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# Trends Tell a STORY

## Three Reasons We Are Optimistic About the Future of Family Child Care

by Erica Phillips and Valora Washington

More children spend time in home-based child care than any other child care setting (NSECE, 2016). Yet these programs have historically been subject to marginalization within both the early childhood profession and within communities. Dominated by single proprietors, family child care educators face negative assumptions about program quality, even as they navigate policies that may reimburse them at lower rates or assess their quality with tools meant for centers. Despite a decades-long decline in FCC programs—as much as 25 percent since 2012 (Datta, Milesi, Srivastava, & Zapata-Gietl, 2021)—we nevertheless share an optimistic view of the future of FCC for three reasons.

### FCC Will Continue to Grow in Popularity

In the United States, we see important new family trends. Families are having fewer children, and children make up a smaller proportion of the population (Washington, 2021). Yet we predict that within this trajectory of decline, a considerable proportion of families will continue to choose family child care, particularly because of its flexibility, nurturing environments, and the opportunities it provides to support the child's home language and culture.

As our economy shifts, many of today's young families embark upon nontraditional career paths, engage in shift or gig work, and are less likely to return to work in an office, thereby increasing the demand for flexible child care. FCC is more likely to provide care during non-traditional hours and in locations where parents live or work. Case in point: A 2020 NAFCC survey found that 69 percent of FCC programs remained open during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic—more than double those of center-based care. Ninety-seven percent of those that remained open served the children of essential workers, including school-age children.

A hallmark of family child care has been intimate care, spanning several developmental time periods, with the same 1-2 caregivers in a home-like environment. One lingering impact of the pandemic is a preference for smaller group sizes, which families believe promotes a healthier environment.



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Furthermore, FCC is typically a mixed-age service delivery model. This model strengthens family/child/provider relationships. It also has the advantage of enabling siblings to remain together in the same setting.

Finally, a signature characteristic of today's young families is their ethnic and racial diversity. Today's children, Generation Alpha, are the most strikingly diverse in our nation's history (Washington, 2021). It is foreseeable that many families will prefer linguistic and cultural continuity in their child care choices. FCC educators are more likely to care for families of color, as well as families living in rural communities (Bromer J. P.-B., 2021).

### **We Will See Promising Innovations in the FCC Industry**

Strategic innovations now characterize the FCC professional communities in many ways that will prove to have a sustainable impact on the sector's business and program practices. Here are a few examples that encourage us.

Today, there are more FCC networks than ever. These networks are promising strategies for improving the quality of care provided in FCC programs (Bromer J. , 2009).

There is a greater focus on professional development and professionalization of the sector. For example, the American Rescue Plan provided \$39 billion in emergency funding, giving states an unprecedented opportunity to offer tailored professional development for FCC (CLASP, 2021). The professional development offered met the specific needs for FCC, such as being available in the evenings or on weekends. It was also available in multiple languages, addressing the providers' dual roles as educators and business owners. This professional development also incorporated strategies for mixed-age groups in a home-based setting and offered networking opportunities to counter the isolation educators face in their homes.

Appropriate uses of technology are gaining ground. We have seen more shared service platforms and automated tools for FCC enrollment and subsidy administration, such as My Village and Wonderschool, spurred by a doubling in venture capital investments in early education over the last five years (Wan, 2021).

Engagement and leadership among practitioners are also accelerating. FCC educators have increased their engagement in FCC led associations, including NAFCC and unions. These educators are demanding more respect and compensation as they advocate for a living wage, strong health benefits, retirement savings, and the ability to build wealth. One recent example occurred in the State of Washington, where FCC educators fought to receive health insurance benefits (Economic Opportunity Institute, 2021).

### **FCC will Become a More Typical Setting for Publicly Funded Early Learning**

During the 2019-2020 school year, about half of the state-funded pre-K programs allowed family child care programs to receive state pre-K dollars (Weisenfeld & Frede, 2021). Many states have expressed their commitment to making systems more inclusive of FCC programs.

Including FCC programs in state-funded pre-K programs recognizes their strengths as settings that offer a holistic view of early childhood education quality. These early learning settings highlight the unique strengths of home-based child care, including strong caregiver-child interactions and rich opportunities for learning in real-life environments with mixed-age groups. Pre-kindergarten programs can use NAFCC accreditation standards to ensure publicly funded FCC programs support child development and early learning, while minimizing the risk of pushing out educators with years of experience or those who speak languages other than English.

Most importantly, FCC leadership will be central to the development of any future innovations for this sector. As an organization led by FCC educators, NAFCC recognizes the power of lifting their voices through programs like Leaders Shaping Leaders, a year-long leadership development program. And as we look ahead, we must leverage the deep relationships FCC educators have with their families to create additional champions for child care, and generate the necessary momentum to realize a stronger child care system for the future.

### **Family Child Care Has a Bright Future**

As a valued family choice focused on promising innovations, and serving a wide range of children, there are many reasons to be hopeful about the future of family child care. We envision a future where FCC is no longer invisible and fragile, but

instead serves as a leader in the early childhood education profession.

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