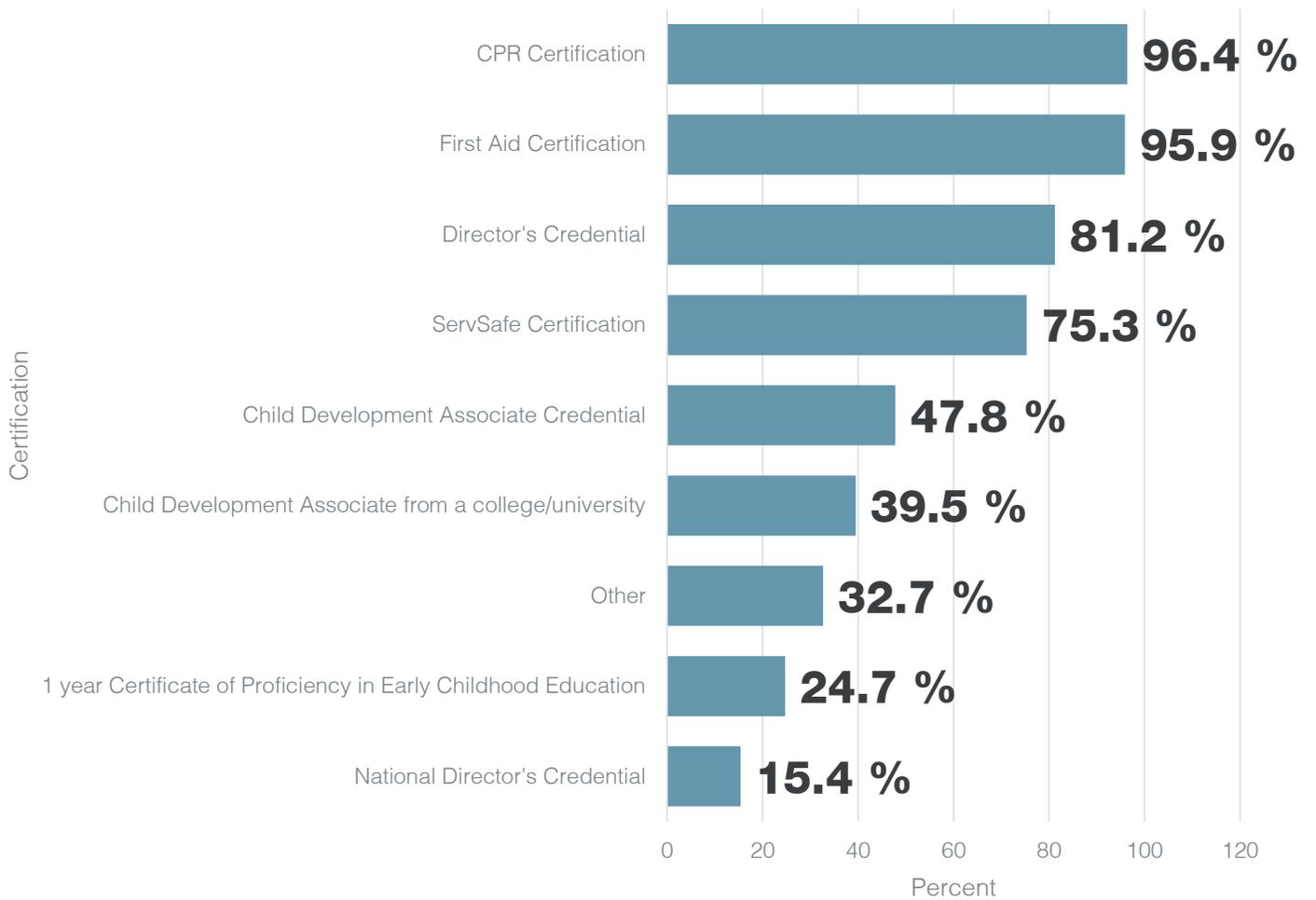


Figure 16: Professional Development Hours Completed by Center Directors during Licensing Year (n=623)

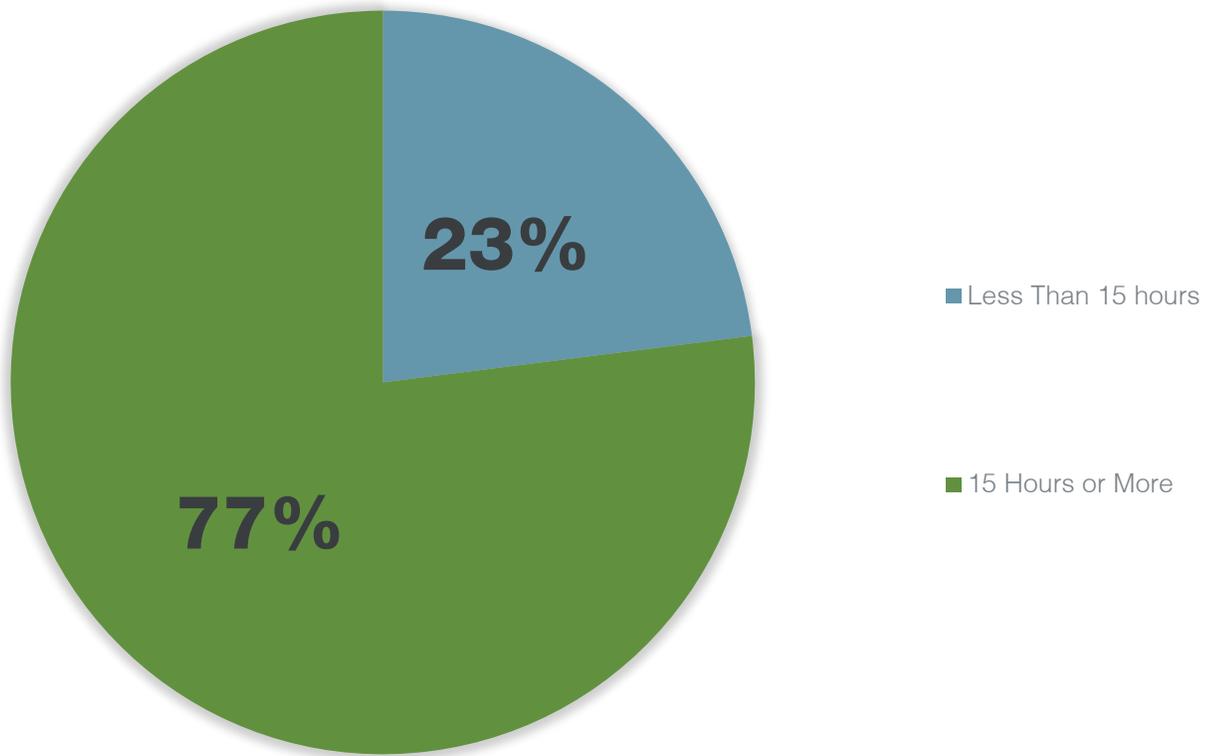
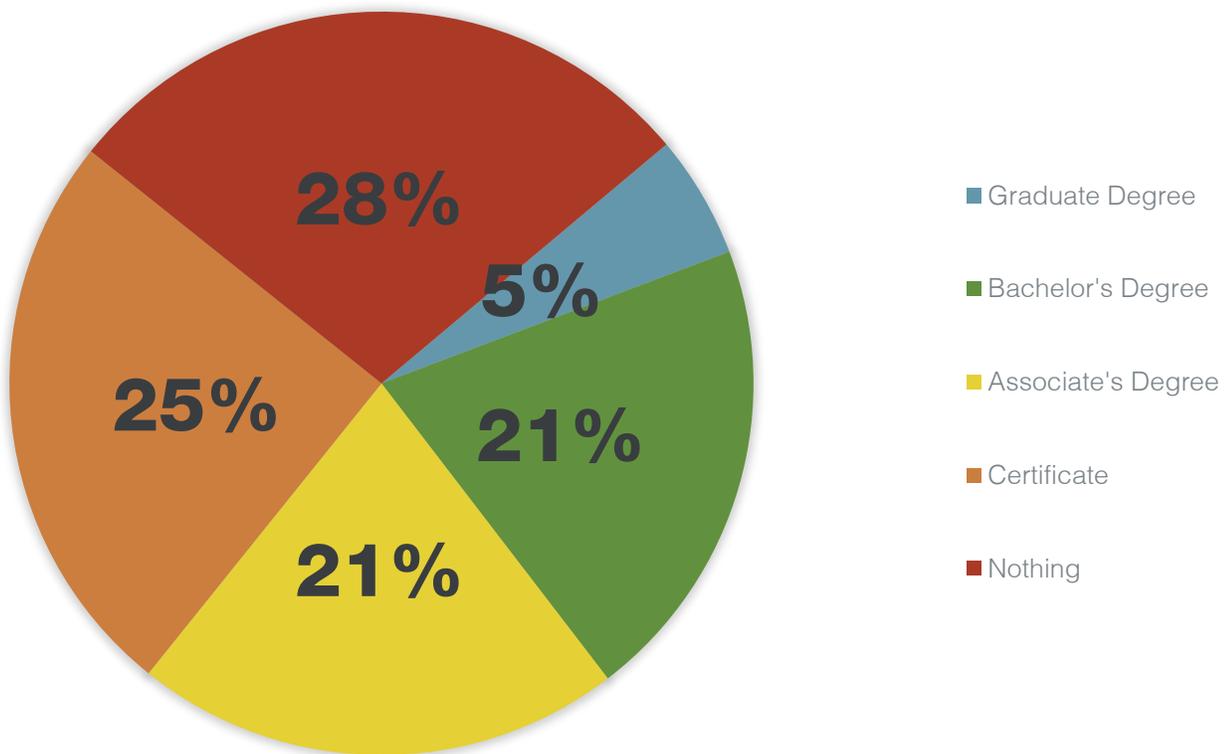


Figure 17: Level of Educational Attainment for Childcare Center Staff (n=620)



Day-To-Day Center Operations

Mississippi's early childhood centers tackle the challenges of providing high-quality care on a daily basis. The questions in this part of the survey focused on day-to-day center operations in terms of preparedness, organization and relatedness to their communities and the profession.

The five key findings within this area follow:

- Eight out of 10 centers in this survey provide services from birth through age four, and three-fourths of these centers are of significant size.
- Across every district, early childhood education centers are making efforts to partner with communities and give back to the profession.
- Directors believe their staff is positioned to facilitate early learning and development and to provide family support but not as equipped to address mental health, health, and nutrition needs.
- State licensing renewals swell from July to August, accounting for 25 percent of the year's activity.
- Centralizing early childhood education under a single agency is seen as preferable to multiple agencies, but opinions on who should have oversight vary widely.

Eight out of 10 centers in this survey provide services from birth through age four, and three-fourths of these centers are of significant size.

The information gathered from questions about licensing capacity, center size, and ages of children helps paint a clearer picture of the daily workings of the state's early care and education settings. Almost all of the responding directors (95 percent) currently serve three- and four-year-olds, with the large majority also serving children from birth through school age (83 percent). About a third of these directors serve child populations greater than 100, while another 41 percent serve between 50 and 99 children at their facilities (the largest reported category). Directors who reported serving less than 20 children were a small minority (4 percent).

In every district in the state, early childhood centers are making efforts to partner with their communities and give back to the profession.

Volunteer opportunities provide families and community members a way to partner with early childhood care providers to serve the needs of the community's children. All nine of the state's Department of Health districts in Mississippi contain early childhood centers intentionally working toward this partnership, with 81 percent of all directors reporting they have a volunteer program. The most robust use of volunteers is reported in Head Start/Early Head Start classrooms (90 percent), followed by private non-profit centers (79 percent) and private for-profit centers (74 percent). In comparison, only 69 percent of survey participants from the state's public preschools reported that they provided volunteer opportunities.

In addition to working with volunteers, another 32 percent of center directors reported offering an internship program that helps prepare future early childhood professionals. According to the responses in this survey, Head Start, public preschool, and private for-profit and non-profit centers were all equally likely to offer internships, and opportunities were available in some form in all nine districts as well.

Directors believe their staff is positioned to facilitate early learning and development and to provide family support but not as equipped to address mental health, health, and nutrition needs.

Directors were asked to rate the extent to which they felt their staff is prepared and qualified in some of the care domains deemed critical by early childhood experts. The largest percentage of directors (82 percent) agreed that their staff is prepared and qualified in the areas of early learning and development and family support (see Figure 18). However, a lower percentage of directors (77 percent) indicated their staff is sufficiently knowledgeable in the areas of mental health, health, and nutrition. When asked to rank priorities for staff professional development, 82 percent of directors felt that consistent, equal, and affordable training emphasizing child and family needs was the most important strategy to close gaps for Mississippi's children (see Figure 19).

State licensing renewals swell from July to August, accounting for 25 percent of the year's activity.

Early childhood care providers in Mississippi are required to reapply for state licensure through the Department of Health on an annual basis. Responses of survey respondents show that the heaviest renewal times are July (12 percent) and August (13 percent), which together account for one-fourth of all licensing renewals submitted in a calendar year. As shown in Table 20 below, February-April brings the fewest renewals, with the remainder of submissions fairly evenly dispersed across the rest of the year. These potentially predictable fluctuations in licensing renewals may be helpful for coordinating future offerings of professional development opportunities to directors and staff.

Centralizing early childhood education under a single agency is seen as preferable to multiple agencies, but opinions on who should have oversight vary widely.

One survey question presented directors with three hypothetical ways to structure oversight of all early childhood care and education at the state level. The first was "placing authority and accountability for early childhood education under one existing agency, such as the Mississippi Department of Health, Mississippi Department of Human Services, or Mississippi Department of Education." The second was "placing authority and accountability for early childhood education under multiple agencies, but coordinated by a council," and the last was "placing authority and accountability for early childhood education under an independent, stand-alone executive office." Each option was ranked from one to three in order of preference. Based on the ranking results, every option had both supporters and detractors, and about 100 respondents chose not to rate any of the options, suggesting wide variation in sentiment on this topic.

The option receiving the most positive response was oversight by a single, existing agency, with 50 percent of responding directors ranking it as their first choice. The creation of a new stand-alone agency was neither strongly favored (23 percent) nor strongly opposed (34 percent). The option receiving the most negative rankings was multiple agencies coordinated by an existing agency, with 42 percent of directors ranking this as their last choice. Tables 3 and 4 provide detail on these rankings.

Figure 18: Directors Who Agree Their Staff Is Prepared and Qualified in Early Learning Areas (n=621)

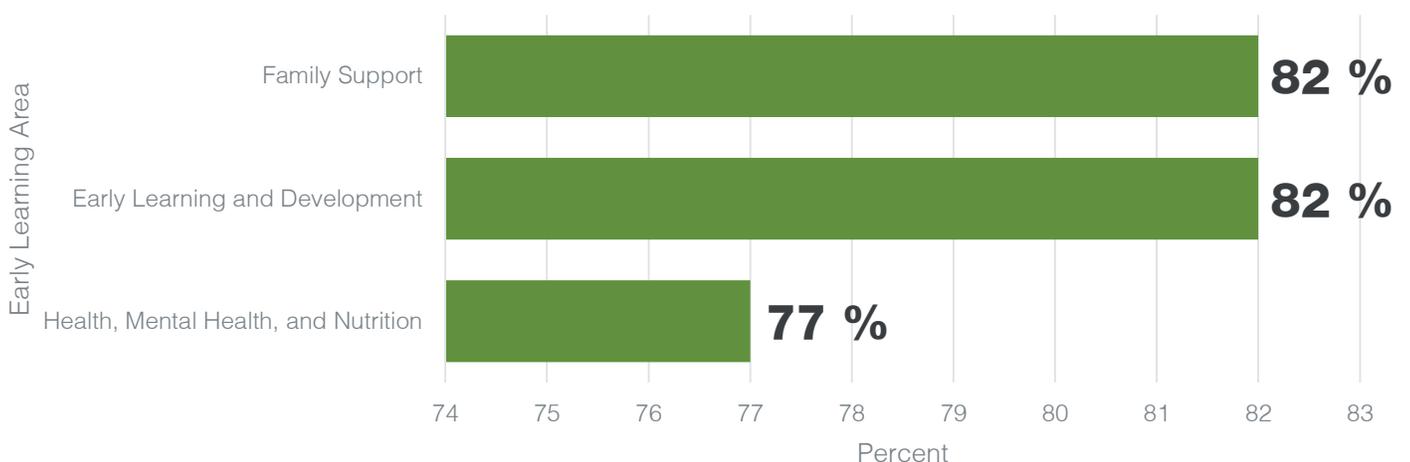


Figure 19: Most Important Areas to Address to Ensure Staff Is Prepared (n=620)

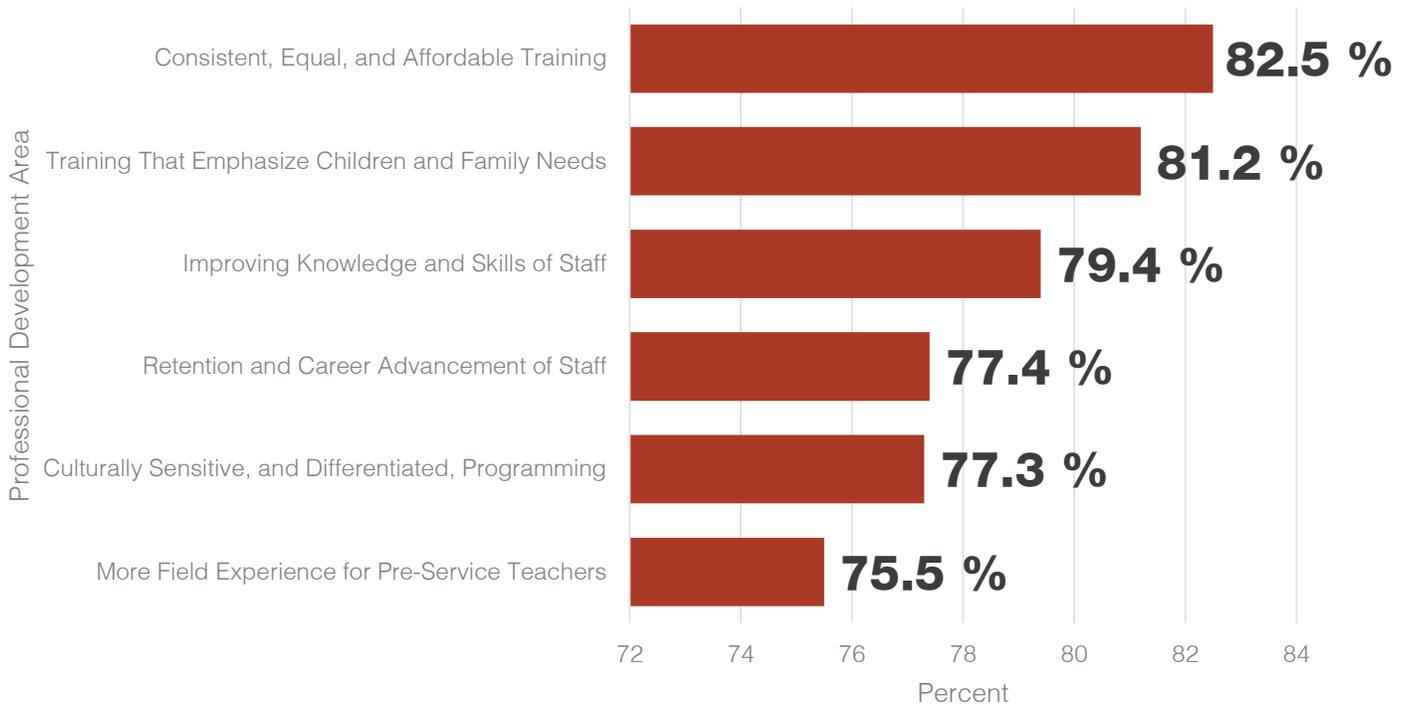


Figure 20: License Renewal Applications by Calendar Month (n=615)

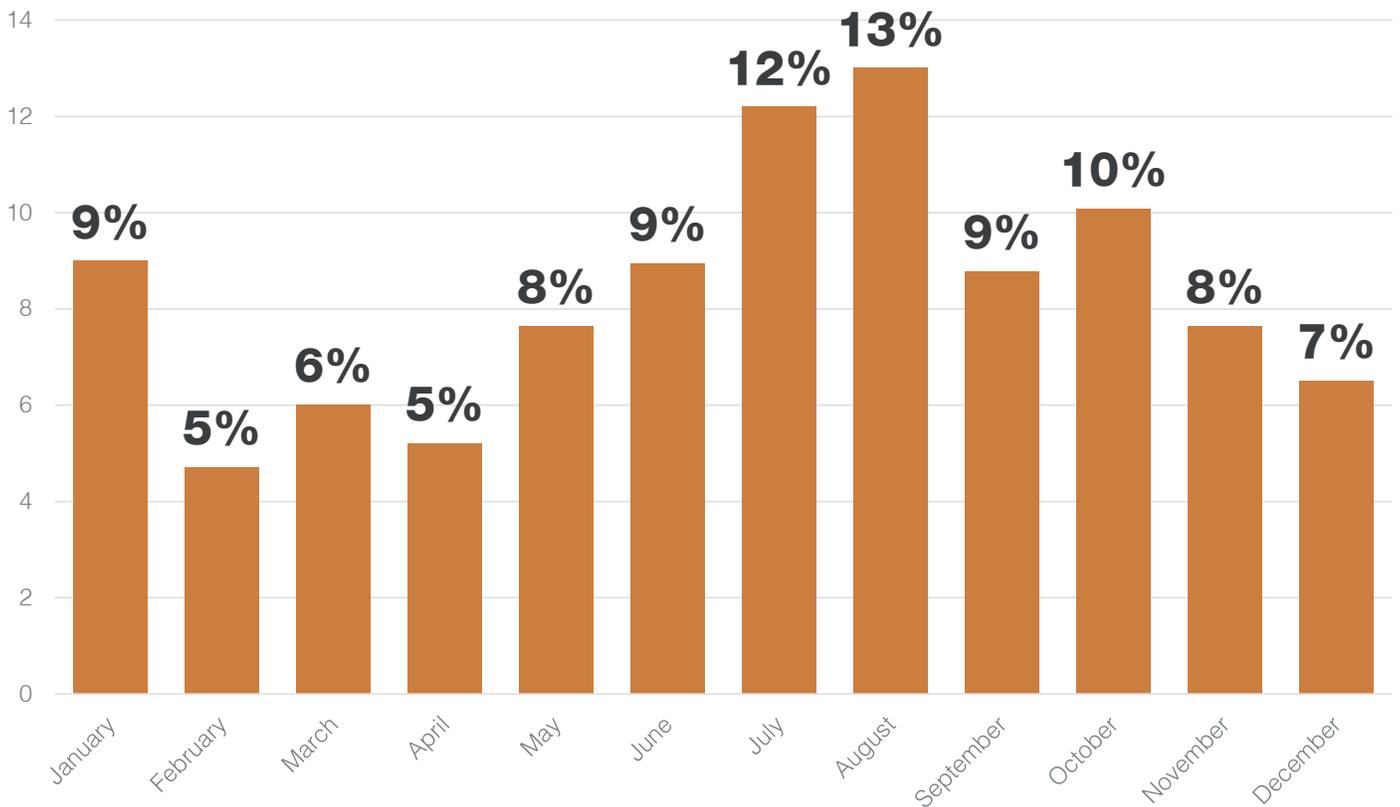


Table 3: Most Preferred Option (Ranked as “1”) for an Integrated Governance Model (n=529)

	Option	N	Percent
Most Preferred Option (Ranked as “1”)	Existing Agency	262	50%
	Council	143	27%
	New Agency	124	23%

Table 4: Least Preferred Option (Ranked as “3”) for an Integrated Governance Model (n=539)

	Option	N	Percent
Least Preferred Option (Ranked as “3”)	Existing Agency	227	42%
	Council	185	34%
	New Agency	127	24%

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study provides new information on Mississippi’s Early Learning Standards and Guidelines as well as early education and care practices. Encouraging findings show that 82 percent of centers are currently utilizing these standards, that many center directors have multiple certifications, that many directors have accumulated annual professional development hours, and that the majority of directors have college degrees. Directors from all nine districts of the state are involved in some level of collaboration between school districts and childcare centers, along with offering volunteer opportunities and internship programs for future care providers.

This study also identified some challenges that directors face in providing high-quality care that Mississippi’s children deserve. About 25 percent of directors are concerned their staff is not adequately prepared to address the mental health, health and nutritional needs of the children in their care. Perhaps even more pressing, directors report that more than a fourth of their staff lack certification, and staff who hold two- or four-year college degrees are in the minority.

Based on the results of this large-scale survey, the independent research team makes the following recommendations to assist SECAC and its Standards Committee in addressing early childhood education and care throughout Mississippi:

- Future research examine conceptual and content understanding of the Early Learning Standards and Guidelines as well as how they are being used. This initial statewide survey was limited to questions regarding the use and access of the standards and guidelines. While answers to these questions were likely connected to levels of understanding among early childhood practitioners, additional inquiry in this direction would provide the necessary data to investigate this relationship. The effects of standards and guidelines usage on providers’ assessment and progress monitoring practices also merit further analysis.
- Early childhood stakeholders should investigate potential pathways to help early childhood educators obtain certification and degrees. Further research is needed to determine the primary reasons that reported percentages are so low. Factors such as high industry turnover, lack of access to formal education, and financial hardship may be at play.
- The research team recommends that this survey be done annually. As the state moves forward in advancing early childhood initiatives, results of an annual survey can then be used to track longitudinal growth in learning standards and guidelines usage, training levels, and professional development efforts in every region of the state.

REFERENCES

Javorsky, K., Pittman, C., Risman, K. L., & Sergi, K. (2015). Getting Fresh Perspective on Quality Rating Systems: Listening Sessions with Mississippi's Licensed Childcare Providers. NSPARC. Starkville, MS: Mississippi State University. <http://www.nsparc.msstate.edu/index.html/reports/GettingFreshPerspectiveOnQualityRatingSystems.pdf>

State Early Childhood Advisory Council. (2015). *Mississippi Blueprint for Early Childhood Education*.

APPENDIX A: SURVEY INSTRUMENT

SECAC Standards Committee Provider Survey of Early Childhood Standards and Guidelines

Hello my name is _____ and I am calling you from NSPARC, a research institute at Mississippi State University. We are conducting a survey on behalf of the State Early Childhood Advisory Council (SECAC) about Mississippi's Early Learning Standards and Guidelines. Your input will help SECAC gain a better understanding of how these standards and guidelines are being used and implemented in childcare centers. Please keep in mind that participation in this survey is voluntary and you may choose not to take the survey, to stop responding at any time, or to skip any questions that you do not want to answer. Your responses will be kept strictly confidential and will be used only for statistical purposes. The results will be presented only in aggregate form and no individually-identifiable data will be included in the report. This survey should take around 20 minutes to complete.

Section 1: Early Learning Standards and Guidelines

First, I would like to ask you a few questions about your usage of Mississippi's Early Learning Standards and Guidelines.

1. Which of the following best describes the curriculum used by your facility?
 - a. We use a formal published curriculum
 - b. We use a teacher created curriculum
 - c. We use a formal published curriculum and teacher created curriculum together
 - d. Do not use a curriculum
 - e. Other (specify)

2. To the best of your ability, please list the name(s) of the formal published curriculum that is used at your facility:

3. Does your facility follow/use Mississippi's Early Learning Standards and Guidelines for children ages 3 and 4?
 - a. YES
 - b. NO (Skip Q4)

4. On a scale of 1 to 4, please rate the usefulness of Mississippi's Early Learning Standards and Guidelines for children ages 3 and 4. 1=not at all useful, 4=very useful

Not at all Useful	Not very useful	Somewhat useful	Very useful
1	2	3	4

5. What are some of the reasons you have chosen not to follow/use Mississippi's Early Learning Standards and Guidelines for children ages 3 and 4? (check all that apply)
 - a. Lack of access
 - b. Lack of training
 - c. Not required to use it
 - d. Too expensive to implement
 - e. Problems with technical assistance
 - f. Other reason (please specify):

6. Would you like to receive information on Mississippi's Early Learning Standards and Guidelines for children ages 3 and 4?
 - a. YES (If YES, Answer Q6)
 - b. NO (If NO, Skip Q6, Answer Q7)

7. What would be the best way for us to make Mississippi's Early Learning Standards and Guidelines available to you and your teachers?
 - a. Electronically, either by email or viewing online
 - b. On a jump drive or CD
 - c. Hard copy
 - d. Other (please specify):

8. What would be the most effective training method for you and your staff as they relate to Mississippi's Early Learning Standards and Guidelines?
 - a. Weekend workforce training course(s)
 - b. Weekday workforce training course (s)
 - c. Webinar or electronic training source
 - d. More on-site training
 - e. Other (please specify):

9. Which of the following technical assistance programs have you received services from? (Check all that apply)
 - a. The Early Years Network (Excel by 5, Allies for Quality Care, MS Shared Services Network, or Partners for Quality Child Care)
 - b. Mississippi Building Blocks
 - c. MDE Pre-K Collaborative
 - d. MS Low Income Initiative
 - e. MS Head Start
 - f. Other: _____

10. If you have not accessed the programs listed above, which ones would you be interested in participating in? (Check all that apply)
- The Early Years Network (Excel by 5, Allies for Quality Care, MS Shared Services Network, or Partners for Quality Child Care)
 - Mississippi Building Blocks
 - MDE Pre-K Collaborative
 - MS Low Income Initiative
 - MS Head Start
 - Other: _____
11. Please indicate the type of developmental feedback you provide to parents? (Check all that apply.)
- Progress Report
 - Developmental checklist
 - Competency checklist
 - Report Card
 - None
 - Other (please specify):
12. How often is this developmental feedback provided?
- Daily
 - Weekly
 - Monthly
 - Quarterly
 - Other (please specify):
13. Does your center currently collaborate with your local school district?
- Yes (If YES, Answer Q14)
 - No (If NO, Skip to Section 2)
14. In which ways does your center collaborate with your local school district? (Check all that apply.)
- Training
 - Kindergarten transition day
 - Sharing of materials and information
 - Special needs children
 - Aligned report card/checklist
 - other(specify)
 - None, do not collaborate

15. How often does your center collaborate with your local school district?

- a. Weekly
- b. Monthly
- c. Yearly

Section 2: Professional Expertise and Strategies to Close the Gap

Next, I would like to ask you a few questions about professional expertise of your staff and strategies to close the gap.

16. To what extent do you agree that your staff is prepared and qualified in each of the following areas:

	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neither Agree/Disagree (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
Early Learning and Development					
Health, Mental Health, and Nutrition					
Family Support					

17. When you think about professional development in early childhood education, what areas do you feel are the most important to address in order to ensure that your staff is prepared and has the skills needed to close the gaps in these three areas? Please indicate your response by scoring the following items on a 1-5 scale, with 1 indicating Not Important and 5 Indicating Very Important.

	Not Important (1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	Very Important (5)
By providing more hands-on experiences for postsecondary students in early childhood education programs that emphasize a link between theory and practice.					
By providing training experiences designed to improve the knowledge and skills of early childhood professionals.					
By providing training experiences that emphasize the needs of children and families.					
By making sure that training is done in a consistent, equal, and affordable manner for providers across the state.					
By tailoring programs to the unique needs of young children and helping to strengthen sensitivity to diversity in cultural and family backgrounds.					
By providing meaningful opportunities that lead to the retention and career advancement of early childhood professionals.					
Other (please specify)					

Section 3: Governance Models

In this section, I would like to ask you about your feelings on the most effective way to govern the Early Childhood System in Mississippi.

Currently, Mississippi's early childhood education programs do not have an established system for authority and accountability and are instead being governed by multiple agencies such as MDE, MDH, MDHS.

18. Please rank in order of importance from 1 to 3 where 1 is the best option and 3 is the least option for the following scenarios you believe would be the best fit for creating an integrated governance model where all Early Childhood Education programs would be directed and controlled by one entity in the state of Mississippi.

	Rank (1-3)
a. Placing authority and accountability for Early Childhood Education under one existing agency, such as the Mississippi Department of Health, Mississippi Department of Human Services, or Mississippi Department of Education.	
b. Placing authority and accountability for Early Childhood Education under multiple agencies, but coordinated by a council.	
c. Placing authority and accountability for Early Childhood Education under an independent, stand-alone executive office.	

Section 4: Director Educational Profile

Next, I would like to ask you about your educational background.

19. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
 - a. Less than High School
 - b. High School Diploma/GED
 - c. Some College
 - d. 2-year college degree (Associate's)
 - e. 4-year college degree (Bachelor's)
 - f. Graduate degree (Masters, Ph.D., Professional)
 - g. Other

20. Do you hold a degree in early childhood education? (If they check e, f, or g in Q18)
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Currently working on a degree in early childhood education

21. Have you received any of the following certifications related to your work with children under the age of 5? (check all that apply)
 - a. Child Development Associate Credential
 - b. Child Development Associate from a college/university
 - c. 1 year Certificate of Proficiency in Early Childhood Education
 - d. Director's Credential
 - e. National Director's Credential
 - f. First Aid Certification
 - g. CPR Certification
 - h. ServSafe Certification
 - i. Other (please specify):

22. How many professional development hours have you completed this calendar year?
 - a. Less than 15 hours
 - b. 15 hours or more

23. When does your licensing year start?

24. Are you a member of any national or regional professional organizations related to your work with children under the age of 5?
 - a. Yes (If YES, Answer Q25)
 - b. No (If NO, Skip Q25)

25. Please list these organizations

Section 5: Childcare Center Staff Profile

27. Does any of your staff hold a degree in a field related to early childhood education (such as elementary education, special education, human development, sociology, or psychology)?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Currently working on a degree in a related field
28. How many staff members at your center currently work with children ages 0-5?
29. Does your center provide volunteer opportunities?
30. Does your center have an internship program?
31. How many staff in your center have earned a Certificate (less than a 2-year degree)
32. How many staff in your center have earned an Associate's degree from an accredited community or junior college? _____
33. How many staff in your center have earned a Bachelor's degree? _____
34. How many staff in your center have earned a Graduate degree (Masters, Ph.D., Professional)? _____

Section 6: Childcare Center Profile

Finally, I would like to ask you about your childcare center.

35. Which of the following best describes your center?

- a. Early Head Start
- b. Head Start
- c. Public, Pre-K
- d. Private, for profit
- e. Private, not for profit
- f. Other (please specify):

36. In what county is your facility located? (Dropdown list)

37. Is your center licensed to serve the following early childhood groups?

(Check all that apply.)

- a. Infants (Birth to 1 Year)
- b. Toddlers (1-2 Years)
- c. 3 year olds
- d. 4 year olds
- e. School age

38. What is the license capacity for your center?

39. How many children from the following early childhood groups are currently enrolled in your program?

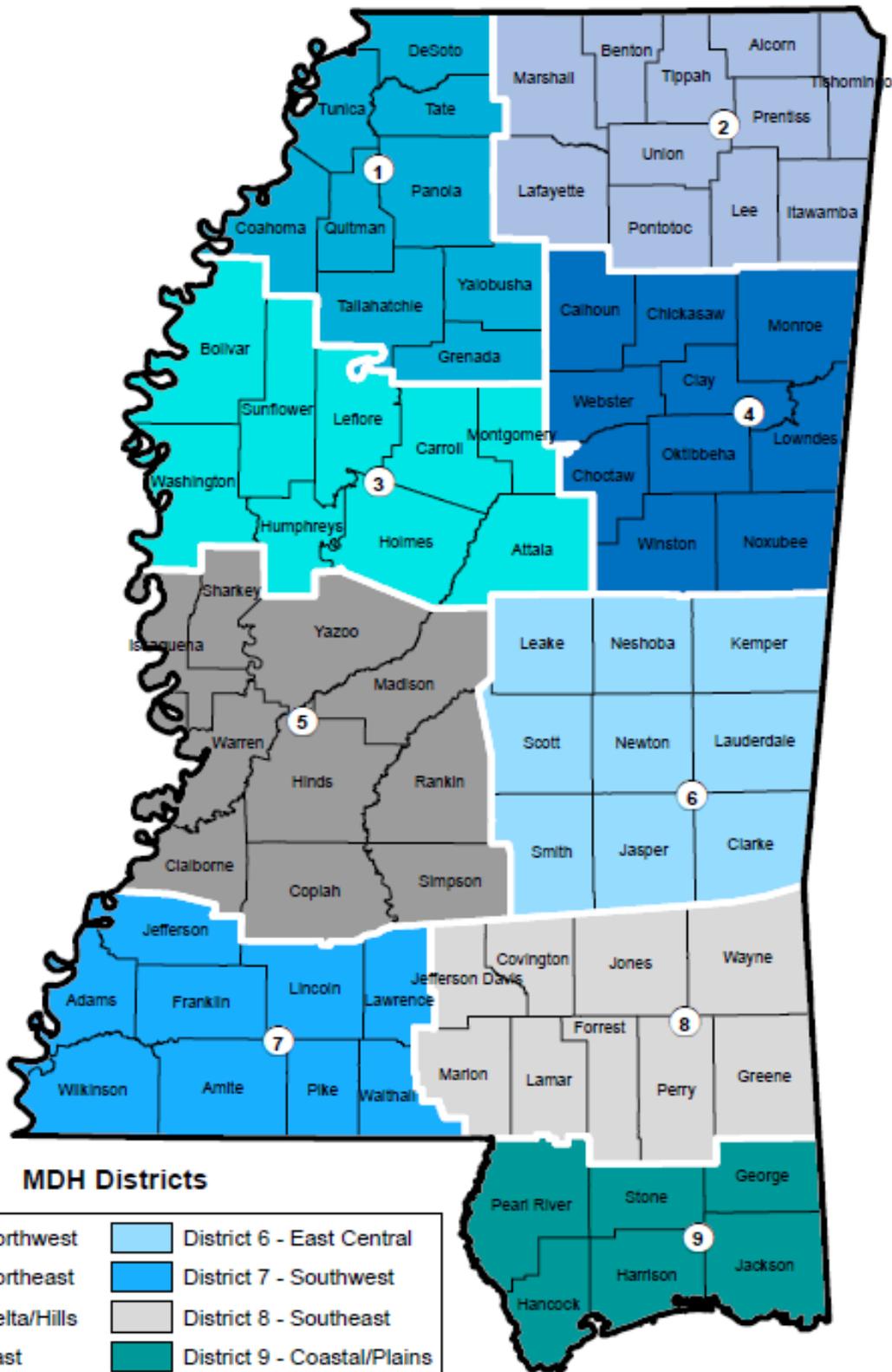
- a. Infants (Birth to 1 Year if 'a' was checked in Q36)
- b. Toddlers (1-2 Years if 'b' was checked in Q36)
- c. 3 year olds (if 'c' was checked in Q36)
- d. 4 year olds (if 'd' was checked in Q36)

This concludes our survey. Thank you very much for your participation.

If you have questions about this research project, please feel free to contact Dr. Laurie Smith, Education Policy Advisor/Executive Director of SECAC, at (601) 576-2010.

APPENDIX B: MAP OF MISSISSIPPI DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH DISTRICTS

District Map



MDH Districts

	District 1 - Northwest		District 6 - East Central
	District 2 - Northeast		District 7 - Southwest
	District 3 - Delta/Hills		District 8 - Southeast
	District 4 - East		District 9 - Coastal/Plains
	District 5 - West Central		

APPENDIX C: RESPONSE RATE PER QUESTION

QUESTION	RESPONSE RATE
1: Which of the following best describes the curriculum used by your facility?	86%
2: To the best of your ability, please list the name(s) of the formal published curriculum that is used at your facility.	57%
3: Does your facility follow/use Mississippi's Early Learning Standards and Guidelines for children ages 3 and 4?	85%
4: On a scale of 1 to 4, please rate the usefulness of Mississippi's Early Learning Standards and Guidelines for children ages 3 and 4.	70%
5: What are some of the reasons you have chosen not to follow/use Mississippi's Early Learning Standards and Guidelines for children ages 3 and 4?	99%
6: Would you like to receive information on Mississippi's Early Learning Standards and Guidelines for children ages 3 and 4?	89%
7: What would be the best way for us to make Mississippi's Early Learning Standards and Guidelines available to you and your teachers?	83%
8: What would be the most effective training method for you and your staff as they relate to Mississippi's Early Learning Standards and Guidelines?	82%
9: Which of the following technical assistance programs have you received services from?	94%
10: If you have not accessed the programs listed above, which ones would you be interested in participating in?	74%
11: Please indicate the type of developmental feedback you provide to parents,	89%
12: How often is this developmental feedback provided?	99%
13: Does your center currently collaborate with your local school district?	99%
14: In which ways does your center collaborate with your local school district?	93%
15: How often does your center collaborate with your local school district?	99%
16: To what extent do you agree that your staff is prepared and qualified in each of the following areas:	98%
17: When you think about professional development in early childhood education, what areas do you feel are the most important to address in order to ensure that your staff is prepared and has the skills needed to close the gaps in these three areas? Please indicate your response by scoring the following items on a 1-5 scale, with 1 indicating Not Important and 5 indicating Very Important.	98%
18: Please rank in order of importance from 1 to 3 where 1 is the best option and 3 is the least option for the following scenarios you believe would be the best fit for creating an integrated governance model where all Early Childhood Education programs would be directed and controlled by one entity in the state of Mississippi.	
19: What is the highest level of education you have completed?	98%
20: Do you hold a degree in early childhood education?	
21: Have you received any of the following certifications related to your work with children under the age of 5?	98%
22: How many professional development hours have you completed this calendar year?	98%
23: When does your licensing year start?	97%
24: Are you a member of any national or regional professional organizations related to your work with children under the age of 5?	97%
25: Please list these organizations.	91%
27: Does any of your staff hold a degree in a field related to early childhood education (such as elementary education, special education, human development, sociology, or psychology)?	98%
28: How many staff members at your center currently work with children ages 0-5?	97%
29: Does your center provide volunteer opportunities?	98%
30: Does your center have an internship program?	97%
31: How many staff in your center have earned a Certificate (less than 2-year degree)?	84%
32: How many staff in your center have earned an Associate's degree from an accredited community or junior college?	91%
33: How many staff in your center have earned a Bachelor's degree?	90%
34: How many staff in your center have earned a Graduate degree (Master's, Ph.D., Professional)?	86%
35: Which of the following best describes your center?	98%
36: In what county is your facility located?	-----
37: Is your center licensed to serve the following early childhood groups?	95%
38: What is the license capacity for your center?	96%
39: How many children from the following early childhood groups are currently enrolled in your program?	85%

APPENDIX D: TABLE OF PUBLISHED CURRICULUMS USED

CURRICULUM	
123 Curriculum	Head to Toe to Heart
A Beka	High Reach
ABC Jesus Loves Me	High Scope Play
ABC Math	Higher Learning
ABC Mouse Mailbox	Highlights
Alphabet Series	Hooked on Phonics
All About Preschool	Horizons
All Year Round	Houghton Mifflin
Applebaum training institute	I Ready Program
Beautiful Beginnings	Itty Bitty Bookworm
Beginning to Read, Write and Listen	Learn Everyday
Between the Lions	Letterville
Brightly beaming resources	Lippencott Scholastic
Brogance	Literacy
Choctaw Curriculum	Mother Goose
Clifford Pages	MS Action for Progress
Common Core Program	Owl
Core Knowledge	Pathways Programs
Creative Program	Pearson
Creative Resource	Pinnacle Press
Daycare for Toddlers	Pre K for Big Day
Direct	Preschool Curriculum
Easy Breezy	Project Read
Early Childhood	Quality Steps
Early Foundation	Reading Street
Early HS from MS	Scholastic
Early Start	Scholastic big day
Fireflies	Sing, Spell, and Write
Firstlook	Star Fall
Frog Street	Sunshine Express
Fun Steps	The Little People
Funshine Express	The Montessori Curriculum
Galalao	Therapeutic Incredible Years
Get Ready	Toddler Play
Handwriting without Tears	We Learn



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