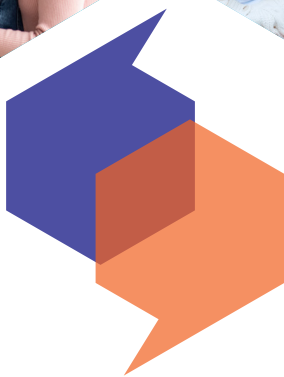




VILLAGE PATHWAYS™  
**TO CHILDCARE**



— AMPLIFYING VOICES —

# PARENTS

IN BARRY, IONIA, KENT, MECOSTA, MONTCALM COUNTIES



VIBRANT  
**FUTURES**

# Partners

Thanks to all the individuals and organizations whose contributions were instrumental in amplifying the voices of Michigan parents in Barry, Ionia, Kent, Mecosta, and Montcalm counties.



## Acknowledgements

Many thanks to the foundations and corporations whose support made this regional parent research possible.

The Regional Child Care Planning project is supported by funding provided from the Michigan Department of Education utilizing American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding, from the Office of Child Care, Administration for Children and Families, and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

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# The Silent Noise

## Absence of affordable care suppressing economic growth

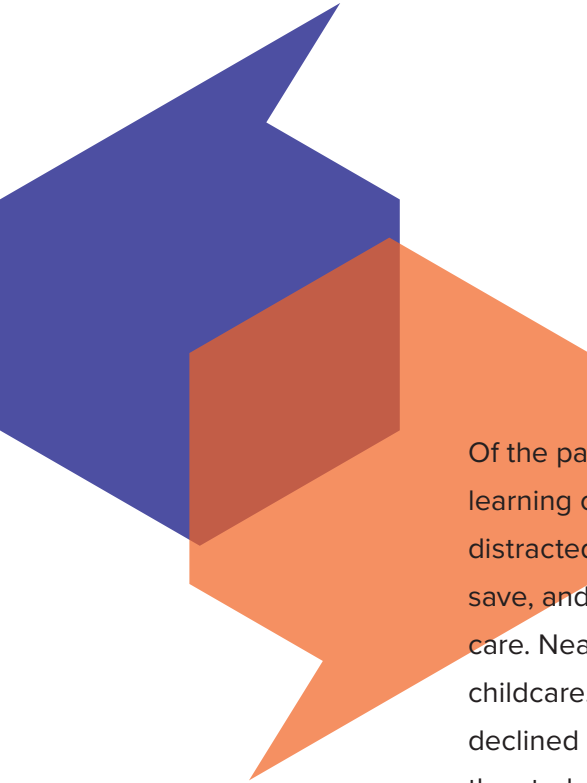
In a healthy economy, people go to work, build their careers, and secure affordable housing. But in this report, West Michigan refers to the counties of Barry, Ionia, Kent, Mecosta, and Montcalm. A shortage of acceptable and affordable childcare is a silent yet deafening noise, suppressing full employment, career growth, and progress toward home ownership.



The Village Pathways to Childcare survey results for West Michigan confirm that extreme, post-pandemic childcare shortages are keeping parents of young children out of the workforce... limiting their ability to earn, get a mortgage, build home equity, and make a better life for their children.

***As the affordability and shortage of childcare limits employment for parents of more than 60% of West Michigan's young children, it constrains growth throughout the entire region for all.***

This report seeks to document and lift parent voices about this critical issue. Our top three findings: (1) childcare is too costly, and unaffordable for most families; (2) nearly half cannot find childcare where and when they need it; and (3) infant and toddler care is unattainable for a majority of families seeking it.



Of the parents who have childcare, many would prefer a more structured learning option. More than half say their care arrangements leave them distracted and stressed at work, half say the cost makes it impossible to save, and 3 out of 5 say they have missed days of work due to gaps in care. Nearly a third have cut spending on food and health care to pay for childcare. About one-fourth of those surveyed have worked fewer hours, declined offers and promotions, and left jobs because of childcare. In the study, most parent responses from more urban and more rural counties were consistent within a few percentage points; a few exceptions are noted.

The demand for childcare is simply outstripping supply, current federal and state subsidies are falling short, and young families are caught in a bind they alone cannot solve.

Fortunately, West Michigan is rich with innovation, collaboration, and strategic investment. We will need all three to solve the childcare crisis... and unleash the full economic potential of the region.



Chana Edmond-Verley  
Chief Executive Officer  
Vibrant Futures



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# Absence of Care

## Top 10 Concerns of West Michigan Parents

The voices of parents in West Michigan ring strong and clear on 10 points of concern:

- 1** The cost of care is objectively too high relative to wages.
- 2** The demand for care exceeds the supply, with enough capacity for just 26% of children under age 13, and 56% of children under age 6.
- 3** Employment is off the table; in many families, one parent must stay out of the workforce until preschool is available.
- 4** Careers are suffering; diminished job performance due to childcare gaps puts promotions out of reach.
- 5** Most parents would choose a quality childcare center if space were available.
- 6** Young children in the care of friends and family may not be learning at an optimal pace.
- 7** Current care options do not align with current employment requirements.
- 8** Parents are more likely to stay employed when childcare benefits are available.
- 9** The cost of care is making it more difficult to buy a house or secure stable housing.
- 10** Parents fear for their children's futures due to lack of quality care.

# Executive Summary

## Findings



### **COST OF CARE RELATIVE TO WAGES**

The cost of childcare is too high to justify working for most prevailing wages and benefits.



### **ABSENCE OF CARE RELATIVE TO NEED**


Childcare is available for less than two-thirds of young children in Kent County who need care.

### **INFANT AND TODDLER CARE NOT ATTAINABLE FOR MAJORITY**


Age requirements leave families with the youngest children without options.

## Insights


### **KENT COUNTY PARENTS OF YOUNG CHILDREN REVEAL THAT THE SHORTAGE OF AFFORDABLE CHILDCARE IS CURRENTLY:**

- 
-  1. Constraining workforce participation


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  -  2. Diminishing workforce performance


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  -  3. Limiting cognitive and social development of young children

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  -  4. Hampering family earnings and savings

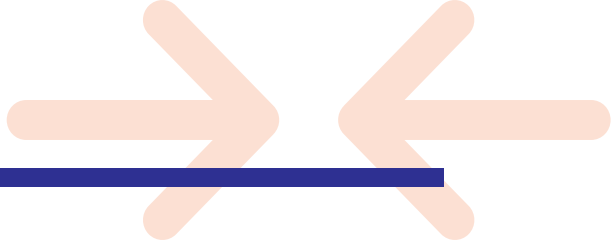
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  -  5. Restricting economic growth

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## Conclusion

Absent a strategic, systemic, public-private solution, the childcare crisis will continue to impede economic growth in West Michigan, constraining the prosperity of families, businesses, and communities.



# Childcare Costs Out of Reach

## CHILDCARE CRISIS CONSEQUENCE 1

### Constraining workforce participation

To stay employed, parents of young children must have reliable, safe care for their children. No childcare, no work. Yet one of the fields most starved for workers in West Michigan is childcare, and childcare costs are keeping many parents out of the workforce.

***“Childcare is NOT affordable.”***  
—Parent, Kent County

“With growing classroom closures and waitlists for childcare, we’ve recognized new strategies are needed to address the talent shortage in the child care sector,” says Joan Blough, says Joan Blough, senior director of the The Child Care Innovation Fund within Michigan’s Early Childhood Investment Corporation. “Expanding the number of early care and education registered apprenticeships is where we are doubling-down and investing to assure access to this innovation state-wide.”

For working parents, more childcare cost share options can help. Michigan’s innovative Tri-Share program provides a state subsidy for one-third of childcare costs, with the employee and employer each contributing another one-third.

Employers immediately [saw improvements in retention](#) with Tri-Share, says Cheryl Bergman, CEO of the Michigan Women’s Commission, tapped by Gov. Gretchen Whitmer to lead the pilot and administer the program. “It’s a workforce development program,” says Bergman, “and it is changing people’s lives.”

Workforce experts agree that parents alone cannot create the system of care they need to join and stay in the workforce.

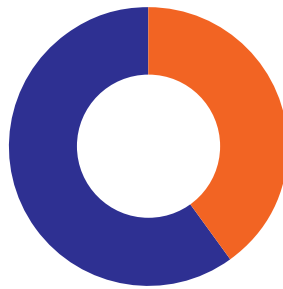


## Prevented Parents from Accessing Care



**61%**

said cost was a barrier



**40%**

found little or no care available



**17%**

lacked access to quality childcare

Tuition for five-day care for an infant is \$350 a week. Even taking into account holidays and vacations, that's more than \$16,000 a year, close to the cost of tuition and fees at the [University of Michigan](#).

*"We make too much money for available assistance programs, but we do not make enough money to afford a private 3-year-old program. And we do not earn enough to pay for full-time childcare."*

—Parent, Montcalm County

*"I cannot afford childcare currently. I stay home with my kids."*

—Parent, Kent County

*"I wish I could help bring in some money part-time, but childcare's too expensive."*

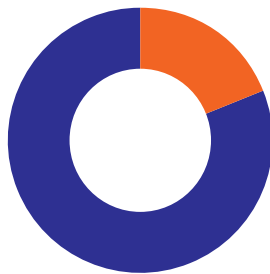
—Parent, Montcalm County

## Effects on Employment



**25%**

worked fewer hours or stopped working



**19%**

turned down offer or promotion



**25%**

had to leave a job

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# Unstable Care, Distracted Workers

## CHILDCARE CRISIS CONSEQUENCE 2

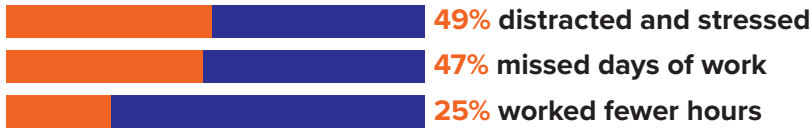
### Diminishing workforce performance

Many parents with precarious childcare arrangements feel like they are straddling a river too wide with little ones in their arms, at constant risk of falling in the rushing current. Safe, secure, reliable childcare allows employees to go to work focused, confident, and productive, as business leaders attest. When parents must rely on a patchwork of family, friends, and neighbors, they say the unreliable situation leaves them distracted and stressed, more likely to miss days of work and work fewer hours.

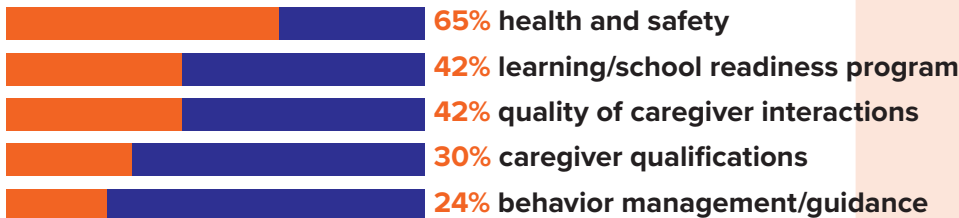
*“It’s simple. Child care keeps Michigan working. That’s why we’ve worked to expand access to low or no cost care, open more child care programs, and improve wages for child care professionals,” said Michelle Richard, acting director of the Michigan Department of Lifelong Education, Advancement, and Potential, or MiLEAP. “We have so much more to do. Today, too many families still can’t find care that fits their budget or meets their needs. We’re committed to working with communities to build the creative solutions that are needed to achieve lasting change.”*



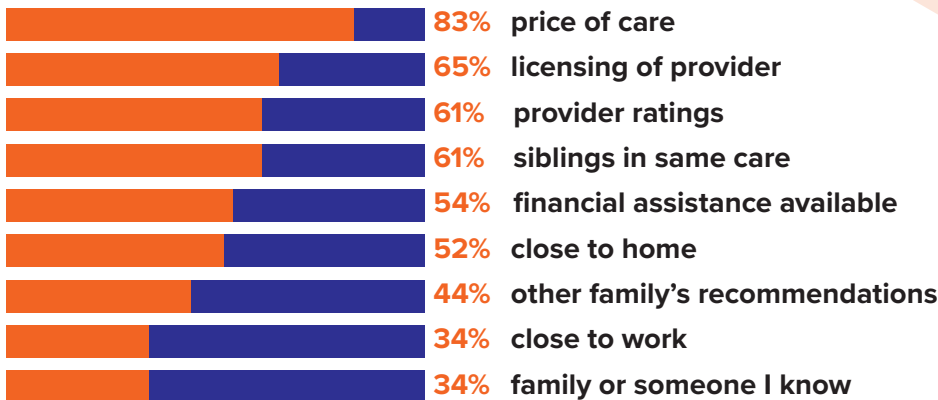
## Career Consequences



## Most Important Considerations when Selecting Childcare



## Selecting Care: Very Important Factors



*“We need two incomes. However, due to a lack of childcare and conflicting schedules of work and when children are home from school, only one parent can work.”*

*—Parent, Kent County*

*“In my family, we are very concerned about the physical and mental health of our children. So I am very concerned about whether our unpaid provider will take good care of my children.”*

*—Parent, Kent County*

*“We have no second income due to lack of reliable, safe childcare.”*

*—Parent, Ionia County*

*“Our youngest is 5 and has autism. Finding care for his particular set of needs has been challenging.”*

*—Parent, Kent County*

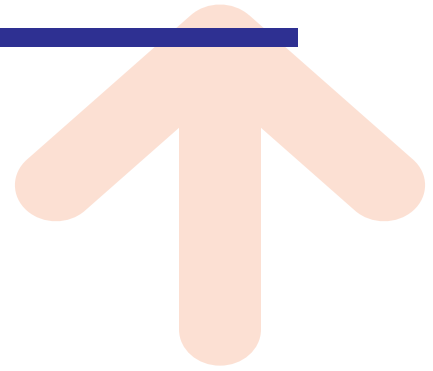
## Insights



**Career consequences** of child care limitations are slightly more severe in Kent County than the four-county region.

**Health and safety** is more of a concern in Kent County than the four-county region.

# Brain Development for Life



## CHILDCARE CRISIS CONSEQUENCE 3

### Limiting cognitive and social development of young children

Decades of academic evidence confirm that the human brain is wired for language, math, problem solving, critical thinking, and social interaction during the first days, weeks, months of life... with the greatest window of opportunity closing by age 5. Experts say early childhood is the most high-stakes time in a human life. When children have safe, secure, quality childcare in their earliest years, they will be primed to learn, work, and contribute to society for years to come.

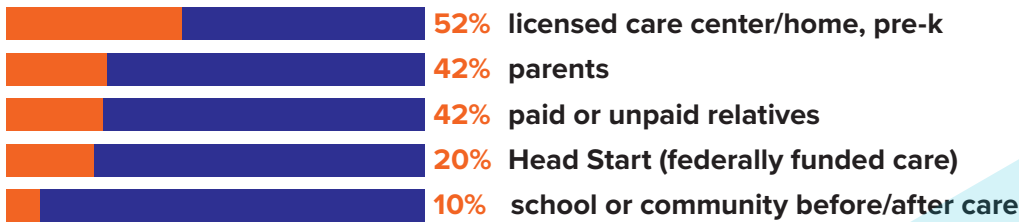
Any investment in young children is an investment in their future lives, their family's prosperity, and the future workforce of their community.

***“The highest rate of return in early childhood development comes from investing as early as possible, from birth through age five, in disadvantaged families. Starting at age three or four is too little too late, as it fails to recognize that skills beget skills in a complementary and dynamic way. Efforts should focus on the first years for the greatest efficiency and effectiveness.”***

James J. Heckman,  
Nobel laureate and Henry Schultz Distinguished Service Professor  
in Economics at the University of Chicago

## Current Arrangements

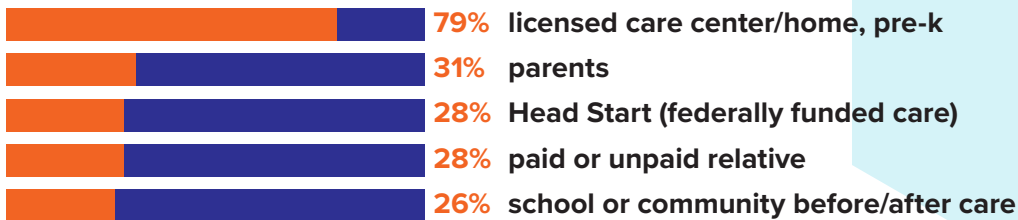
In most families today, relatives care for young children.



*"We would love to enroll our toddler in childcare/preschool but are struggling to find one that is a good fit for our family and finances."*  
—Parent, Kent County

## Ideal Arrangements

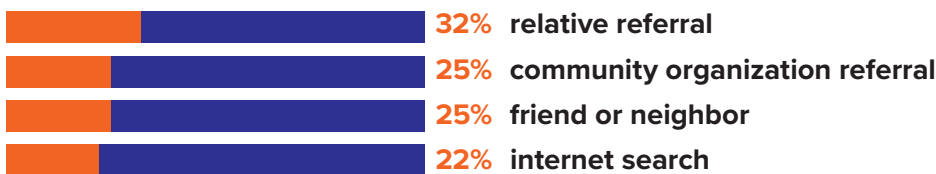
Most parents would prefer a licensed or professional childcare setting where trained professionals are providing age-appropriate learning experiences.



*"I would love for my son to be able to be in a center-based childcare that offers more child engagement and more of a preschool-type setting."*  
—Parent, Montcalm County

## Finding Care

Most parents are finding care through personal networks and community referrals.



*"I was recently unemployed due to not being able to afford childcare. I started working from home and my kids are not in any childcare centers. When school starts back, I'll have all my children enrolled and attending programs."*  
—Parent, Kent County

## Insights



**In Kent County**, 76% of families reported having licensed care with preschool or Head Start, compared to 51% for the rural counties.

**In Kent County**, 57% of families prefer licensed care, a significantly larger share than in the five-county region.

**Slight preference for community referrals** exist in more rural counties.

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# No Work, No Investment

## CHILDCARE CRISIS CONSEQUENCE 4

### Hampering family earnings and savings

Every economy is essentially an ecosystem of interdependent parts: products and profits, wages and benefits, productivity and consumption, private wealth and public resources. When one part in the ecosystem falls out of balance, the entire economy shifts.

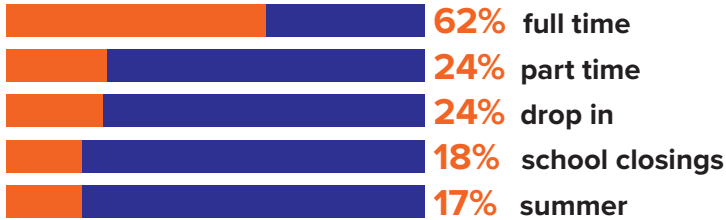
For many families in West Michigan, welcoming a child drives a major shift in household finances. If childcare is available and affordable, any interruption in work is short-lived, and income can continue to flow. But if no childcare is available, income may be lost. The family's ability to maintain decent housing may become a challenge. Soon, the prospect of owning a home—investing in the community as a homeowner and stakeholder and contributor of stability and growth—quickly slides out of reach.

*The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services says "affordable" childcare takes 7% or less of family income. In West Michigan, parents report that childcare takes up to 50% of family income, an unsustainable formula in any economy.*



## When Care is Needed

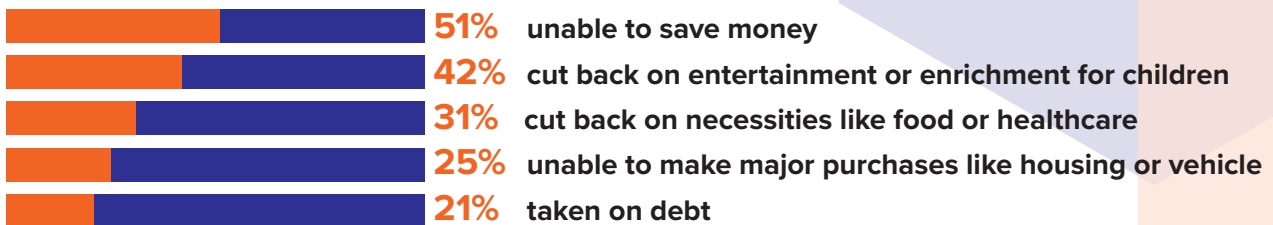
Parents need childcare while they work, but very few systems exist to align timetables of childcare and employer operations.



*"Childcare costs half of my take-home pay each month. I've had to place my mortgage in forbearance to pay for it and will soon need to borrow money. All the moderately priced centers and at-home care with a good reputation had a 12- to 18-month wait for full-time infant care. I had no choice but to use a very expensive daycare center."*  
—Parent, Kent County

## Reduced Opportunity, Security, Safety

Childcare limitations can hamper opportunity afforded by positive fiscal habits that lead to security as well as the rewards of developmentally supportive activities. Parents are further limited when mobility is restricted, and they are forced to sacrifice health or safety because of unaffordability.



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# Paychecks, Promotions, and Profits

## CHILDCARE CRISIS CONSEQUENCE 5

### Restricting economic growth

Michigan's childcare crisis is an equal opportunity burden, shared by:

- All businesses and employers  
*\$2.3 billion lost annually to absenteeism and turnover costs*
- All Michigan residents relying on State services and resources  
*\$576 million in annual revenue lost*
- Prospective workers in every profession and trade  
*Michigan is 39/50 in U.S. state labor force participation*

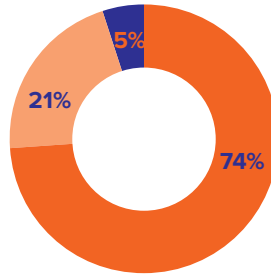
Those bearing the greatest burden? Parents of infants and toddlers who cannot work and earn at top productivity, which prevents them from providing for their children with optimal investments in education, nutrition, and developmental experiences. Limited by system failures far beyond their ability to solve, West Michigan's young heads-of-household are simply boxed out of the paychecks and promotions they need in their 20s and 30s to build a sustainable future for themselves and their families.



## Loyalty

For 95% of parents, assistance with childcare would increase loyalty to employer:

- 74% very much
- 21% somewhat
- 5% not at all



*“Ideally, I would like to work a little bit more. To save money and help our family out more financially. But due to daycare costs it’s just out of the question. My salary isn’t very much. With the cost of childcare, working would not improve our family’s financial status.”*

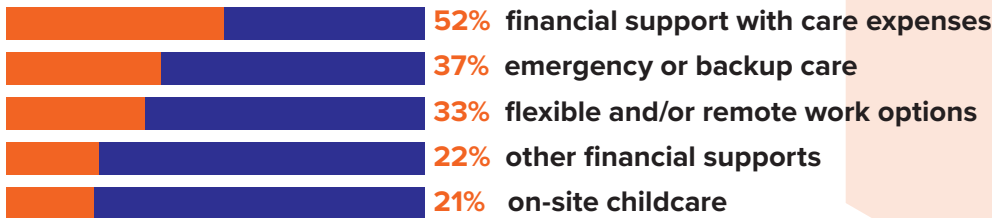
—Parent, Kent County

*We would both like to be able to work but it is not affordable with 3 kids who would need some form of childcare.*

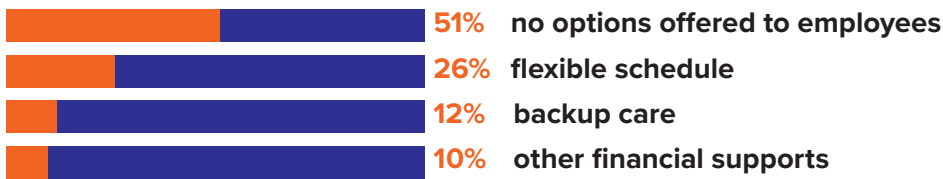
—Parent, Barry County

## Employer Supports

Families expressed preference for employers that offer assistance with childcare availability and expenses.



## Benefits Currently Available to Families



## Insights



**93% loyalty rating** was consistent in primarily urban and mostly rural counties.

**Price of care** was the highest rated selection factor in Barry, Ionia, Kent, Montcalm and Mecosta County.

**Licensing of provider** was 24 points higher in Kent County (73%) than in the four-county region of Barry, Ionia, Montcalm, and Mecosta (49%).

# Demographics

**57%** White, Caucasian, or Euro-American

**27%** Black, African American, or Afro-Caribbean

**24%** Latina/o/x/@/e, Hispanic, or Chicana/o/x/@

**3%** Native American, Alaska Native, American Indian, First Nations, or Indigenous

**3%** Asian or East Asian

**2%** Indian or South Asian

**1%** Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander

**1%** Arab or Middle Eastern

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# Conclusions

While subtle differences exist in parent perceptions between the more urban Kent County and the more rural four-county area, most parent responses were consistent. In the world of childcare, the stakes are high:

- early brain development of children, tomorrow's voters and entrepreneurs and leaders;
- early-career earnings and growth for families, tomorrow's owners and investors and builders;
- optimal productivity and profits for employers, tomorrow's innovators and creators and developers;
- opportunity and prosperity for all.

West Michigan's share of Michigan's \$2.9 billion childcare opportunity may be as high as \$279 million. Solutions will require ingenuity from the entire village of private, public, and independent sector players; parents cannot shoulder the burden alone. And absent solutions, parents will have no choice: they will continue to withdraw from the workforce.

The cost of low workforce participation over time? **Incalculable.**  
The value of abundant, quality childcare starting today? **Priceless.**



Vibrant Futures creates cradle-to-career opportunities and experiences that hold sacred the vibrant promise and potential in every child, family, and caregiver, to ensure more vibrant futures for all.



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