

Families and Providers Perspectives on Child Care and Early Education

A report from Spark Connection
August, 2023

About this project

In late spring of 2023, The Research Institute at West Oregon University (WOU) sought to engage parent/guardian and early childhood educator community input in redesigning the statewide Quality Recognition Improvement System (QRIS) - or Spark - a program designed to support, recognize, and communicate to families about high quality early childhood care and education programs.

WOU partnered with Community Wealth Partners (CWP) to support a listening, learning, and design process led by parents/guardians and early childhood educators through a Participatory Action Research process over a 16-week period.

This is the result and recommendations.

Key Questions of PAR process:

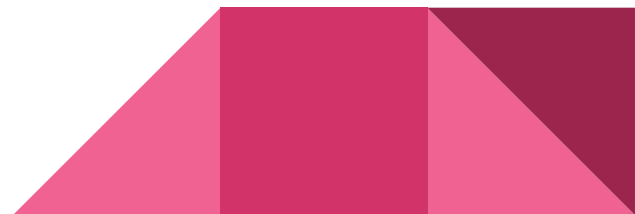
1. What's important for you in choosing or providing childcare and early education?
2. How do families want to receive information that will help them choose the childcare and early education option that is the best fit for their child?
3. (for educators) What support would you like to receive to improve the care and education you provide to children in partnership with their families?

About Spark Connection

Spark Connection is the name we gave to our 15-member group which is comprised of community members reflecting:

- A passion for supporting early childhood for the children and families of Oregon.
- A variety of Oregon counties - rural, suburban, and urban communities.
- Parents/guardians from a variety of family structures who care deeply about their children.
- Early childhood providers reflecting early childhood centers of various sizes and models.
- Strong connections to other parents/guardians and/or early childhood educators to gather and listen to their experiences.

Bios of the Spark Connection members can be found in the [Executive Summary](#) of this report.




Our objectives at the onset of the listening process

We aimed to listen to our communities to learn what is important to parents/families and providers as it relates to child care. The communities we are part of include and are not limited to:



As parents and providers, we had some ideas and assumptions at the start

Grounded in our experience, we recognize that we had ideas and curiosities that came through in our survey. These include:

- To what extent are LGBTQ+ children and families feeling supported in their child care program?
 - How are providers embracing the languages and cultures represented in their communities?
 - What would drive up retention for providers?
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The Listening Process

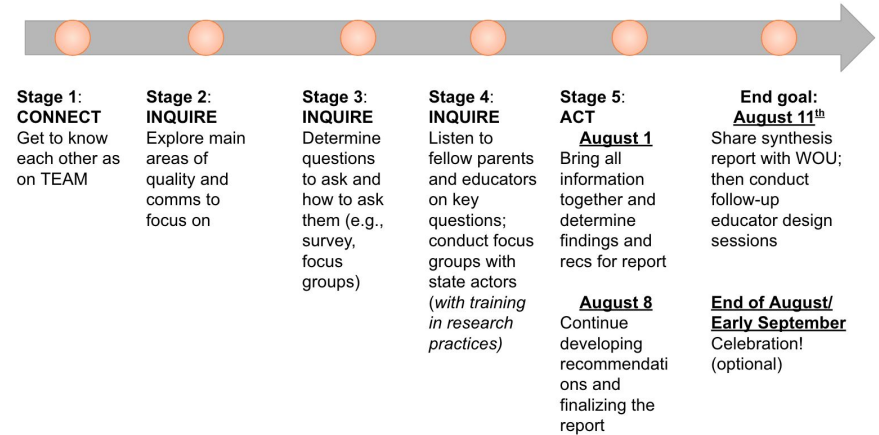
From April through August 2023, our team:

- Reviewed the data from over **350** applicants across the state to identify major areas to look into.
- Developed a survey and distributed it to more than **1,200** people.
- Listened to a total of **50** parents and providers in focus groups and interviews.
- Listened to employees at different agencies/departments related to Spark.

These included teams from:

- Spark
- QRIS
- CCR & R
- Early Learning Hub
- Department of Early Learning & Care

Overview of Listening Team / PAR Process



Demographics - our outreach and results

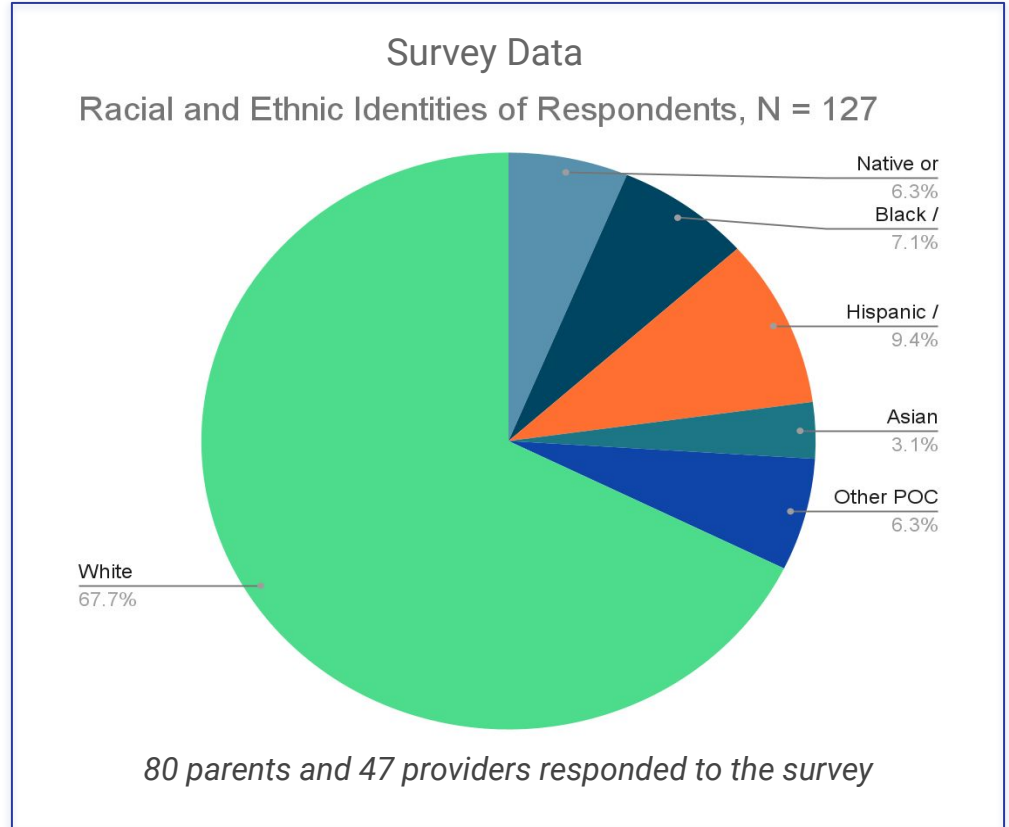
Our outreach to our networks was intentional. Below is data from our sampling table which shows the populations we aimed to connect with.

Parents who

- Live in Rural Areas 23%
- Qualify for state aid for child care 16%
- Live in Urban/Suburban areas 15%
- Identify as BIPOC 11%
- Don't have child care 10%
- Don't qualify for state aid for child care 10%

Providers who

- Live in Urban/suburban areas 28%
- Live in rural areas 7%
- Are not in Spark program 21%
- Serve BIPOC families 9%



Demographics - our outreach and results

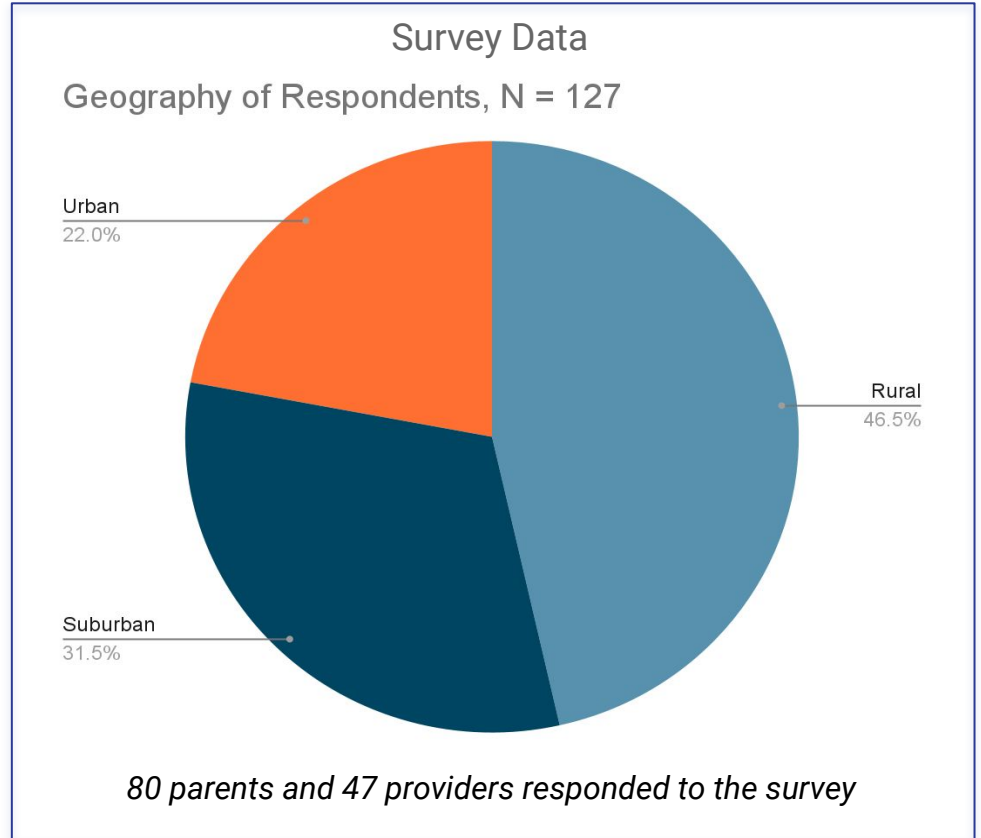
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Our Findings

Finding 1: Their child's **safety**, support for their child's **social-emotional development**, and having **flexible hours** is what parents want more of in child care

- 72% of parent respondents believe that their child care providers have the skills to support their goals for their children.
- 61% of parent respondents selected Social Skills/Connection with Friends as a top goal for their children in child care and 51% selected Social Emotional Development as a top goal for their children in child care.
- 59% of parent respondents said they are not offered care during non-traditional hours, such as late evenings and weekends.

We believe these findings are most relevant to the following Spark domains:

Learning & Child Development, Health & Safety, and Family Partnerships



Finding 1 - in their own words

What is the most important to me is that I know my child is safe and well cared for...I want my child to feel loved, important and valued as an individual.

Help them name the emotion and steps to get back to neutral (e.g breathe, take a walk, etc.) - *Hmong parent in urban area*

It is important that some quality child care providers offer non-traditional hours for those who work weekends or before/after normal business hours and for the public to be able to find those providers and acquire confidence in their safety and ability to care for my child. - *White parent in suburb*

I just don't trust anyone to watch my kids because I work overnights. How will I know they're safe at somebody's house? I have my daughter watch them. And yeah I feel like that's hard on a teenager. But there's not childcare centers open all night. I don't want it to be someone's house. It should be a real childcare center and I would like to see their safety ratings.- *White, gender non-conforming parent in urban Lane County*

I want my child to grow in ECE, social emotional skills, letters, and numbers. The social emotional is most important to me. - *White parent in rural area*

Some of the daycares do not supervise children well enough...My child came home with scratches that they couldn't explain when I picked him up. WE need better communication for what happens every day. - *African American mother of two in Salem*

Maybe using a specific curriculum around handling emotions and teaching strategies for emotional regulation and then sharing with parents

Allowing my kid to express themselves at all times,make sure they don't get caught up in their own emotion/feelings - *Black parent in suburb*

Finding 2: For some families, **affordability** and **availability** of child care in Oregon are major obstacles.

- Across rural, suburban, and urban areas, there was a mix of parents who had an easy time finding child care and parents who had a hard time finding child care. In rural areas it tended to be more hard to find.



Finding 2 - in their own words

Please make childcare more available and affordable for underage parents - *POC parent in urban area*

I have been unable to find affordable child care openings. *White parent in rural area*

My youngest child was on a wait list at 2 different childcare facilities for 2 years prior to being offered a spot at 16 months. -- *Native parent in rural area*

I do not at all feel supported in our childcare in this state or our country. Options are so limited that we don't really feel we have a choice which provider to choose and do not feel we can trust complaining to our provider when something is wrong, because it could compromise our child's welfare and/or our ability to continue at that child care center. *White parent in a suburban area*

I wish it was more upfront about what childcare costs, it's so hush hush I feel like. So many factors come into play but it's so all over the board with how much to pay someone for drop in care. *White parent in rural area*

It's been very difficult (to find child care). -- *Hispanic parent in rural area*

Hard to find child care, let alone child care that i trust to have my children. -- *Native parent in rural area*

Hard to find and very expensive -- *White parent in rural area*

Finding 3: A majority of parents do not feel they have an **actual choice** when it comes to child care

- 68% of parent respondents indicated they have little to no actual choice in selecting child care for their children
- 37% of parents in rural areas say they don't have an actual choice at all, as compared to 24% of parents in urban areas

We believe this finding impacts how many families can actually benefit from Spark's programs



In their own words


I don't feel like I have a choice where my child goes. It's all too expensive and I have to choose the place I can afford. I almost don't want to know if they aren't quality, you know? Because I can't change it. -- *Biracial cisgender woman, urban, has a child with a disability*

Childcare is marketed by the state to some extent, but it is not provided or funded. It is like the cyber truck, "look at this amazing thing, but you can't get it". -- *White parent in rural area*

Finding 4: Parents of cisgender children feel their child's identity is supported but qualitative responses indicate that **LGBTQ+ parents and children do not feel supported.**

- 78% of parents selected a high satisfaction score (4 or 5) when asked “to what extent is your child's identity (e.g., gender, culture, etc.) been supported in your child care setting?”

We believe these findings are most relevant to the following Spark domains: Health & Safety and Family Partnerships



Finding 4 - in their own words

They made comments like "boys will be boys" and asked for the "big strong boys" to help them move materials. Used gendered put downs like "girls are so dramatic". They always assume a child's gender and some of the staff know how children identify but ignore it. It is very disrespectful and hurtful.

It's scary to ask a provider if they're queer friendly in this environment...we just don't know if our kids will be safe. I wish every place had to certify they are inclusive. - *White transgender woman in urban area, has an autistic child*

My child is trans and it is not exactly well received for a child so young to be that self aware. - *White parent in suburb*

As a family of white, cisgendered people, our identities and culture are often supported by default --*White parent in suburb*

He is a boy, and treated as such. To push any type of liberal gender-identity crisis agenda onto small children is absurd and not a place that any child care or early learning facility should be doing in my opinion. --*White parent in rural area*

Finding 5: Parents want **multiple ways of receiving information**

- 72% of parent respondents found it difficult to find information about childcare.
- People of color and parents living in rural or suburban areas tended to have a harder time finding information about child care than parents who are white and parents who live in urban areas.


How parents want to receive information from providers:

- 10 parents preferred all methods of communications (call, text, email, in person)
- 9 parents preferred phone and text only
- 6 parents preferred phone only communication
- 5 parents preferred text only

How parents want to find information about child care options:

- 19 parents indicated a desire for there to be an easy to search centralized web site that is updated regularly (incl. improve the existing ones for easier navigation)
- 6 parents suggested email and mailed materials to churches and community based organizations to connect with populations who don't access the Internet
- 4 parents would like there to be information exchanged between doctors, community organizations, and families with children in childcare.

Finding 6: Providers are passionate about what they do, but a majority say they are unable to take steps to prevent burnout and **are underpaid, understaffed, and have insufficiently trained staff**

- 66% of providers indicated a 1, 2, or 3 (out of 5) to the question, “To what extent are you able to take steps to prevent burnout in yourself / your staff”
 - 55% of providers indicated that they struggle to meet their basic needs (rent, food, bills, etc.)
 - 53% of providers said an increase in pay and having benefits would help them meet their basic needs
 - When asked if more funding were available, where they would want those funds to go, providers said higher salaries, staff training, and subsidized care.
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In their own words

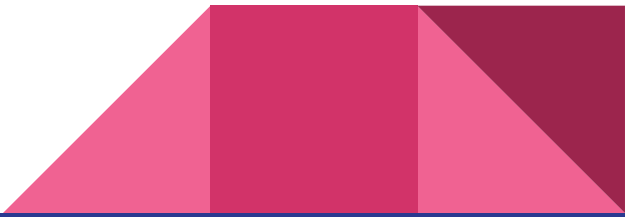
As a provider we make very little to nothing. We qualify for the same programs we offer to assist families so they can go to work and we live pay check to pay check. Benefits that are affordable and an income that shows our education an experience would be a huge longterm goal. Times are getting harder and the lack of support in home programs receive is a big reason to leave. --*White provider in a rural area*

I would have continued providing childcare if I had reliable, affordable, and well-trained subs or assistants so that I could work a few less hours and have time for training, planning, or appointments during regular business hours. --*White provider in a rural area*

I just want to be recognized and validated. I work really hard and parents voice their appreciation on the last day of school. But then the rest of the year it can be tough. But the kids make it worthwhile. And that's the reason I'm here. I do love my job in the work than I do is important! --*White provider in a rural area*


More pay would be my number one due to working non profit can be difficult at times financially especially when our work can get very challenging and difficult at times. --*White provider in suburban area*

What a healthy child care site that is committed to a child's well-being looks, feels, and sounds like to providers closely mirrors what parents envision

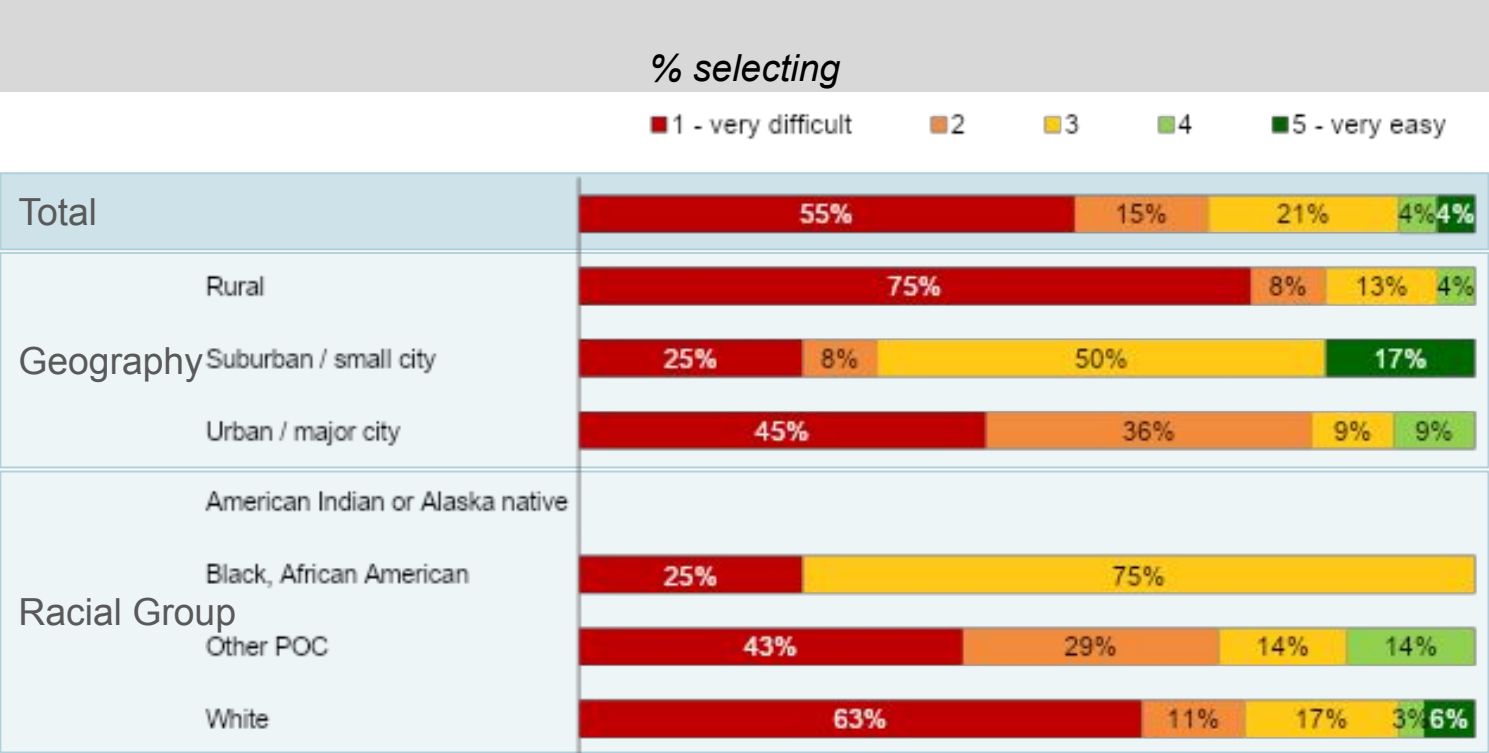


Finding 7: Providers are managing multiple stressors at once

When asked what are the top stressors for providers, these four causes were mentioned the most:

- **Insufficient staffing**
 - **Children's behavioral needs**
 - **Insufficient time to plan, assess, do paperwork**
 - **Staff not trained for what is needed**
- 

Difficulty finding substitutes is an issue affecting all



In their own words

Over worked, no reflection time/team meeting to discuss things going on in the classroom, unable to have planning time in order to set up classroom spaces to ensure the most out of learning (often time spend lots of my own time and money to make this happen) unable to provide necessary documentation of children's progress and connection with families to the degree in which I think is necessary for a quality program - *White provider in rural area*

Unbalanced caseloads and employee turnover - *Black provider in suburban area*

We have a high percentage of kids (30%) with significant behavioral issues due to trauma. Our staff is not trained in this speciality. Understanding the difference between neuro-typical children and trauma children and how to help them would be highly beneficial to serve our community better. -- *White provider in rural area*

The pandemic and it's challenges have been difficult. Unfilled teaching positions and lack of substitutes is a stressor. Dangerous behavior from children. Challenging behavior from parents. *White provider in suburban area*

Family stress spills over into child behavior and parent stress levels/what they share with us. --*Black provider in rural area*

Inadequate staffing, too much paperwork and not enough time to complete it (people do it on their own time) and behaviors, many unsafe, of the children with little support or help. -- *White provider in rural; area*

Finding 8: Providers want supports that helps them meet their needs in the classroom and a shift away from a system that feels punitive


Insights from CCR&R system and partner Focus Group

- Coordinators have seen providers who could not progress past level 3 of Spark rating because of language barriers.
- Some providers with learning disabilities would benefit from being able to submit portfolios in different ways such as video. Coordinator went out of their way to help them type up the portfolio.

When asked what would make getting a Spark rating easier, providers selected

- Consultative TA services to assist providers who are operating, and
- Observations to assess what may be needed for their portfolio.

The trainings most selected as affecting the quality of care providers can provide were:

- Classroom behavior management
 - Understanding and guiding behavior
 - Human growth and development
 - Trauma-informed care
 - Self-care (to prevent burnout)
- 

In their own words

I think Spark makes it hard for Black providers. It's all hard work getting ratings from Spark when they really don't care about providers. Their criteria are so rigid and it is frustrating for us. --
African American provider in suburban area

The ORO system is VERY frustrating and not user friendly and incredibly inconsistent. Child injuries are treated as crimes and do not support reporting or consulting. --
White provider in urban area

Spark feels like a punitive tool that is wielded by the state - do this, or else you lose a star. We worked hard to get 5 stars, then we had a few OCC findings for minor things, even things that were not clear and we lost a star. No support was given to help us with the findings.
--*Provider Rural Head Start*

You have to have all this photo documentation and that is done with iphones / digital devices and then you have to print it all out. It's repetitive in the information it wants. *White provider in urban area*

I think there needs to be a better understanding of the current crisis in schools with violence and extreme behaviors. Programs are being punished for trying to deal with the current state of children and families -- *White provider in rural area*

The grading of the portfolio. We followed every step and they critiqued it so harsh and had no explanation of the scoring - *Black provider in rural area*

We are a large center and it took me over 140 hours to create our portfolio. This is not a reasonable way to assess quality. Our philosophy is not well represented in the criteria.
--*White provider in urban area*

When asked what could make Spark a better support tool, some providers shared ideas

- Getting observations done
- By not allowing the ratings to be used as a criteria for state and federal funding. Allowing for differing philosophies of early child education and care receive higher ratings.
- It's use is in grant securing. Some people want to know if you have been assessed by a third party. That is Sparks only value. That's a lot of work when I work with community agencies that would willingly give a third party assessment.
- Recognition and support; More creativity; Labelization with meaning
- Really look at their regulations and requirements, and how that inhibits the learning and play of children
- Spark should be modified to be achieved by all programs throughout the state. If you want a program from Eastern Oregon to match Central Oregon you will find that will not happen as stated before we don't have the resources or funding to do so. Make the stars for centers and home providers different as a home is NOT a center and a center is NOT a home so to have the same requirements does not make sense.

The value and reputation of our program comes from our relationships with the families we serve. Spark is something you have to do to get any additional money to support children and families so leader have to take time out of our already very busy unappreciated day to compile a document that the families we serve don't care much about, because they already see the value of the program.

Recommendations

Recommendations for the Spark Redesign

- Remove star rating system and replace with a badges of competencies providers do and have meaning for parents (*i.e., inclusion, safety, sensory-friendly, Head Start, Relief Nursery*)
- Use coaches and strengths-based systems to support the development of providers (*strength-based support to licensed, followed by strength-based growth support*)
- Use observation to ease burden on providers to demonstrate quality
- Focus on attaining positive outcomes for providers so they can achieve positive outcomes for children

Recommendations for the Spark Redesign

- Have existing licensing be the marker for ECE providers and focus Spark on supporting the development of providers
- Offer rewards to teachers/directors of child care programs to prevent burnout and help them feel valued
- Provide resources and trainings to support social-emotional / behavioral support in the classroom

General Recommendations

Without actual choices in childcare available to parents

Spark has no practical value to a parent in determining a program because many parents have to accept whatever is available/and or they can afford/be eligible for.

To this end, we recommend...

General Recommendations

- Make increasing child care options throughout the state a priority in Oregon, especially in child care deserts
- Given that many parents need flexible child care options, create more rewards/incentives for child care settings that can offer extended hours and weekends.
- Direct resources to building a pool of substitute teachers for all programs
- Create an LGBTQ+ friendly designation providers can earn by attending Spark-led training on inclusion and safety for these families, and provide this training to any/all providers even if they don't plan to earn the designation