

Clear Creek 2026 Summer Pre-K Pilot

Final Report





Executive Summary

The Clear Creek 2026 Summer Pre-K Pilot was launched to address the county's significant childcare gap during the peak summer tourism season, when school-based preschool care is unavailable. In partnership with Clear Creek Metropolitan Recreation District (CCMRD), Clear Creek School District RE-1, Expanding Early Care and Learning (EECL), The Clear Creek Schools Foundation, and Triad Bright Futures/Gateway Partnership for Early Childhood, the seven-week program provided licensed care for children ages 3-5 using an existing preschool classroom at Carlson Elementary.

Demand for the summer preschool program was strong: 22 children were enrolled from 20 families, filling 88.5% of seat-days, with six families waitlisted. Family satisfaction was exceptionally high; all respondents reported positive experiences and would enroll again. Staff feedback affirmed implementation fidelity and cross-organizational coordination, while noting needs for training, communication systems, and budget clarity.

Future recommendations include extending program duration, modestly increasing daily capacity, strengthening pre-service training and staffing structure, modernizing enrollment systems, and securing multi-year funding commitments.



Introduction / Project Background

Like many rural mountain areas, quality childcare is a significant issue impacting families in Clear Creek. In 2024, Triad Bright Futures completed an Early Childhood Community Needs Assessment in Clear Creek County. This research showed that Clear Creek has more than 3 times as many children as licensed seats and 8.5 times as many infant/toddler children as seats (467 children under 5 with only 10 infant slots, 29 toddler slots and 100 preschool seats), qualifying Clear Creek County as a "childcare desert." During a journey mapping session, parents expressed significant mental and financial stress from the lack of affordable childcare and 100% said infant, toddler and preschool care is too expensive to access. According to the data review, one third of families with children under 6 had to use childcare outside Clear Creek to meet their needs but 74% said they would choose care near their house if they could.

Parents in Clear Creek rely on school-based preschool care, however, these school-based programs leave parents with a major summer gap. Through capacity-building investments from Comis Foundation, Freeport-McMoRan/Henderson Mine, and county lodging tax dollars, this project sought to address that need in a sustainable and replicable way, through an innovative partnership.





The summer preschool program aimed to:

- Increase access to summer childcare for families, reduce family stress, and improve family economic standing.
- Improve school and lived outcomes for children, consistent with preschool attendance.
- Improve consistent summer staffing for local businesses, minimizing call outs and seasonal turnover due to lack of childcare.
- Increase enrollment retention in Clear Creek County School District RE-1 by establishing consistent childcare options in the county, resulting in more family retention, increased annual per pupil revenue for the school district, and better student outcomes.
- Utilize the experience and know-how of the already established school-age summer program governed by Clear Creek Metropolitan Recreation District.
- Build the childcare workforce in the county by creating summer income options and opportunities for higher level certification.
- Provide a roadmap for other mountain and rural communities with lessons learned and an implementation path.

By leveraging existing infrastructure and operational systems, the program was designed to fill gaps in childcare availability and provide a reliable solution for families with young children. It also sought to reduce the historically high turnover of young families by incentivizing them to remain in the county. Long-term benefits include increased workforce participation, community stability, and economic resilience. The program is structured to be scalable and replicable in other rural and mountain communities facing similar challenges.





Program Partners

- **Clear Creek Metropolitan Recreation District (CCMRD):** Served as the governing and implementation body for the summer preschool program.
- **Clear Creek School District RE 1 (CCSD RE-1):** Provided classroom space and a learning environment; coordinated cleaning logistics.
- **Expanding Early Care and Learning (EECL):** Provided program planning support and served as an implementation partner for the Strong Start Scholarship Fund.
- **The Clear Creek Schools Foundation:** Provided program planning support; provided fiscal support for lease and materials; served as an implementation partner for the Strong Start Scholarship Fund.
- **Trailhead Institute:** Served as the fiscal sponsor for Triad Bright Futures.
- **Triad Bright Futures / Gateway Partnership for Early Childhood:** Secured grant funding; provided project management and evaluation for the pilot program. Note: Triad Bright Futures closed in July 2026, and the work was absorbed by Gateway Partnership for Early Childhood.
- **Child Care Innovations:** Provided licensing support.
- **Comis Foundation and Freeport-McMoRan/Henderson Mine:** Provided capacity building funding for the project.
- **Clear Creek County, City of Idaho Springs, and City of Empire:** Contributed to the 2025-26 Strong Start Scholarship Fund





Program Description

Program Name: Clear Creek 2026 Summer Care Preschool Pilot

Duration: 7 weeks (June 8 to July 24, 2026)

Target population: Children ages 3 to 5 with family living/working in Clear Creek County

Goals:

- Strengthen family retention and economic development by addressing urgent need for summer childcare availability
- Provide safe, engaging summer learning for 3 to 5-year-olds entering preschool

Delivery Approach

Utilizing an existing preschool classroom at Carlson Elementary School, implement a preschool program serving up to 10 children ages 3 to 5 daily. Program administered by CCMRD parallel to the school-age summer program they run annually.

Program Daily Schedule Overview

Operating Monday through Friday, 7:30am to 5:30pm. Daily schedule:

- 7:30 to 9:00: Drop-off and Free Play
- 9:00 to 9:30: Cold Snack
- 9:30 to 11:00: Center Time (Planned)
- 11:00 to 11:30: Circle Time
- 11:30 to 12:00: Unstructured Free Play
- 12:00 to 12:45: Lunch
- 12:45 to 1:00: Clean Up
- 1:00 to 2:30: Naptime / Quiet Play
- 2:30 to 2:45: Clean Up and Wash Hands for Snack
- 2:45 to 3:00: Snack
- 3:00 to 4:00: Outside Time
- 4:00 to 5:30: Free Play and Pick-up





Activities & Timeline

Planning & Partnerships (Oct 2025 to Feb 2026)

- Established service agreements and operational logistics between CCMRD and CCSD RE-1.
- Consulted with Child Care Innovations regarding licensure requirements.
- Presented plan and gathered feedback/insights from the Clear Creek Early Childhood Working Group.
- Identified and confirmed funding sources and operational needs.

Staffing & Outreach (Feb to May 2026)

- Finalized operational needs including insurance and licensure
- Recruited and hired director and staff
- Secured small center direct licensure
- Launched outreach and marketing to enroll families

Program Implementation (Jun to Jul 2026)

- Operated summer childcare for 3–5-year-olds, in alignment with the recreation center's existing summer schedule.
- Provided structured care and early learning activities, serving up to 10 families daily.

Evaluation & Year 2 Planning (Aug to Sept 2026)

- Assessed pilot outcomes through quantitative and qualitative means: family satisfaction, staff feedback, and operations feedback.
- Identified lessons learned and areas for improvement.

Planned Communications for Dissemination & Year 2 Replication (Sept 2026 to Aug 2027)

- Prepare reports and communication to share project and recommendations.
- Refine program design and confirm continuation agreements with partners.
- Secure grant funding and scholarship expectations.
- Disseminate through networks and organizational communication channels.





Evaluation Design & Methodology

Program Evaluation

Purpose:

- Determine the pilot's effectiveness, identify areas for improvement, and inform decisions regarding scaling.
- Assess whether the pilot operated within budget, used resources efficiently, and demonstrated financial feasibility for continuation or scaling in 2027.

Key Questions:

- How do families perceive the program's value and accessibility?
- Were program activities implemented as planned?
- Did the pilot remain within the planned budget?

Design and Methods

Type: Mixed Methods (process + outcome evaluation)

Approach:

- Post assessment for family and employer feedback
- Data analysis of program process

Methods:

- End-of-program family surveys measuring program satisfaction, perceived benefits, and barriers. Including both multiple choice and open-ended questions. (See Appendix A).
- Post-program staff/employer survey measuring implementation fidelity, quality, costs, and improvement opportunities. (See Appendix B).
- Program implementation data analysis, utilizing child attendance records, staff attendance records, and financial records.



Planning

Beginning in October of 2025 the Clear Creek Early Childhood Working Group began meeting with partners to determine efficacy of a summer preschool program. With the support of CCSD RE-1 and The Clear Creek Schools Foundation, CCMRD agreed to govern the preschool program alongside their already established school-age program at Carlson Elementary School. EECL and Triad Bright Futures secured grant funding in November of 2025 from Comis Foundation to finalize the funding requirements. Additional funding was secured through a Freeport-McMoRan Henderson Site Investment grant in May of 2026.

CCMRD began staff recruitment in February of 2026 and hired the program director in March. Between March and June, three additional staff members were hired and trained, and the program secured the required small childcare center license certificate prior to the open date. Licensure certification included the acquirement of a small center director certification for the program director. Initial planning included 4 hours per week for the director to complete planning tasks; however, this was quickly adjusted to accommodate more hours for administrative planning and staff training. These funds were accounted for in the administrative budget allocated to CCMRD for such costs. Staff hours were adjusted to better accommodate the needs of the program including reducing the lead teacher from 35 to 30 hours per week, which allowed for an additional childcare aide to be hired at 10 hours per week. The lead teacher also took on assistant director responsibilities on Fridays to adhere to licensing requirements.





Implementation

The program ran from June 8, 2026, through July 24, 2026, seven weeks, this was two weeks less than the school age program due to classroom cleaning and setup required for the school year early childhood classroom on both ends of the program.

The program provided early learning support to 20 families and 22 children during the 34-day summer session. The program offered 10 childcare seats per day, creating a total capacity of 340 seat-days, of which 301 seat-days were used (88.5% utilization). This was an average of 8 to 9 children per day. There were six additional families on the summer program waitlist.

The program's list price was \$60 per child per day, while qualifying families received a \$30-per-day scholarship through the county's Start Strong scholarship program administered by The Clear Creek Schools Foundation with oversight from EECL. Over the course of the program, 122 scholarship days were provided, representing 40.5% of care days, with a total of \$3,660 in scholarship assistance awarded.

The staff schedule reflected licensing requirements with one lead teacher or one director always in the classroom to maintain the 1 to 10 ratio. Due to staffing constraints and unexpected child needs, some staff overtime was experienced.

Outcomes: Family Survey Responses (See Appendix A)

10 of the 20 families completed the post-program survey, a 50% response rate. Of those responses 10 of 10 families reported that during the program their child felt safe, enjoyed daily activities, and that the activities were developmentally appropriate.

Of those responses, all families also reported positive communication (timeliness, clarity, frequency) from the program and felt staff demonstrated respect and friendliness. When asked, "What is one thing we should keep for next year?" four of the respondents referenced the staff as a highlight of the program.

A high proportion of parents described positive behavioral or social changes with 8 out of 10 respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that they noticed positive changes in their child's routines (e.g., social skills, following directions, readiness for preschool).

"Her overall behavior changed. Started doing more acts of kindness." - Parent respondent

All responding families were satisfied overall with the program. All families agreed the program helped maintain work schedules or reduce stress and that the program was worth the time and cost. All respondents stated they would enroll again next year.

"I really appreciated this program. It had good hours, my daughter loved going, and the cost was reasonable." - Parent respondent

Barriers highlighted by respondents included the availability of slots (raised by 2 of 10 families), the program ending too early before the start of the school year (1 of 10 families), sign-up system issues (1 out of 10 families). Five of the 10 families reported no barriers.

Staff Survey Responses (See Appendix B)

A total of 4 of 6 staff completed the post program survey (66% response rate).

Three of the four respondents reported strong adherence to planned activities. All four indicated that facilities, materials, and supports for children's needs were adequate. All four confirmed that child ratios met required standards.

All four staff agreed the program met its learning goals. Three of four reported that the program positively supported family stability. Two of the four indicated they were highly satisfied with the pilot overall.

Respondents noted challenges with training, staffing, scheduling, and communication. Two of four reported limited preparedness for the program. Two of four indicated staffing strain. Ratings on scheduling predictability were evenly split. Two of four reported inconsistent onsite communication.

Cross organization coordination was viewed positively, with three of four respondents expressing strong agreement. In contrast, three of four reported challenges with family communication systems.

Responses on data collection feasibility varied across all four respondents. Two of the four identified significant concerns with budget clarity. Three of four felt resources were used efficiently. Overall, funding sustainability received moderate confidence from respondents.

Two of the four respondents reported concerns with equitable enrollment, indicating potential gaps in outreach and representation across the county.

Financial Overview

Overall, the pilot operated slightly under budget. Total actual expenses were \$46,171, coming in \$614 (-1.3%) below the planned budget.

In total the program received \$41,000 in grant funding and an additional \$3,082 in Strong Start Scholarship Funds.

Cost Per Child Analysis

The total actual enrollment amounted to 301 child days, resulting in a cost of \$153.39 per child day. Over the seven-week program period, this equates to a weekly cost of \$6,595.90. When measured by staff hours, the cost was \$135.80 per hour (based on ten-hour program days over 34 operational days).

Enrollment & Attendance Impact

Enrollment utilization reached 88.5%, with 301 actual child days out of a possible 340.

Staffing Efficiency Review

Actual staff to child ratios met or exceeded licensing and safety standards. The financial data indicate a staff to child cost ratio of \$137.17, reflecting the intensive staff hours needed for safe and high-quality care.





Analysis and Discussion

Program Planning and Preparation

The pilot's planning phase demonstrated effective cross sector mobilization and agile operational readiness. Convening partners in October 2025 led to a clear governance home at CCMRD, while early grant commitments (Comis Foundation in November 2025 and Henderson Mine in 2026) derisked launch and allowed for timely hiring and materials procurement.

CCMRD's recruitment of a director in March and three additional staff by June, coupled with securing the small childcare center license before opening, reflects strong execution under compressed timelines. Early staffing adjustments show pragmatic alignment to licensing requirements and a relationship-based care model that families value.

At the same time, the planning window carried avoidable risk. Licensure granted just days before the program start left minimal buffer for remediation if inspectors had required changes, and director hours were increased significantly to absorb simultaneous demands (hiring staff, program planning, applying for licensure). This signals underestimation of the prelaunch workload in the initial plan (4 hours/week). While the added hours were covered in CCMRD's administrative budget, the late licensing decision, compressed hiring, and evolving staffing model suggest the program would benefit from earlier program preparation and a dedicated prelaunch FTE allocation (director + admin support).

Overall, the pilot's planning succeeded because of robust collaboration, grant funding, and additional staff hours but future cycles should shift critical preparation pieces earlier and resource prelaunch tasks more realistically to improve resilience and reduce startup stress.

Demand, Access and Utilization

Utilization of the program was strong at 88.5%, a daily average of 8-9 children out of 10 seats. The consistent waitlist of six families indicates an unmet demand; if capacity were increased by even two additional seats (to 12), the program could absorb part of this demand with minimal structural change (dependent on age of students and licensure requirements). Overall, the utilization of the program suggests this is not a "build it and hope" model but implies that demand exists now.





Affordability and Scholarship Impact

Scholarships covered 40.5% of care days and delivered \$3,660 in assistance. In terms of family perception, the survey results suggest families viewed the program as generally affordable, but positive results were not unanimous. Most families indicated that their affordability thresholds sit below the \$60/day list price. Additionally, grants comprised of 68.8% of total income, with tuition fees providing 31.4%. The viability of this program heavily relies on external funding and scholarships are pivotal, even if not universally sufficient.

Financial Structure and Efficiency

The program ended within budget. The current model is financially resilient, breaking even at 68% utilization due to strong grant support. If grants decline, the break-even threshold rises quickly.

Lower-than-maximum enrollment (11.5% unused capacity) represents an opportunity for improved outreach or alternative enrollment models that could further enhance efficiency without significantly increasing costs.

Staffing costs comprised the largest portion of total expenditures and represent the primary driver of overall cost structure. However, quality guardrails and licensing ratios alongside beneficial workforce wage structures limits how far staffing can be compressed.

Income/viability relied on grant funding. To assess scalability, it will be important to evaluate ongoing commitments from the county, school district partners, and philanthropic sources. While strong in this cycle, grant-dependent models may fluctuate annually, and multi-year commitments are recommended for long-term stability.





Positive Outcomes vs. Obstacles

Families reported uniformly positive experiences, suggesting staff and general program implementation practices should be sustained.

High implementation fidelity alongside licensing compliance and perceived family stability gains aligns with near-full utilization and 100% family satisfaction among respondents. Cross-organizational coordination likely underpinned smooth program operations despite short setup time.

Training preparedness and on-site communication are the two most salient operational risks which both directly affect safety, consistency, and staff experience. Additionally, budget clarity and data collection hinder decision-making and could imply foundational systems issues. The staff survey also suggests outreach or access barriers across the county with regards to enrollment equity.

Recommendations

1 - Calendar & Capacity – Extend Smartly, Protect Utilization

Objectives: Align with school-age summer care program to address childcare gap and meet demonstrated demand without quality erosion.

Actions:

- Extend summer preschool 1 to 2 weeks to finish closer to the school end and start dates.
- Increase efficiency of waitlist process with an auto-offer function within 24 hours of when seats open with the aim of filling weekly targets to at least 90% utilization.
- Consider increasing seats to 12 to meet demand. Confirm ratios and staffing plans to accommodate 12 seats/daily.



2 - Staffing Model – Prepare People, Then Scale Seats

Objectives: Raise preparedness and communication (lowest staff scores), maintain licensing ratios, and reduce daily friction.

Actions:

- Consider increasing director hours in preparation/planning stages. Adjusting the director role to salaried may mitigate overtime fees as well.
- Smooth staffing schedule to match attendance patterns and ratio needs. Re-structure staffing to include two lead teachers, or one lead teacher and one assistant director, along with one assistant to allow for more flexibility and breaks.
- Structure pre-service training, (2-3 days) covering:
 - Behavioral supports & de-escalation (staff asked for stronger training)
 - Health & safety protocols (needed to meet regulatory needs)
 - Ratio management and outdoor learning risk assessment
 - Daily handoff and communications
- Develop weekly planning cadence such as lesson plans due Friday; family calendar shared at the start of the program and include outdoor learning blocks and hikes.

3 - Enrollment and Family Experience – Increase Access, Keep the Spirit

Objectives: Streamline sign-up, communicate proactively, and preserve what families value most. Actions:

- Replace FunJoin with a modern registration portal that eases enrollment and includes automated waitlist.
- Communicate flexible drop-off windows to accommodate family need.
- Preserve high-value elements such as long hours, outdoor learning/hikes, fun/lighthearted tone, daily structure/flow, and friendly and qualified staff.
- Increase scholarship visibility by increasing county-wide outreach utilizing partner channels (school district, clinics, libraries).



Conclusion

The 2026 Summer PreK Pilot proved both essential and effective. Demand was sustained at near-full levels with a waitlist and families reported consistently positive experiences and outcomes. Staff affirmed high implementation fidelity, maintained licensed ratios, and highlighted strong cross-organizational coordination. Collectively, these results demonstrate that the model is effective and it fills a critical summer childcare gap for Clear Creek families.

Financially, the pilot was disciplined and viable in year one with the expenses coming in under budget and income slightly exceeding projections. Importantly, scholarships covered 40.5% of care days and were pivotal to access and affordability for families. The revenue mix indicates ongoing reliance on grant fundings (68.8% of income). This model breaks even around 68% utilization, but long-term sustainability requires multi-year grant commitments and continued use of scholarships to ensure affordability for families and operational stability.

Next steps for the program should focus on extending access while preserving quality and affordability. This could include extending the program to align more closely with school calendars, expanding capacity to 12 seats per day, strengthening staffing and training, modernizing enrollment technology and locking in affordability with stable funding streams.

With these adjustments, the program can scale a high-quality, affordable summer preschool option that families value, employers depend on, and partners can sustain. The hope is that this program will serve as a replicable model for other rural and mountain communities facing similar childcare gaps.





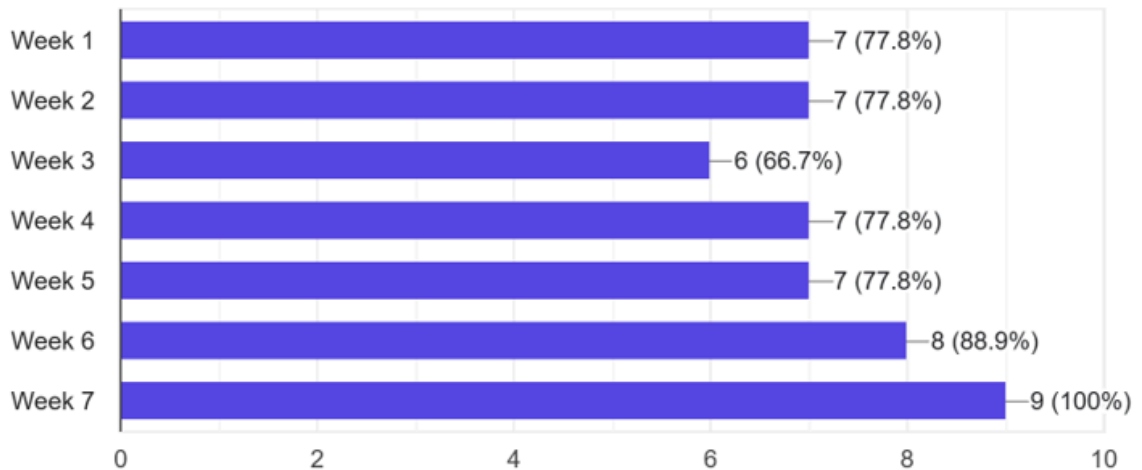
Appendices

Appendix A: Post-program Family Survey Summary

Survey was electronically distributed the last week of the program, open for 3 weeks.
Ten of 20 families completed the survey; 50% response rate.

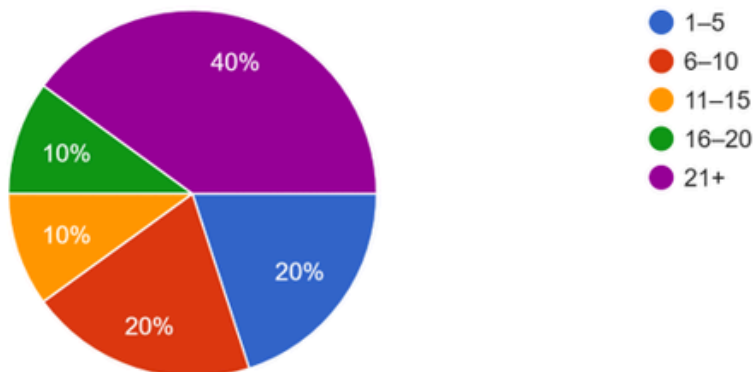
Weeks attended

9 responses



Total number of days attended

10 responses

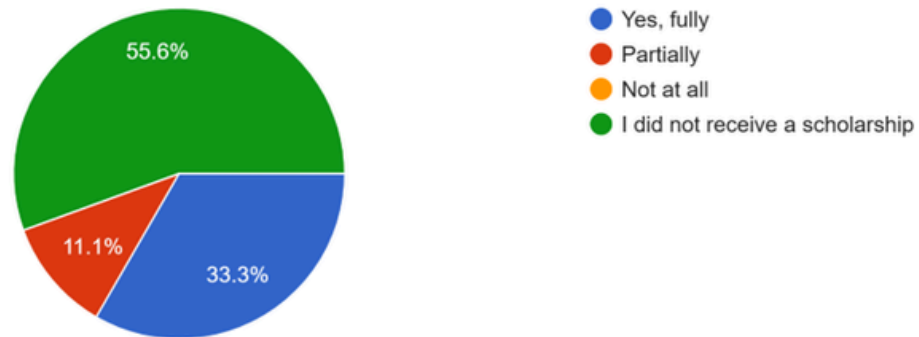


Percentage of respondents (10 Respondents in Total)					
Questions rated from 1 (Low/Strongly Disagree) to 5 (High/Strongly Agree)	1	2	3	4	5
Ease of enrollment	0	0	10	20	70
Fit of program hours with needs	0	0	0	20	80
Convenience of location	0	0	10	0	90
Overall communication (timeliness, clarity, frequency)	0	0	0	10	90
Responsiveness to my questions or concerns	0	0	0	10	90
Respectfulness and friendliness	0	0	0	0	100
My child felt safe at the program	0	0	0	0	100
My child enjoyed the daily activities.	0	0	0	0	100
Activities were developmentally appropriate for 3–5-year-olds.	0	0	0	10	90
I noticed positive changes in my child’s routines (e.g., social skills, following directions, readiness for	0	10	10	20	60
Affordability of cost/fees	0	10	30	10	50
Overall, how satisfied were you with the Summer PreK program?	0	0	0	10	90
Disagree/Agree: The program helped my family maintain work schedules or reduce childcare stress.	0	0	0	10	90
Disagree/Agree: The program was worth the time and cost to my family.	0	0	0	0	100



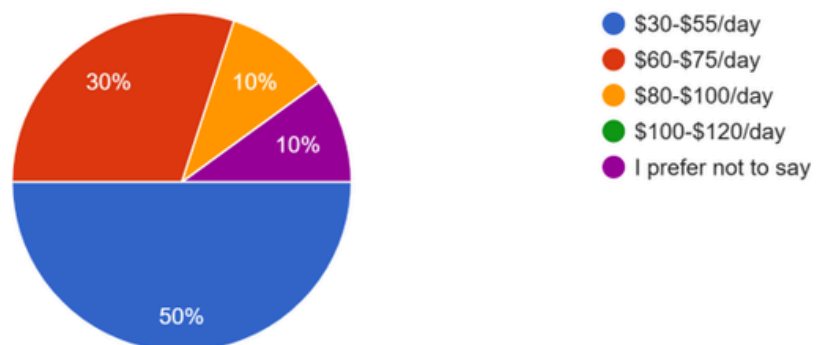
If you received a scholarship for the Summer PreK program, did it meet your needs?

9 responses



At what daily fee would you still consider the program affordable?

10 responses



Would you enroll again next summer if offered?

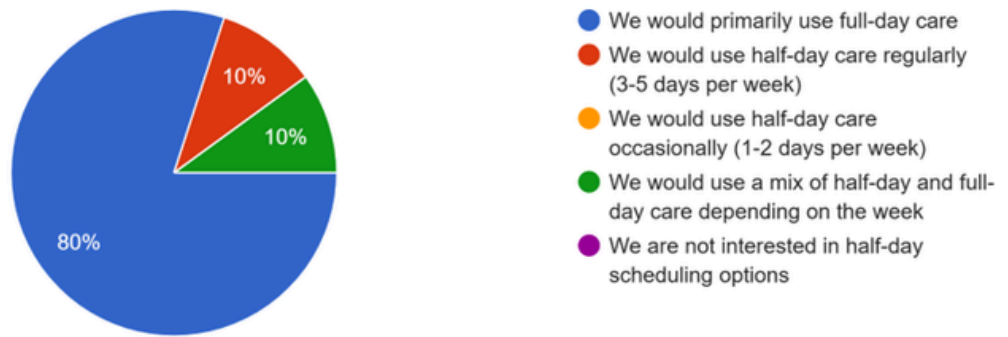
10 responses





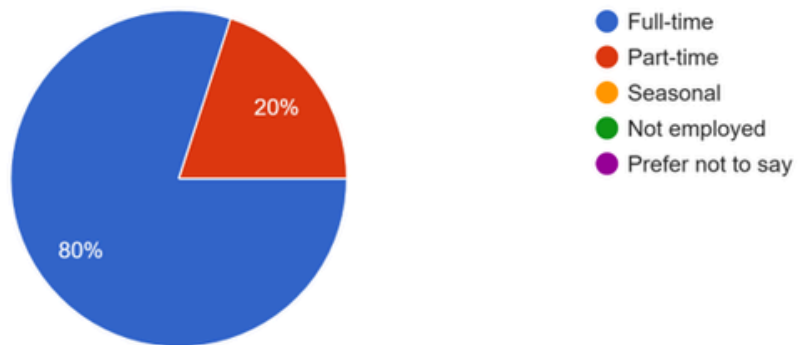
As we explore additional scheduling choices, would half-day and full-day options be useful for your family?

10 responses



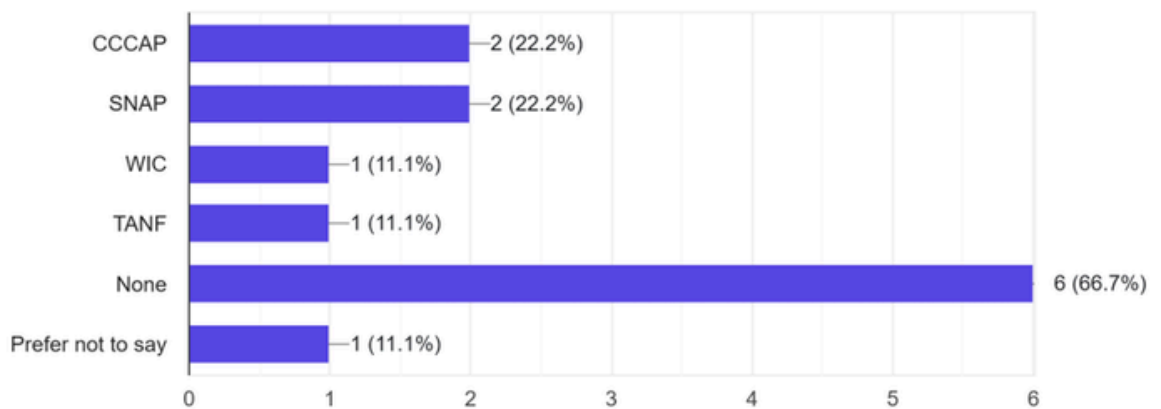
Employment during the program

10 responses



Household uses any of the following:

9 responses



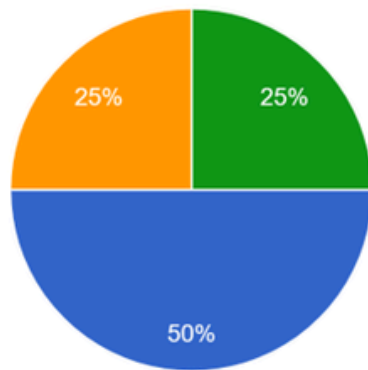


Appendix B: Post-Program Staff Survey Summary

Survey was electronically distributed the last week of the program, open for 3 weeks.
4 of 6 staff completed the survey; 67% response rate.

What is your primary role in the Summer PreK program?

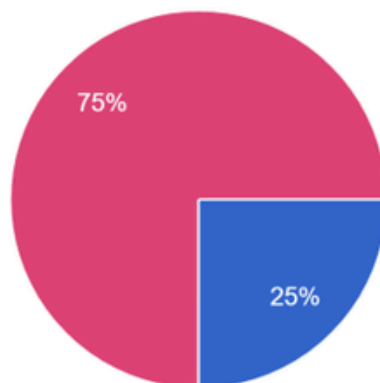
4 responses



- Classroom staff
- Site lead/director
- Program admin
- Operations/logistics

How many weeks were you involved?

4 responses



- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7+

Percentage of respondents (4 Respondents in Total)					
Questions rated from 1 (Low/Strongly Disagree) to 5 (High/Strongly Agree)	1	2	3	4	5
Core activities were implemented as planned (daily schedule, curriculum, recreation)	0	0	25	25	50
Staff-to-child ratios met licensing and program standards.	0	0	0	50	50
Facilities and materials (indoor/outdoor, supplies) supported safe, high-quality programming.	0	0	50	25	25
Student support (behavioral, developmental, health) was adequate.	0	0	50	25	25
Staff felt prepared/trained for their responsibilities.	0	50	25	25	0
On-site communication among staff (daily huddles, handoffs, incident reporting, etc....)	25	0	50	25	0
Cross-organization coordination (CCMRD, EECL, CC Schools Foundation, CCSD, Triad Bright Futures)	0	0	25	0	5
Family communication systems and procedures worked well	0	0	75	25	0
Data collection processes (attendance, staff attendance, incidents, etc...) were clear and feasible.	25	0	25	25	0
Staffing levels were sufficient to cover schedules, breaks, and ratios.	0	50	25	25	0
Scheduling was predictable and manageable.	0	25	25	50	0
Compensation, stipends, or incentives were adequate.	0	0	75	0	25
Professional development/training met staff needs	0	25	50	25	0
Budget information and spending guidelines were clear.	50	25	0	0	25
Resources were used efficiently (minimizing waste, aligning purchases with needs).	0	0	75	0	25
If you worked with funding sources or reporting (grants, invoices), how manageable was it? Skip if not applicable.	0	0	0	25	0
From your perspective, the current funding model is sustainable for next year.	0	0	50	25	0
The program met its goals of safe, engaging summer learning for 3 through 5-year-olds.	0	0	25	50	25
The program contributed to family retention and economic stability (e.g., enabling work schedules).	0	0	0	50	25
Enrollment and outreach reached families across Clear Creek County equitably.	0	50	25	25	0
Overall satisfaction with this pilot?	0	0	25	25	50



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