



STAFF REPORT

City Council

Meeting Date:

2/11/2025

Staff Report Number:

25-017-CC

Study Session:

Consideration of needs analysis and potential strategies to enhance enrollment and financial sustainability at City-run preschool facilities

Recommendation

Staff recommends that City Council review the childcare needs analysis report (Attachment A) and provide direction to City staff about potential strategies to enhance enrollment and financial sustainability at City-run preschool facilities. Staff seeks direction from City Council on which of the potential strategies to develop for additional City Council review and potential implementation. Staff anticipates bringing back City Council's identified implementation strategies for City Council review in the context of the fiscal year 2025-26 budget deliberations.

Policy Issues

City Council provides policy direction to the city manager regarding services to the community; allocates resources to support City services; and sets prioritization for the use of City resources to serve the community.

City Council Procedure #CC-22-025, User Fee Cost Recovery, adopted by City Council Resolution No. 6768 Aug. 23, 2022, provides "an ongoing, sound basis for setting fees that allows charges and fees to be periodically reviewed and updated based on predetermined, researched and supportable criteria that can be made available to the public." (Attachment B). The procedure sets targets of "High cost recovery (70-100%)" for Menlo Children's Center preschool, and "Mid cost recovery (30-70%)" for Belle Haven Child Development Center."

Background

On April 2, 2024, City Council received an informational report about City-run childcare programs including background information about the City of Menlo Park's two preschool centers, current enrollment trends and potential causes of low enrollment (Attachment C).

To support the research and analysis needed to inform decision-making about the future of preschool child care in city-run preschools, the City engaged the services of Solutionary Advisors (Consultant), an education consulting firm founded by former Menlo Park City School District superintendent Erik Burmeister, to conduct a comprehensive needs analysis of the City's early learning and care programs.

On Sept. 10, 2024, City Council held a study session and preliminary review of City-run preschool programs and provided direction to staff to: conduct broad outreach for a Menlo Park child care needs survey; engage child care staff input in the process; leverage partnerships with schools to seek insight into preschool enrollment trends; rapidly respond to known changes in the market for child care services; investigate

accreditation opportunities for City preschools; pursue grant opportunities to support child care programs; review compensation levels and job classifications for child care staff (Attachment D).

From Sept. 17 to Oct. 17, 2024, City staff opened a citywide survey to gain insight into Menlo Park residents' needs and preferences for childcare. The survey received responses from 627 participants, over 90% of whom self-identified as incorporated City of Menlo Park residents. The survey results and sample datasets were previously transmitted to City Council Nov. 12, 2024 (Attachment E), along with a brief update on the research and analysis efforts. Additional new analysis of the survey results is provided in the childcare needs analysis report (Attachment A).

Analysis

Childcare needs analysis

The City of Menlo Park commissioned a needs analysis (Attachment A) to help identify strategies for increasing enrollment and financial sustainability at its two City-run early learning centers: Belle Haven Child Development Center (BHCD) at 410 Ivy Dr., and Menlo Children's Center (MCC) at 501 Laurel St. Both City-run centers have experienced persistently low, decreased enrollment since the COVID-19 pandemic, with BHCD operating at approximately 65% of its total capacity and MCC operating at approximately 40-55% of its total capacity.

In addition to the two City-run preschool facilities, the City of Menlo Park owns two preschool facilities operated by private preschool operators that lease the facilities from the City: Menlo-Atherton Cooperative Preschool at 802 Middle Ave. and Building Kidz at 490 Willow Rd.

To understand the underlying causes of low enrollment and help identify potential solutions, the research team conducted extensive community outreach, including a survey completed by 627 participants, four focus groups with 30 staff members and parents, and interviews with 10 local preschool directors. Research and analysis of enrollment trends, demographic data, and state and county early learning reports provided essential context for local challenges within the broader childcare landscape.

Factors driving enrollment challenges

The research identified several converging factors that are driving enrollment challenges:

- Universal Transitional Kindergarten. The recent expansion of free Universal Transitional Kindergarten (TK) for all 4-year-olds through the public school system has significantly reduced demand for fee-based preschool programs in the private and nonprofit sectors.
- Work-life trends. Pandemic-induced remote work trends fundamentally changed how many families approach childcare. Additionally, the increasingly high cost of living in the Menlo Park area has led some families to seek affordable options.
- Birth rates. Declining local birth rates have reduced overall demand for early learning and care, a trend that is projected to continue into the years ahead.
- Consumer information-seeking habits. City-run preschools' past success using word-of-mouth to attract new students has become less effective as more community members now rely on internet search to find childcare, making the website and search optimization strategies crucial to consumer awareness.

Menlo Park community needs for early learning and care

The citywide community survey, focus groups with childcare families and childcare staff, and interviews with local preschool directors revealed four main areas of need in Menlo Park.

1. Affordability. 83% of surveyed families reported difficulty finding affordable childcare options. The affordability challenge was corroborated by focus groups and interviews, and is the most significant area

of need.

2. Infant and toddler care. The research showed a strong demand for infant care and toddler care, particularly for children under 3 years old, and indicated that local supply is insufficient to meet the demand for care in these younger age groups.
3. Scheduling flexibility. Nearly half of families reported struggling to find care that matches their work schedules, such as care that extends earlier in the mornings and later in the evenings, and part-time care.
4. Consumer awareness. Focus groups with childcare staff, as well as community survey responses offered various suggestions for increasing consumer awareness about the high-quality programming offered at both City-operated centers.

Potential strategies to enhance enrollment and financial sustainability

Through analyses of potential impact and implementation feasibility, the research team identified several potential strategies for each of the four areas of need.

Affordability

To address affordability, the strategy identified most likely to increase enrollment would be to institute reduced tuition for middle-income families who do not otherwise qualify for income-based tuition assistance, for example, by using a sliding-scale fee model. However, this strategy would reduce the revenue the City receives from tuition fees. A related strategy to increase enrollment that could help meet an expressed community need would be to offer tuition discounts to City and school employees; this strategy also would result in lower revenue from tuition fees. Another potential strategy would be to convert MCC from a market-rate preschool to one that provides free or deeply discounted tuition for income-qualifying families similar to BHCD. However, it is noted that BHCD also is challenged by persistently low enrollment despite already offering these incentives, and the process for converting the MCC program to this model would be extensive and would depend on successfully securing major grant funding from the State of California and other sources.

Infants and toddlers

Adapting the City-run programs to accept infants and/or toddlers under 3 years old at each location would be responsive to strong local demand and limited supply. This strategy could be achieved through a phased approach for different ages based on licensing requirements and the timeframe for updating facilities. However, providing care for younger ages would entail higher costs due to lower teacher-to-child ratios; it would require additional staff training and education; and it would necessitate investments to update preschool facilities to accept younger children. Additionally, adapting to accept younger children potentially would reduce the centers' overall enrollment capacity and overall revenue from tuition fees because of reduced limits on the numbers of infants and/or toddlers allowed per classroom.

Flexible scheduling

Creating new flexible scheduling opportunities would be responsive to expressed community need and interest and could potentially attract some new enrollees to City-run programs. Offering part-time and/or flexibly scheduled care would be feasible to implement at MCC; however, it would require some additional administrative work and coordination and is not expected to dramatically increase enrollment overall. This strategy is far less feasible at BHCD, which currently operates under a stringent grant agreement with the California Department of Education and has far less flexibility to offer part-time care due to scheduling requirements set by the grant agreement.

Consumer awareness

Raising consumer awareness of City-operated preschools was the subject of many suggestions offered by preschool teachers and parents. Updating the centers' webpages to emulate those of centers in the private

and nonprofit sectors was suggested multiple times, for example, by including more photos of the centers and profiles of the teachers to instill confidence in the quality and safety of the care provided. Staff is in the process of implementing this suggestion. Other suggestions cover a range of common marketing techniques, some of which are already in practice but could potentially be increased or refined, such as holding open houses, producing printed materials such as flyers and brochures, and engaging in electronic outreach through email and social media; and other techniques not currently in use such as more powerful search engine optimization.

Strategies snapshot

Table 1 provides a snapshot view of the potential strategies. The first column describes the possible strategies grouped by area of need. The second and third columns indicate which center is recommended and/or feasible to implement the strategies. While all the recommended strategies are feasible at MCC, state grant program requirements currently in place at BHCDRC render some strategies infeasible at that location. Strategies marked with an “X” are considered feasible for the site under current conditions. The fourth column indicates the estimated level of impact, and the fifth column indicates the estimated level of effort anticipated to implement each strategy. The level of impact is based on the potential impact the strategy would have on 1) increasing enrollment and 2) supporting the program's financial sustainability. The level of effort is a composite factor that considers the overall change management effort needed (staffing changes, facilities upgrades, new licensing, etc.), cost impact to the City, and the estimated timeline for implementation. This process helped to prioritize the final recommendations, which are described in the next section.

Table 1: Potential strategies				
Need	BHCD	MCC	Impact	Effort
Affordability				
Create a sliding scale that provides tuition assistance to middle-income families who do not qualify for other income-based tuition assistance	X	X	High	High
Institute discounts for City employees and local educators.	n/a	X	Low	Medium
Create a “cooperative” childcare option for some families.	n/a	X	Medium	High
Flexible scheduling				
Allow families to choose days/schedules.	n/a	X	High	Medium
Earlier drop-off and later pick-up.	X	X	Medium	High
Toddler care				
Open space for 2-year-olds.	X	X	High	High
Open space for 18-month-olds.	n/a	X	High	High
Infant care				
Add infant care.	X	X	High	High
Communicating quality care				
Update the website.	X	X	Medium	Low
Host community events: open houses, preschool fairs, etc.	X	X	Medium	Medium
Update marketing materials: flyers, brochures, signage	X	X	Medium	Low
Utilize existing city channels to “tell the story.”	X	X	Medium	Low

Table 2 summarizes highlighted recommendations for strategies that the research team identified as having the greatest potential for increasing enrollment and enhancing financial sustainability within the near-term (0-six months) to mid-term (6-18 months) and/or with lower effort or cost needed for change management. These strategies are recommended for further deliberation, decision-making, and potential implementation in the near term. Additional detail about each of the highlighted recommendations is provided in the full report in Attachment A.

Table 2: Highlighted recommendations		
Highlighted recommendation	Major considerations	Estimated time frame
Flexible scheduling at MCC	The financial impact of scheduling options	Short-term
Communicate quality care	Management of the communication and marketing plan	Short-term
Sliding scale fees for middle-income families	Cost to the City, time to develop a fair and sustainable policy	Mid-term
Discounts for City workers and educators	Cost to the City, time to establish a fair and sustainable policy	Mid-term
Begin serving 2-year-olds at BHCDC	New facility license	Mid-term
Increase slots for 18-month-olds at MCC	New facility license	Mid-term
Add infant care	New facilities license, fee structure, impact of space available for toddler and preschool programming	Long-term

City Council direction sought

With any of the strategies described in the report, it is recommended to carefully evaluate the accompanying costs and consider both the one-time and ongoing expenditures that would be needed to implement strategies and sustain program operations. Staff seeks direction from City Council on which of the potential strategies in Attachment A and outlined above in Tables 1 and 2 to develop for additional City Council review and potential implementation. Potential strategies for which staff seeks City Council direction to further develop for potential implementation include (lettered in order presented for convenient reference only):

- A. Create more flexible scheduling options at MCC
- B. Enhance consumer awareness of City-run preschools through marketing techniques
- C. Create a sliding scale that provides tuition assistance to middle-income families who do not qualify for other income-based tuition assistance
- D. Institute discounts for city employees and local educators
- E. Create a “cooperative” childcare option for some families
- F. Expand to provide care to 2-year-olds at BHCDC
- G. Increase slots for 18-month-olds at MCC
- H. Add infant care (younger than 18 months) at MCC and/or BHCDC

Staff anticipates bringing back City Council's identified implementation strategies, with detailed cost analyses and related considerations, for City Council review in the context of the fiscal year 2025-26 budget deliberations.

Facilities leased to third-party childcare operators

As previously noted, the City owns four preschool facilities but currently operates only two of the facilities directly. The other two city-owned preschool facilities, Menlo-Atherton Cooperative Preschool and Building Kidz, are currently operated by local small businesses under lease from the City, as described in the informational report on city-owned facilities leased to third parties included separately on the Feb. 11 City Council agenda. Those leases are nearing the end of their terms, and as such, staff will be seeking City Council direction on how to proceed with leasing those facilities later this year as a separate agenda item.

Impact on City Resources

The two City-run preschools, MCC and BHCDC, operate under different financial models. MCC operates as a market-rate preschool with operating expenditures and revenues derived in the City's General Fund. BHCDC operates under a grant agreement from the California Department of Education primarily as a preschool for income-qualifying families who receive care at free or reduced tuition, and its expenditures and revenues are derived in special revenue funds from grants.

Menlo Children's Center (MCC)

MCC's operating budget for fiscal year 2024-25 includes 11.25 full-time equivalent (FTE) staff, total expenditures of approximately \$1.85 million primarily to salaries and benefits, and total projected revenues of \$600,000 primarily from tuition fees, resulting in a cost-recovery of approximately 32%. This is lower than the "High cost recovery (70-100%)" target set in the City's cost recovery procedure for MCC (Attachment B). MCC's budgeted revenues and expenditures are housed in the City's General Fund

Belle Haven Child Development Center (BHDCD)

BHDCD's operating budget for fiscal year 2024-25 includes 13.0 FTE staff, total budgeted expenditures of approximately \$2.48 million primarily for salaries and benefits, and total projected revenues of up to \$2.96 million (the maximum grant reimbursement possible when the center is fully enrolled). BHDCD revenues come primarily from grant reimbursements equal to the amounts of its expenditures, resulting in full cost recovery. This is higher than the "Mid cost recovery (30-70%)" target set in the City's cost recovery procedure for BHDCD (Attachment B). BHDCD receives substantial grant funding from State of California and other sources to support its daily operations, and BHDCD's budgeted expenditures and revenues are housed in special revenue funds associated with these grants.

Impact on City staff classifications and compensation

Pending City Council direction on the options above, human resources will conduct a classification and compensation study related to the City's existing child care positions in the coming months, with the goal of incorporating any recommendations into the fiscal year 2025-26 budget. This may involve (a) modifying existing classifications to include additional job duties related to infants and/or toddlers; (b) modifying the education and experience requirements of existing classifications; and/or (c) creating new job classification(s) if job duties are determined to have enough distinction from existing classifications to justify the creation of new classification(s). The City is required to meet and confer over any salary adjustments to represented classifications and over the impact of any changes to education and experience requirements for incumbent staff. When conducting a compensation study, the City would look at a standard set of comparator agencies for job classifications performing substantially similar work to the City's job classifications and calculate the median of the top step salary across these agencies to identify any recommended adjustments to the City's compensation. Note that this study would evaluate other municipal agencies, not private child care facilities. If wage adjustments are recommended, these changes would come before the City Council for consideration in a future salary schedule amendment and outline the associated cost impacts to the personnel budget.

Cost of Services Study

A fundamental analysis to conduct that would help inform decision-making about City services is a Cost of Services Study. Such a study would provide important information about the extent of direct and indirect costs for each of the City's services, including the childcare programs. A study would determine the total cost associated with providing services the various services the City provides, allowing for effective allocation of the overall cost of operations based on usage and needs. The administrative services department is finalizing a Request for Proposals to select a consultant to perform a citywide Cost of Services Study commencing in calendar year 2025.

Environmental Review

This informational item is not a project within the meaning of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) Guidelines §§15378 and 15061(b)(3) as it will not result in any direct or indirect physical change in the environment.

Public Notice

Public notification was achieved by posting the agenda, with the agenda items being listed, at least 72 hours prior to the meeting. In addition, staff directly notified all families currently enrolled in City childcare programs about this study session including a link to the agenda and staff report.

Attachments

- A. Childcare needs analysis report
- B. Hyperlink – City Council Procedure #CC-22-025, User Fee Cost Recovery:
menlopark.gov/files/sharedassets/public/v/1/library-and-community-services/policies/cost-recovery-policy_cc-22-025_20220823.pdf
- C. Hyperlink – April 2, 2024 Staff Report #24-056-CC:
menlopark.gov/files/sharedassets/public/v/1/agendas-and-minutes/city-council/2024-meetings/agendas/20240402/m2-20240402-cc-childcare-programs-update.pdf
- D. Hyperlink – Sept. 10, 2024 Staff Report #24-153-CC:
menlopark.gov/files/sharedassets/public/v/1/agendas-and-minutes/city-council/2024-meetings/agendas/20240910/g1-20240910-cc-city-run-preschool-programs.pdf
- E. Hyperlink – Nov. 12, 2024 Staff Report #24-190-CC:
menlopark.gov/files/sharedassets/public/v/1/agendas-and-minutes/city-council/2024-meetings/agendas/20241112/m3-20241112-cc-childcare-survey.pdf

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The Future of Early Learning and Care in Menlo Park, California

February 2025 Report
Submitted to City of Menlo Park
by Solutionary Advisors



The Future of Early Learning and Care in Menlo Park
Final Report and Recommendations
 Solutionary Advisors for the City of Menlo Park, February 2025

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Acknowledgments

Many thanks to the individuals below for their active participation and guidance in developing this report. Our work builds upon the 2022 San Mateo County Childcare Needs Assessment, which provided a starting point for this study. We are deeply indebted to the many childcare advocates and preschool directors who met with us to help us better understand the early learning landscape in Menlo Park. In addition, we want to recognize the staff and families from the Belle Haven Child Development Center and Menlo Children's Center who provided insight through focus groups, as well as the 627 families who completed the childcare needs assessment survey. The input and participation of our Menlo Park community members was critical in forming our analysis and recommendations.

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Executive Summary

The City of Menlo Park commissioned a comprehensive needs assessment to identify strategies for increasing enrollment and financial sustainability at its two early learning centers: Belle Haven Child Development Center (BHCDC) and Menlo Children's Center (MCC). Both centers have experienced significant enrollment declines since the COVID-19 pandemic, with BHCDC currently operating at 45-66% capacity and MCC at 39-57% capacity.

To understand the underlying causes and potential solutions, the research team conducted extensive community outreach, including a survey completed by 627 residents, four focus groups with 30 staff members and parents, and interviews with 10 local preschool directors. Research and analysis of enrollment trends, demographic data, and state and county early learning reports provided additional context for local challenges within the broader childcare landscape.

The research revealed that multiple factors are driving enrollment challenges. The recent expansion of Universal Transitional Kindergarten for 4-year-olds has significantly reduced demand for traditional preschool programs. Increased remote work has changed how families approach childcare, while the high cost of living has forced many to seek more affordable options and others to move into the community for work opportunities. Declining local birth rates have reduced overall demand, and the centers' historical reliance on word-of-mouth marketing has become less effective as community demographics shift.

Four critical community needs emerged from the research. First and foremost is affordability, with 83% of surveyed families reporting difficulty finding affordable childcare options. Second is scheduling flexibility, with nearly half of families struggling to find care that matches their work schedules. Third is a strong demand for infant care and toddler care, particularly for children under three years old. Fourth is limited community awareness about the high-quality programming offered at both city-operated centers.

Based on careful analysis of potential impact and implementation feasibility, several potential strategies rose to the top of a large pool of possibilities. To address affordability, the most broad impact strategy to increase enrollment and meet expressed community needs would be to institute a sliding scale for middle-income families who do not otherwise qualify for income-based tuition assistance. A related, somewhat less impactful strategy to increase enrollment that could help meet an expressed need would be to offer tuition discounts to city and school employees.

The most impactful programmatic adaptation strategies are primarily focused on adapting the programs to accept younger children under 3 years old at each location, which could be achieved through a phased approach for different ages based on licensing and facilities. Other strategies include creating new flexible scheduling opportunities in response to expressed community need and interest. Multiple strategies to raise awareness and marketing City-operated preschools are identified, with many suggestions coming directly from preschool teachers and parents. These strategies all aim to increase enrollment and strengthen financial sustainability while responding to evolving community needs.

With any of the strategies in this report, it is recommended that the City carefully evaluate the accompanying costs and consider both the one-time and ongoing expenditures that would be needed to implement strategies and sustain program operations. It is noted that the City owns four preschool facilities but currently operates only two of the facilities directly. The other two city-owned preschool facilities, Menlo-Atherton Cooperative Preschool at 800 Middle Ave. and Building Kidz at 490 Willow Rd., are currently operated by local small businesses under lease from the City. Should the City ultimately decide that the cost to directly operate centers is too great, one potential alternative to preserve the availability of childcare in those facilities without directly operating them would be to identify one or more private providers to operate the facilities through a lease agreement or other form of public-private partnership. This alternative would have the potential to preserve childcare access while generating revenue and reducing city expenditures.

Regular evaluation of progress against enrollment targets will allow for strategy adjustments as Menlo Park's early learning centers evolve to meet community needs while maintaining financial viability. The success of any strategy would require ongoing collaboration between city leadership, program staff, families, and community stakeholders, as well as careful attention to implementation timing and resource allocation.

The insights gathered from this research and analysis are intended to help inform City deliberation and decision-making for City-operated childcare centers and by extension, childcare throughout Menlo Park. They shed light on current and future early learning and care needs, program preferences, and the unique challenges facing families today. The strategies in this report were identified through extensive research and present an opportunity to adopt a sustainable childcare program that supports young children and their caregivers and strengthens the fabric of the Menlo Park community.

Introduction

The City of Menlo Park provides early childhood education through high-quality care and learning programs for its youngest residents. The City runs two early learning centers, Belle Haven Child Development Center (BHCDC) and Menlo Children's Center (MCC); both have experienced under-enrollment for the last several years. The city-operated centers are not alone in this predicament. Since the COVID-19 pandemic and the expansion of free Transitional Kindergarten (TK) for 4-year-olds through the public school system, preschools across the region have experienced challenges in enrollment.

Recognizing the evolving challenges and opportunities in this sector, the City partnered with Solutionary Advisors to undertake a comprehensive analysis of its early learning and care programs and propose recommendations for how the early care and learning programs might better meet the evolving needs of the community while ensuring the financial sustainability of the programs. Solutionary Advisors, founded in 2022 by Erik Burmeister, a respected former Menlo Park City School District superintendent, brings extensive expertise and a deep understanding of the local community. This partnership underscores a shared goal: to ensure Menlo Park's early learning initiatives meet the highest standards of excellence while adapting to the community's changing needs.

Collaborating closely with the City of Menlo Park staff were lead consultants Tricia Singleton and Katherine Carter, experienced youth services and early education consultants. They were joined by local equity expert and graduate of Ravenswood School District, Marissa Magee. The City's team was led by Library and Community Services Director, Sean Reinhart, and included Nick Szegda, Assistant Library and Community Services Director, Natalya Jones, Library and Community Services Manager, Kira Storms, Library and Community Services Supervisor at BHCDC, and Sheriann Chaw, Library and Community Services Supervisor at MCC.

This report documents the Solutionary team's systematic approach to developing recommendations for these community needs. The first section describes our research into the state and national preschool landscape to better understand the impacts of contextual factors like the California Transitional Kindergarten (TK) program and the long-term implications of the COVID-19 pandemic. The second section explores the local context, with a detailed description of the city-operated early care centers, an overview of the local preschool landscape, and an exploration of the multiple factors impacting enrollment in the region. The third section dives into the data analysis and local research we conducted to identify the unmet needs of our local families. This data

includes a robust resident survey and multiple focus groups with families and staff. The fourth section shares our recommendations for increasing enrollment and financial sustainability of the city-run centers through meeting those community needs.

The insights gathered from this collaborative effort shed light on current and future early learning and care needs, program preferences, and families' unique challenges today. By addressing those challenges, we can support young children and their caregivers and strengthen the fabric of the Menlo Park community.



Preschool Landscape: National, State, and County Context

Overview

The country's early care and learning landscape has been profoundly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, prompting a temporary disruption of services and contributing to a long-term decline in enrollment. At the same time, emerging initiatives like the California Master Plan for Early Learning and Care¹ and local funding measures such as Measure S and Measure K are reshaping the early childhood ecosystem in California. While the pandemic disrupted the preschool system through health concerns, changes to live-work arrangements, and economic hardship, California's move toward Universal Transitional Kindergarten has further reshaped demand, especially for four and five-year-olds. These forces have influenced preschool enrollment trends and are prompting long-term changes across California's early care and learning sector.

COVID-19 Pandemic & Work from Home

The COVID-19 pandemic led to significant changes in preschool enrollment nationwide. At the height of the pandemic in 2020, many preschools either closed temporarily or faced reduced capacity due to state-mandated health restrictions and social distancing measures. As a result, enrollment plummeted. Nearly one in five children in families using paid childcare services stopped doing so during the pandemic, and although there has been some recovery, enrollment has not returned to pre-pandemic levels in most states.²

COVID-19 created economic uncertainties that further impacted preschool enrollment. Families faced job losses, reduced incomes, and economic uncertainty, making preschool unaffordable for many. According to a report by the University of California, Berkeley, about 58% of childcare programs statewide lost income during the pandemic.³ As a result, some preschools were forced to shut down permanently, reducing the availability of early childhood education options.

Classroom closures due to COVID-19 exposures and cases also significantly impacted enrollment and continuity of care. When a child or childcare teacher tested positive for COVID-19, their classroom was required to close, and all children and staff in that

¹ [Master Plan for Early Learning and Care](#)

² [Report: Child Care Industry Struggling in Pandemic's Aftermath, Recent Trends in Paid Child Care Usage](#)

³ [Impacts of COVID-19 on the early care and education sector in California](#)

classroom were required to stay out of the childcare center for 10-14 days. Health officials imposed this restriction to prevent the pandemic from spreading; however, the follow-on effect drove families to find alternate forms of childcare, even though classes were still held remotely via distance learning. For many families, concerns about safety and infection risks made preschool less appealing, prompting parents to keep their children at home. Families that could shift to remote work often did, reducing the need for traditional childcare services.

This shift to remote and/or hybrid work was not temporary for many families. Continuing to engage in remote or hybrid work was more common among higher-income families, with workers in the professional, information, finance, and management industries. These four industries still had over a third of their workforce working remotely in 2022. In computer systems designs and related services, this number was even higher, with over 57% of the employees working remotely.⁴ This increase in remote work enabled more families to provide early care at home. This contributed to declining enrollment in community and center-based preschool programs.

Parental stress was also exacerbated as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and not just for financial reasons..⁵ With the closing of preschools and other early learning centers, many young families lost an important source of community, and the social bonds between families, childcare teachers, and other families were weakened. Social isolation contributes greatly to parent stress, and in November 2024, the US Surgeon General called this a mental health crisis among parents.⁶ This lack of in-person connection in early learning centers during the pandemic may have inhibited enrollment growth as families sought other sources for these subtler but no less important needs for the health of the whole family.

⁴ [The Rise in Remote Work Since the Pandemic and its Impact on Productivity](#)

⁵ [Parents Under Pressure: The U.S. Surgeon General Advisory on the Mental Health and Well-Being of Parents](#)

⁶ [Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community.](#)

Transitional Kindergarten: State-funded Care for 4-year-olds

Across the country, many states have begun to implement free, transitional kindergarten for 4-year-olds.⁷ In December 2020, California released its *Master Plan for Early Learning and Care*⁸ to provide a roadmap for improving its early learning and care system over the next ten years. One of the key strategies of the plan is to offer free Universal Preschool for all three- and four-year-olds through the public school system. The state began to implement this strategy by building from the existing Transitional Kindergarten (TK) program, which started in 2012-13. Before 2020, the program only served children who turned five between September 2 and December 2. As of the 2024-25 school year, all California children who have their fourth birthday by September 1 can attend free state-funded TK programs.

The hours of the TK programs are up to the school district. For example, the Menlo Park City School District offers a half-day TK program, with an optional, fee-based afterschool program provided by the Newton Center. Exact schedules vary by school. Laurel Elementary offers TK from 8:20 to 12:20. Encinal's program runs from 8:15 to 12:15. Ravenswood School District provides a free full-day transitional kindergarten program from 8:30 to 3:10. Las Lomitas offers a half-day TK program from 7:55 to 1:30.

As predicted, the expansion of TK is significantly impacting the demand for preschool and after-school programming, as families now have an option for free programming for 4-year-olds⁹. This is having a direct impact on enrollment in other early care programs. Preschools across the state are experiencing declining enrollment. Since the expansion of TK and the nearly simultaneous onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Head Start/Title 5 programs in California went from average enrollments of 94 students pre-pandemic to an average of only 55 students in 2023.¹⁰ It is worth noting that this parallels the declining enrollment seen in the early care programs run by the City of Menlo Park, which will be explored further in the next section on the local context.

As outlined in the California *Master Plan for Early Learning and Care*¹¹, the state hopes to expand the number of high-quality early childhood spaces in the public school system by introducing Universal TK. In practice, this means that many other preschools seeking to sustain their past enrollment levels will likely need to shift their focus toward younger age groups—specifically infants and toddlers who are not eligible for TK. As we will see

⁷ [Transitional Kindergarten: The New Kid on the Early Learning Block](#)

⁸ [Master Plan for Early Learning and Care](#)

⁹ [San Mateo County Childcare Needs Assessment of 2022 and 2032](#)

¹⁰ [California's Transitional Kindergarten: Lessons Learned – NASBE.](#)

¹¹ [Master Plan for Early Learning and Care](#)

in the local preschool director interviews in the Data Analysis section, this pivot has allowed some preschools to maintain enrollment levels. In addition, some preschools have started offering wraparound care for children enrolled in TK, such as before- and after-school programs. This model allows them to retain some families who need full-day care, even as their children attend TK for part of the day. Many local preschools in the City of Menlo Park have embraced these options outlined in the Preschool Director Interviews in the appendix. However, this approach is not financially viable for all preschools.

County-wide Initiatives to Support Early Childhood

There is also significant movement and conversation around the importance of early childhood education on a county level. More and more agencies are recognizing, advocating for, and even funding the expansion of early childhood programming. It will be important to monitor these developments and look for potential partnerships and support for City-operated programs.

Two measures have been passed locally that provide additional funding for early childhood programming and other critical community services. Measure S is a parcel tax that was passed in November 2024 by voters living in the Ravenswood School District. The measure is estimated to raise \$2.7 million each year and will fund educational initiatives across the district, with a significant focus on early childhood. It allocates funding for the expansion of affordable preschool and early childhood education, living wages for early childhood educators, facilities for early education programs, and helping low-income families afford childcare and will be implemented on July 1, 2026, and end on June 30, 2034.¹²

Measure K is a half-cent sales tax in the County of San Mateo, which is approved until 2043. The measure provides limited-term funding to meet critical service needs, address service gaps, or save money by improving performance. Currently, the top recommendations for Measure K investment include supporting subsidized childcare as well as more childcare centers overall. The County of San Mateo reviews proposals for Measure K funding on a yearly basis and directs funds to accomplish the priority funding areas.¹³ One of the initiatives funded by Measure K is the San Mateo County Childcare Blueprint, a plan that is being created to improve childcare in the county¹⁴ The Child Care Partnership Council (CCPC) and other organizations are diligently working to complete this actionable Blueprint for the County.

¹² [Measure S Parcel Tax](#)

¹³ [San Mateo County Measure K Website](#)

¹⁴ [Measure K Grant Agreement](#)

Additionally, the Commission on the Status of Women Childcare Impact Report¹⁵, produced for San Mateo County as part of the Fund the Future Report, calls for universal childcare across the county. The report recognizes the multiple benefits of early childhood programming, ranging from children's cognitive and socio-emotional development to women's economic prosperity.

Conclusion

As industries continue to offer the option of working from home and Universal TK is expanded to provide free care for all four and eventually three-year-olds, the early childhood education sector in California must evolve in order to retain full enrollment levels. Many providers are adapting by either shifting their focus to younger age groups or offering wraparound services for TK students. These shifts may be supported through promising developments at the county level, where there is growing recognition of the importance of early childhood programming and the need to support both families and providers in this evolving landscape. Ongoing flexibility and innovation will be needed to meet changing family needs while maintaining sustainable operations. Careful attention should be paid to ensuring these changes support, rather than diminish, the overall availability and quality of early childhood education options for families across all age groups, regions, and income levels.

¹⁵ [Fund the Future Report](#)

Preschool Landscape:

Local Context

Overview

Menlo Park is home to a variety of early learning centers and childcare spaces for families with young children, including infant, toddler, and preschool programming. Most centers are private. Two of the three local school districts (Ravenswood SD, and Menlo Park City SD) operate preschools. The City of Menlo Park operates two preschools: Belle Haven Child Development Center (BHDC) and Menlo Children's Center (MCC). The City owns two additional preschool facilities, which are operated by local businesses under lease to the city: Menlo-Atherton Cooperative Preschool and Building Kidz.

Most early learning programs in the city, including the Menlo Park City School District Early Learning Center, began serving students as young as two years of age. Programs that start with preschool-aged students (three years and up) are generally designed so that students matriculate directly into an elementary school run by the same organization, which is a desirable benefit to many families for continuity of care.

City of Menlo Park Operated Preschool Programs

BHDC and MCC offer early learning programs for students in slightly different age ranges and with significantly different fee structures. BHDC serves preschool students ages three to five and receives substantial grant funding from the California Department of Education through the California State Preschool Program (CSPP) and primarily serves families who qualify for subsidized tuition based on family income. MCC serves students ages 18 months to five years and operates as a market-rate preschool that receives no grants and does not directly provide tuition subsidies. Some families at MCC qualify for subsidies from other sources, such as 4C's (Child Care Coordinating Council). Both BHDC and MCC are state-licensed preschools.

Belle Haven Child Development Center (BHCDC)

Overview	Ages: Preschool children ages three to five years. Classrooms: Four classrooms with a maximum capacity of 24 children each for a total maximum capacity of 96 children. All classrooms serve the same age group. Ratio: 1:8 teacher/child ratio, required by Title 5, applies to programs receiving state preschool funding. Each classroom requires three teachers to operate at the maximum capacity of 24 children.
Fees	BHCDC tuition subsidization is supported by grant funding from the California Department of Education (CDE) through the California State Preschool Program (CSPP). Most students at BHCDC receive subsidized tuition rates; there also typically are 1-5 full-fee students enrolled each quarter. Sliding scale fees are based on family size and income.
Program & Hours	The daily curriculum supports the socio-emotional, physical, and cognitive age-appropriate development of the children served and their families. The program provides breakfast, a hot lunch, and an afternoon snack. Snacks and lunch are prepared and delivered by a qualified outside food service vendor. Hours are 7:30am-5:15pm, Monday – Friday.
Facilities	In addition to its four classrooms, there are four separate outdoor play areas and a multipurpose room. The four classrooms share two kitchens. Kitchens are equipped with an oven, stovetop, and refrigerator. There is also a laundry room, storage sheds, and multiple restrooms on the campus.

Menlo Children's Center (MCC)

Overview	Ages: Toddler children ages 18 months to five years. Classrooms: Three classrooms with a combined maximum capacity of 60 children total. One classroom is for Toddlers and has capacity for 12 children. Two classrooms are for preschool and have capacity for 24 children each. (There is a fourth classroom, currently not in use due to low enrollment, which has the physical capacity to serve 24 students) Ratio: 1:6 teacher/child ratio in the Toddler room and 1:12 teacher/child ratio in Preschool classrooms.
Fees	MCC operates as a market-rate early learning and care program. Tuition fees at MCC are consistent with market-rate childcare fees at other similar childcare programs in the area. Subsidy options for income-qualifying families are available through external agencies such as the 4C's (Child Care Coordinating Council).
Program & Hours	The daily curriculum includes activities to support the children's socio-emotional, physical, and cognitive age-appropriate development and consists of a nutritional component. MCC provides a morning and afternoon snack, and families provide their lunch. Hours are 8 am-6 pm Monday – Friday.
Facilities	In addition to the four classrooms, there are kitchenette areas in each room consisting of counter and refrigerator space that is used for preparing snacks. One larger kitchen area with a stovetop and oven is located in the adjacent MCC afterschool facility. This larger kitchen can be used for cooking and warming up larger quantities of food as needed for the preschool program. The MCC campus also includes dedicated outdoor play areas, a laundry room and storage areas, and multiple bathrooms

Under-Enrollment at BHCDC and MCC

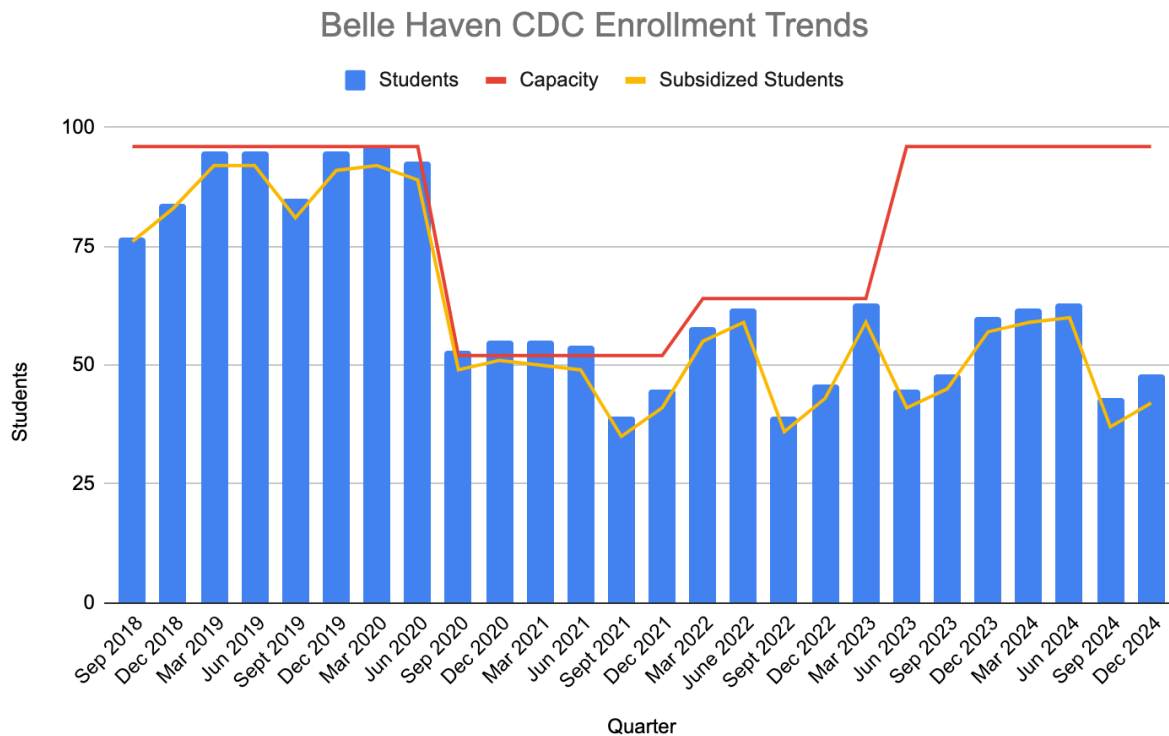
Both centers have experienced under-enrollment since the onset of the COVID-19 Pandemic in 2020, diminishing the level of cost-recovery the programs are able to achieve through the collection of tuition fees. Before the pandemic, BHCDC was consistently enrolled at or near its maximum capacity of 96 total children, and MCC was enrolled at approximately 70% of its maximum capacity of 72 total children. During the pandemic, capacity at both BHCDC and MCC was temporarily reduced due to state-mandated pandemic restrictions. The capacity restrictions endured far longer than first anticipated when the pandemic began. The state fully lifted capacity restrictions over three years later, in June 2023, but enrollment demand did not recover to fill the

restored capacity. Enrollment still has not yet fully recovered to pre-pandemic levels and appears to have plateaued.



BHCDC Historical Enrollment

In the years before the COVID-19 pandemic, enrollment at Belle Haven CDC (BHCDC) ranged from 77 to 95 students, and it could serve 96 students (80-96% capacity).

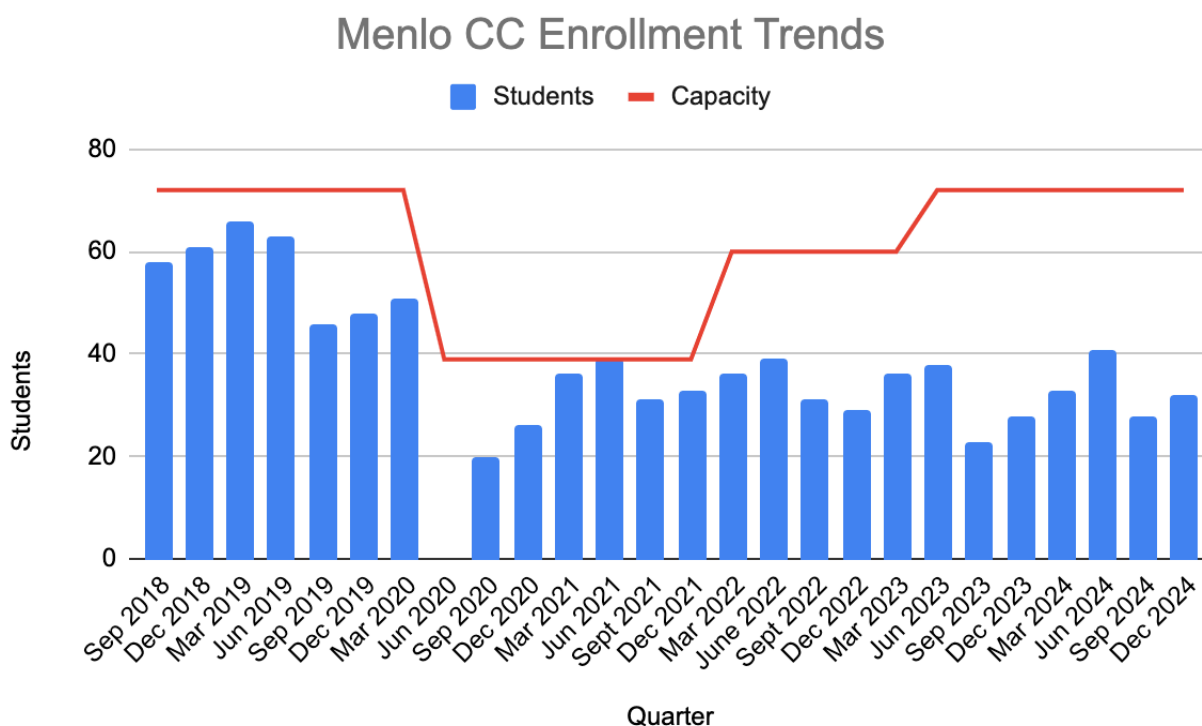


This chart covers enrollment data for six school years. BHCDC was operating at or close to full capacity before the pandemic and implementation of Universal TK. The center was closed entirely for in-person operations from March 2020 to June 2020, and then offered distance learning to students via videoconference. From July 2020 to June 2021, the center re-opened for hybrid in-person and distance learning with a state-mandated capacity of 52 students. By March 2022, the state increased the capacity to 64 students. From June 2023 until now, the center's capacity has returned to its original 96 students, but enrollment has ranged from 43-63 students (45-66% capacity).

MCC Historical Enrollment

In the year before the COVID-19 pandemic, enrollment at the Menlo Children's Center (MCC) ranged from 46 - 66 students, and it could serve 72 students (64-92% capacity). From September 2020 to December 2021, the center's enrollment ranged from 20-39 students with a state-mandated maximum capacity of 39 students (51-100% capacity). From March 2022 - March 2023, the state increased the capacity to 60, and

center enrollment ranged from 29-39 students (48-65% capacity). From June 2023 - December 2024, state-mandated capacity was restored to its pre-pandemic maximum of 72 students; however, enrollment has remained essentially unchanged from 28-41 students (39-57% capacity).



This chart covers enrollment data at MCC for six school years. MCC was operating at 64-92% capacity in the years before the pandemic. The enrollment drop in Sept 2019 was due to the closure of the Morning Birds program (age 2.5-5, morning only). The Morning Birds program was discontinued in Fall 2019 due to low enrollment. The center was closed for all operations from March - June 2020 due to the pandemic. When the center reopened, it was not possible to bring the program back due to COVID-19 restrictions around the space, which is shared with the after-school program.

MCC currently has three classrooms set up for early childhood programming, each serving a different age range and with varying enrollment capacities. The Toddler room serves 18 to 24-month-olds and has a capacity of 12 students. It is typically fully enrolled, and four vacancies are currently being filled. The Early Preschool and

Preschool Rooms usually have an enrollment capacity of 24 students each. However, due to low enrollment, they are combined into one classroom of 20 students.

The licensing capacity for MCC is 72; however, only 60 are available for full-day early childhood programming, as students in the after-school program account for 12 slots. The morning-bird program was utilizing the 12 licensed spots in the morning until it was closed.

The Historical Enrollment Detail in the appendix provides additional information about enrollment trends at BHCD and MCC, including overall capacity, actual enrollment, the number of students with subsidized tuition, the percentage of full capacity based on actual student enrollment, and the number of open spaces.

Local Preschool Landscape Review

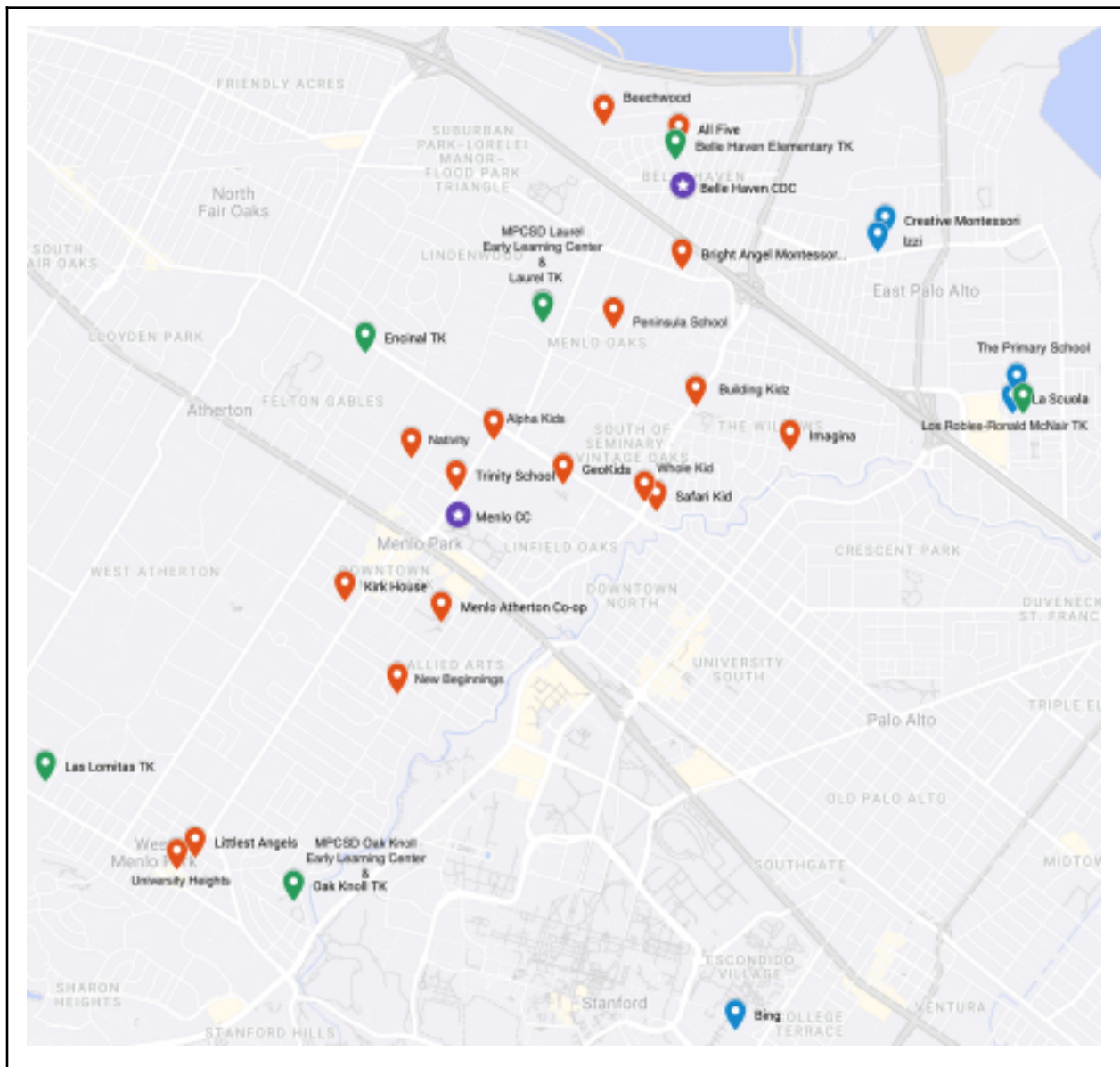
In addition to the City-operated preschools, the City of Menlo Park is home to a variety of other early learning centers and childcare spaces for families with young children, including infant and toddler programs. However, according to the 2022 Menlo Park Childcare Needs Assessment¹⁶, only 6% of the infant demand and 55% for preschool spaces is being met. Despite that assessment's conclusion that demand is greater than supply, many of the preschools across the City of Menlo Park and surrounding cities also report that they continue to experience enrollment vacancies.



¹⁶ [2022 Menlo Park City Profile: Childcare and early learning needs assessment](#)

Menlo Park Early Learning Landscape Map

The following map shows the distribution of 20 early learning centers in Menlo Park that are similar to the City-operated programs in age range and size, as well as five similar preschool centers in neighboring cities, and local transitional kindergarten programs that serve 4-year-olds. A key to this map is provided in the Appendix and provides additional information, including hours, scheduling options, and the ages served. Nearly all the programs listed currently care for children at 2 years or younger, and several serve infants. The only exceptions are the Nativity School and the Peninsula School, which start their preschool programs with 3-year-olds and matriculate directly into their elementary school programs.



Enrollment Trends

Impact of Transitional Kindergarten

Early learning centers across the City experienced declines in enrollment during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although there has been some recovery in enrollment from the pandemic, the full implementation of free Transitional Kindergarten has contributed to an ongoing decline in preschool enrollment in the private and nonprofit sectors. Many programs have pivoted to serve younger students that the public school system has yet to serve, and several have adjusted to provide afternoon care for students enrolled in morning TK programs - at least one such program in Menlo Park includes transportation for this purpose. Five of eight of the preschool directors interviewed reported they have experienced decreased enrollment of 4- and 5-year-olds and have subsequently increased their enrollment of children three and younger¹⁷. As explained in the previous section, these challenges with preschool enrollment have been felt across the state since the onset of the Covid 19 pandemic and the full implementation of Transitional Kindergarten, and indications are that this trend is likely to continue into the foreseeable future.

Birth Rates and Population Trends

While the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and full implementation of TK are being felt across the state, the City of Menlo Park preschool enrollment is also impacted by the region's declining birth rates. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, birth rates in the area were projected to increase; however, actual birth rate data indicates that birth rates currently are declining.¹⁸ Birth rates are down across the county as well as in Menlo Park. The number of aged children zero to four in San Mateo County in 2022 was 45,732. The number of children 0-4 decreased, and the 2022 Needs Assessment predicts that this number will remain relatively stable for the next 10 years¹⁹.

¹⁷ Appendix: Preschool Director Interview Detail

¹⁸ [Early Learning Facilities Study – 2016 San Mateo County.](#)

¹⁹ [City of Menlo Park Child care supply and Demand Summary](#)

Birth numbers in zip codes 94025 and 94027 declined before and during the pandemic.*

²⁰ The chart below shows the declining birth rates in these zip codes from 2010 to 2021.

Birth Rates in Zip Codes 94025 & 94027 from 2010-2021

Birth "Year"	Births in zip codes 94025 and 94027	Trends
"2010"	621	From 2010-12 620-640 births per year
"2011"	620	
"2012"	640	
"2013"	598	From 2013-16 577-609 births per year
"2014"	591	
"2015"	609	
"2016"	577	
"2017"	529	From 2017-18 529-532 births per year
"2018"	532	
"2019"	484	From 2019-21 472-484 births per year
"2020"	472	
"2021"	474	

Source: [Projected Enrollments 2022 to 2027 in the Menlo Park City School District](#)²¹, Page 23

* These are proportionate birth amounts in the listed year and the prior year to correlate to the kindergarten eligibility period appropriately shown. For example, "2010" births represent four-twelfths of the birth total in 2009 and eight-twelfths (for all but September to December) of the birth total in 2010.

Conclusion

Despite the variety of preschool programs operating in Menlo Park, there are still areas of unmet need, especially regarding affordable care, flexible scheduling, toddler care, and infant care. The Menlo Park Childcare Needs Assessment Survey as well as the focus groups conducted with local families in the Fall 2024 highlighted these themes, which will be further explored in the following section of the report. These needs are not

²⁰ [Projected Enrollments 2022 to 2027 in the Menlo Park City School District](#)

²¹ *ibid*

specific to the City of Menlo Park but reflect a larger trend in the region, as evidenced by the *San Mateo County Childcare Needs Assessment*²²

The preschool landscape in Menlo Park highlights the pressing need to address the community's unmet needs and develop strategies to respond to under-enrollment challenges. Despite the wide range of programs, including the City-operated BHCDC and MCC, enrollment and cost-recovery levels remain below pre-pandemic levels, influenced by broader trends such as the expansion of Transitional Kindergarten, declining birth rates, and ongoing pandemic aftershocks. Furthermore, data indicates that the demand for affordable care, flexible scheduling, infant care, and toddler care exceeds the existing capacity for these types of care– not only in City-run preschools but throughout the local preschool ecosystem. Data suggests that increasing the availability of these types of care would help meet community needs and foster a more robust and inclusive early learning environment for Menlo Park families.



²² [San Mateo County Childcare Needs Assessment: City of Menlo Park Profile](#)

Data Analysis

Overview

Solutionary Advisors and City staff conducted a comprehensive analysis of local childcare needs through three research approaches: a community survey (627 respondents), interviews with ten local preschool directors, and four focus groups with thirty staff and parents from the two City-operated centers. The analysis stayed focused on the people in the community and the City's budget through its guiding question: *How might the City of Menlo Park's early care and learning programs better meet the evolving needs of the community while ensuring the financial sustainability of the programs?*

This research revealed significant challenges in meeting community childcare needs, with affordability emerging as the primary concern across all research components. The survey showed that 83% of families struggle to find affordable care. The preschool directors and focus groups highlighted how the high cost of living affects families' ability to afford fees, including families who do not qualify for income-based tuition assistance and centers' ability to retain qualified staff. The research team listened to those closest to the challenge and examined it from many angles to find the most impactful solutions.

Finding childcare can be exhausting for families. Key findings included a strong demand for infant and toddler programs and the need for more flexible scheduling options to accommodate diverse work patterns. The research emphasized the importance families place on experienced staff, inter-family connections within the preschool community, and educational programming. The City-operated centers were recognized for their experienced, long-tenured staff. Still, the City-operated centers faced challenges in community awareness as families report that they increasingly rely on online research rather than word-of-mouth referrals.

These challenges facing families and preschool centers are nuanced and unprecedented. The research suggests that without sustained attention, resources, and effort to implement significant adaptation strategies, young children and their families will continue to face challenges to access the care in education that they need to thrive. In addition to impacting children and parents, these challenges also impact local small businesses and the jobs they provide.

Report: Menlo Park Childcare Needs Assessment Survey

The Menlo Park Childcare Needs Assessment survey was created to obtain up-to-date information from Menlo Park families regarding their childcare needs. The goal was to supplement the *2022 San Mateo County (SMC) Childcare Needs Assessment*²³, which had a low response rate from Menlo Park residents (61 responses). The SMC Childcare Needs Assessment survey was completed before Universal Transitional Kindergarten in California began to allow students to enroll at age four (4), causing widespread impact on preschool enrollment.

The Menlo Park Childcare Needs Assessment Survey revealed significant challenges facing local families in accessing quality childcare, with affordability emerging as the primary concern among several others. Of the 627 respondents, 83% reported difficulty finding affordable care options, while nearly half struggled to secure care that matched their scheduling needs.

The survey, which captured input from a broad cross-section of the community, highlighted five critical areas requiring attention: affordable care, limited availability of infant and toddler programs, inflexible scheduling options, concerns about quality of care, and the desire for enhanced educational value in childcare programs. These findings, supported by 413 detailed comments from respondents, paint a clear picture of a community seeking more financially accessible, flexible, and high-quality childcare solutions to meet Menlo Park families' evolving needs.

The survey's high response rate and detailed feedback demonstrate that childcare accessibility is a critical issue for the Menlo Park community. The thoughtful solutions proposed by respondents—from sliding scale fees to trust-building events—provide a strong foundation for developing concrete initiatives that could help improve childcare access and quality for Menlo Park residents.

Methodology

The Menlo Park Childcare Needs Assessment Survey replicated the content of the *San Mateo County Childcare Needs Assessment Survey* as it was a well-constructed assessment and to retain the ability to compare data between the two assessments. There were 36 multiple-choice questions, plus a free-text comment opportunity to answer the question, "Please tell us your ideas, needs, and suggestions for childcare programs." The survey was designed to take approximately 5 minutes to complete.

²³ [San Mateo County Childcare Needs Assessment 2022](#)

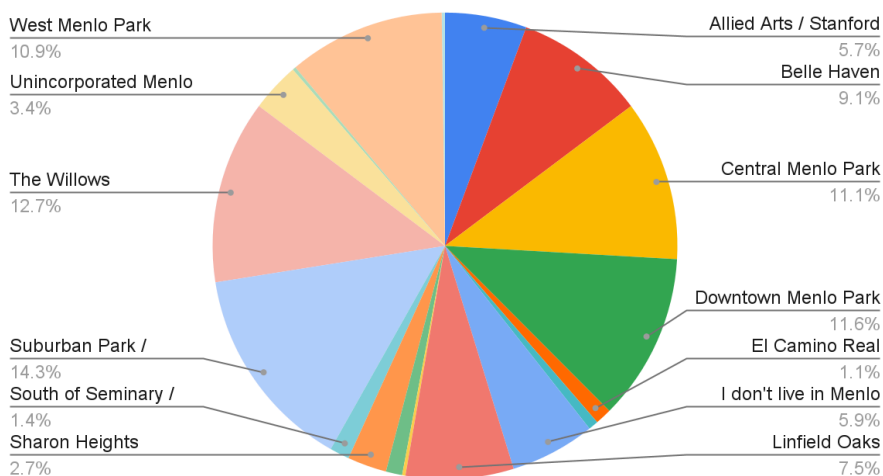
The Menlo Park Childcare Needs Assessment Survey was open from September 14 to October 17, 2024. Various communication avenues ensured that a cross-section of Menlo Park families completed the survey. The survey had a translation feature allowing residents to read and respond in their native language. The survey link was shared in the City of Menlo Park newsletter via email and school district communications in Menlo Park, Ravenswood, and Las Lomitas and with City of Menlo Park staff in their newsletter. It was included in several local preschool center communications, including the Menlo Children’s Center (MCC) and Belle Haven Child Development Center (BHCDC). A paper version of the survey was available in Spanish and English at the Library, BHCDC, and MCC.

Respondents

Six hundred twenty-seven (627) people took the Survey. Approximately 70% of respondents fully completed the survey, and 413 comments were shared, representing 66% of respondents.

The vast majority—97%—identified as the parent or guardian of a child under 12. Over 65% of responses were from families with a child under five. Most respondents (approximately 94%) were Menlo Park residents, representing a broad cross-section of the City. Non-residents were likely people working in the community or residing in adjacent neighborhoods. Respondents either currently access childcare in Menlo Park or expect to soon.

What neighborhood of Menlo Park do you live in now?



Highest priorities for childcare based on survey answers and comments

Respondents prioritized the need for **affordable**, **flexible**, and **trustworthy** child care that provides **educational value**. In addition, many families indicated a need for more **toddler care** and **infant care** programming availability. These themes reflect the core concerns of parents juggling work and family life, underscoring the critical areas for improvement in childcare services.

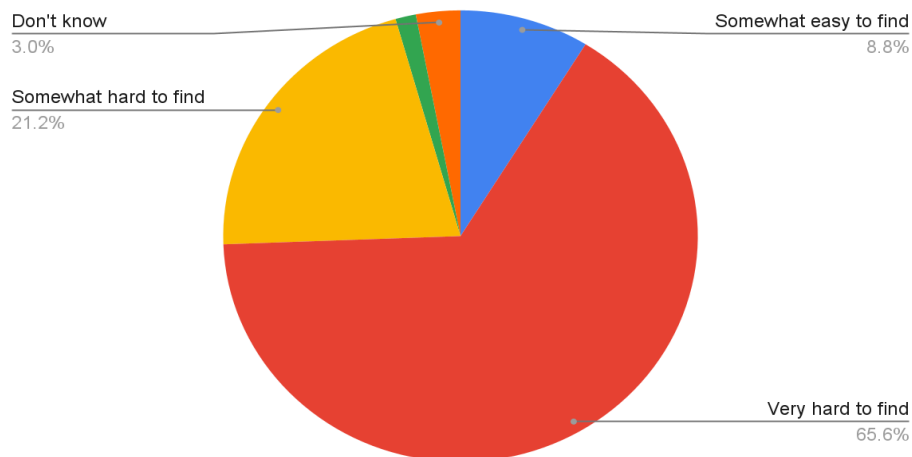
Affordability

Affordability was the highest priority for families, with 83% of the survey participants stating that affordable care was “somewhat” to “very hard” to find. Families consistently mentioned in comments that childcare is too expensive. Many respondents expressed that finding quality care within their budget is challenging, with some mentioning that they’ve had to make sacrifices in other areas to afford it. This was the most mentioned topic in the comments, with the words “cost,” “affordable,” and “budget” appearing frequently, highlighting the financial strain parents feel.

“We are educators and parents of twins. Some daycares are 3000 per child per month. That’s more than my salary. Plus housing and cost of living. We need subsidies that are above the poverty line or maximum income benchmarks. ”

- Belle Haven Resident

How easy or hard it was to find affordable care for your children?



Toddler Care and Infant Care

Finding affordable care for infants and toddlers is one of the biggest challenges identified by survey respondents. Infant care was the second most mentioned need in the comments. While

“[we need] more programs for children 18 mos - 3 yrs old ”

-Downtown Resident

most people prefer in-home care for children ages 0-2, center-based care is preferred by most for children ages 2-4.

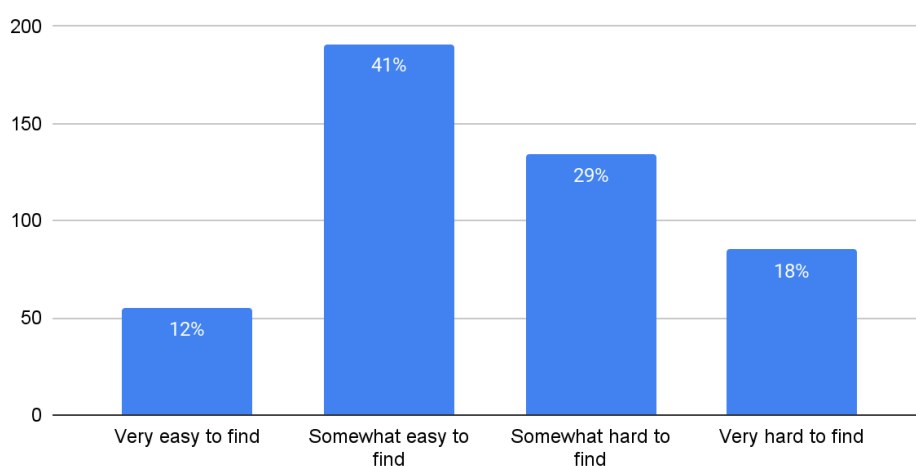
Flexible Scheduling

Flexible scheduling is also an important issue for families. Almost 50% of families say their desired schedule is “somewhat” to “very hard” to find. There is a strong need for care options that accommodate non-traditional work schedules, part-time hours, and last-minute needs. Families mentioned that rigid hours don’t align with their work demands, particularly for parents working shifts or freelance jobs. Multiple comments asked for extended hours, flexible scheduling, and/or drop-in care.

“Childcare programs should offer flexible options to accommodate parents’ work schedules.”

- West Menlo Park Resident

How easy or hard it was to find your desired schedule for childcare?



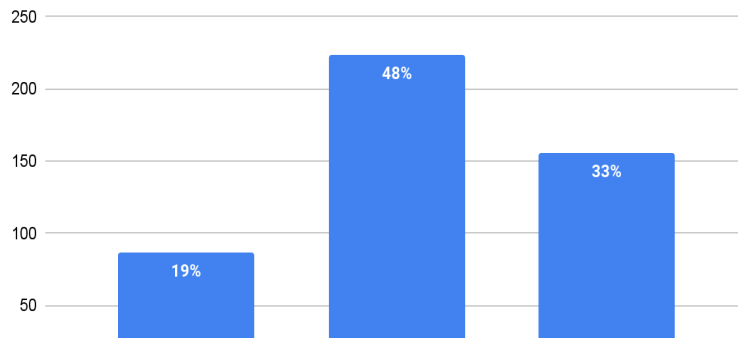
Safety and Trustworthiness

Safety is a significant priority for parents. Over 60% of respondents who answered this question (285 people) said well-trained, experienced caregivers are “somewhat” to “very hard” to find. Families are particularly concerned about caregiver qualifications, cleanliness, and the overall security of the environment. This reveals the importance of readily available information about teacher qualifications and training, recent facility photos, and updated safety measures. Parents want peace of mind knowing their children are in good hands while they are away. Words such as “high quality,” “trust,” “safe,” and “qualified” appeared often in the feedback.

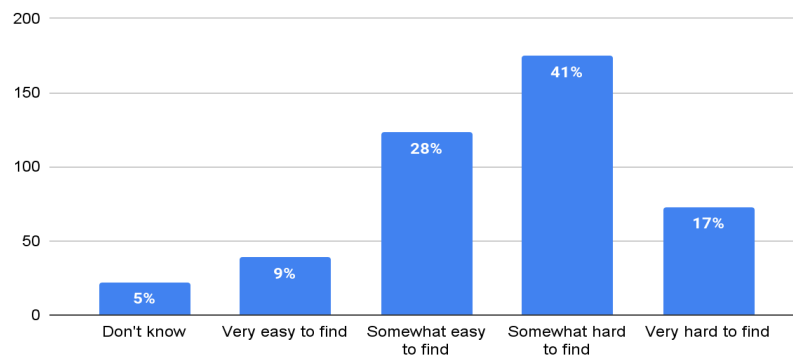
“Our top two priorities would be care that’s healthy and safe...and provides an enriching learning environment.”

- Felton Gables Resident

How easy or hard it was to find safe and healthy care for your children?



How easy or hard it was to find well-trained, experienced educators/caregivers for your children?



Educational Value

Parents are increasingly looking for childcare that also provides early learning opportunities. Parents want programs beyond 'basic' care to include activities that promote children's cognitive, social, and emotional development. This reveals the importance of readily available information about education philosophy, methodology, and enrichment in childcare centers. Continuity of care was also critical to families, as they recognized that frequent changes in their learning environment were disruptive for young children. Words like "learning," "development," and "education" were used often in comments.

"activities available that foster the child/children's social and emotional growth, play-based."

- West Menlo Park Resident

Respondent Suggestions in Comments

Four hundred thirteen (413) participants responded to the question, "Please tell us your ideas, needs, and suggestions for childcare programs. " After reviewing the feedback

from families, several suggested solutions emerged in response to their most significant childcare challenges and needs. The complete list of comments organized by these top five challenges can be found in the Appendix.

Challenge	Biggest Needs	Suggestions Offered in Comments
Affordability	Affordable childcare that doesn't compromise on quality or safety. Financial support options such as subsidies, grants, or employer - sponsored programs.	Sliding Scale Fees: Some respondents suggested more programs offering sliding scale fees based on income to make childcare more accessible. Particularly for middle-income families who do not qualify for most income-based tuition assistance, but still find childcare costs unaffordable. City and/or School Employees: Some respondents proposed priority enrollment and reduced fees for City and school employees. Cooperative Care: Some respondents proposed more cooperative childcare models, where families rotate care duties to lower cost of care.
Toddler and Infant Care	Affordable, high-quality childcare for toddlers and infants.	Increase spaces for toddlers and infants: Multiple respondents identified a need for high-quality toddler and infant care. Subsidized Care: Many respondents emphasized the need for affordable care for toddlers and infants. Continuity of Care: Provide toddler and infant care on the same site as preschool programs to allow for continuity of care and relationships.
Challenge	Biggest Needs	Suggestions Offered in Comments
Flexibility	Childcare services that offer non-standard hours, including early mornings, evenings, weekends, and drop-in care. Flexibility in care options for part-time or occasional needs.	Extended Hours and Drop-In Care: Respondents suggested that childcare providers extend their hours, offering earlier start times and later pick-up options. Flexibility for drop-in care—especially in after-school programs—was also mentioned as a key improvement. Part-Time or Custom Schedules: Many respondents expressed a desire for part-time care options where they could pay for just the hours they need instead of a full day.

		Partnerships with Schools: Some suggested closer collaboration between schools to coordinate after-school care, especially for TK.
Safety and Trustworthiness	Clear communication about the quality and programming at the centers. Assurance that childcare environments are safe, secure and trustworthy.	Communication: Many respondents identified a need for more readily available information about the program's quality and staff. Trust-Building Initiatives: Solutions included meet-and-greets with teachers, parental involvement opportunities, or digital updates (e.g., live feeds, apps) to provide real-time updates on their child's wellbeing during care.
Educational Value	Programs that emphasize developmentally appropriate activities and provide opportunities for enrichment and cognitive development.	Clear Early Childhood Philosophy: Many respondents seek early care programs with a clear educational philosophy, such as Montessori, Reggio-Emilio, or other developmentally appropriate approaches. Enrichment Programs: Respondents emphasized integrating enriched learning opportunities, such as language immersion, arts, and social-emotional learning, into care.

Additional Survey Detail

For additional details on the survey, please see Appendix B. Documents include:

- Childcare Needs Assessment Survey Responses
- Cross Tab Analysis
- Comments Categorized by Top Five Challenges
- Comments Categorized by Neighborhood

Report: Local Preschool Director Interviews

As part of its comprehensive review of the early learning and care landscape in Menlo Park, Solutionary Advisors identified respected, comparable programs in and around the City. Preschool directors were invited to participate in a 1:1 interview with a Solutionary consultant. Preschool directors were asked about their experience with three factors potentially impacting preschool enrollment: 1) parent work-from-home arrangements, 2) pandemic-related changes, and 3) California's Universal Transitional Kindergarten for four and five-year-olds. The primary objective of these interviews was to gather qualitative data to identify and analyze emerging trends within the preschool landscape in Menlo Park, providing a comprehensive understanding of the current challenges and opportunities facing early childhood education in the community.

Methodology

The methodology for the preschool director interviews involved a voluntary opt-in process, ensuring that all participants were willing to share their insights. Tricia Singleton, a consultant for Solutionary Advisors, interviewed ten directors from a diverse range of preschool types in the Menlo Park area for approximately 30 minutes each. To maintain confidentiality and encourage open dialogue, comments included in this report are not attributed to specific preschools or directors.

Preschool Structures

The ten schools interviewed offer diverse early childhood education options in and around Menlo Park. This table shows the preschools' various operational structures.

Category	Program Structure by Category
Years in operation	Under 10 yrs: 3 schools 10-40 yrs: 4 schools 50+ years: 3 schools
Operating hours	Open: 7:30-9:00 am Close: 3:00-6:00 pm
Operation dates	Year Round: 5 schools School Year + Summer Option: 4 schools School Year Only: 1 school
Schedule options	Full-Day only: 3 Full/Half-Day: 3 Full/Half/Multi-Day: 3 Half-Day only: 1

Ages Served	Traditional preschool (3-5 yrs): 10 Toddler (18 mos - 2.9 yrs): 9 Infant (3-17 mos): 2
Enrollment	50-85 Children: 5 schools 30-50 Children: 3 schools Less than 30 Children: 2 schools
Funding Model	Fully fee-based: 6 Subsidized tuition option: 2 Cooperative model: 2
Enrichment	Music, art, dance, language immersion, STEM, sports, special needs support

Summary of Feedback

Work from Home

Preschool directors report that the impact of "work-from-home" (WFH) on their respective preschool enrollment has been mixed. Many interviewees noted that WFH itself was not the primary driver of changes, and the more significant challenge has been the increasing "cost of living," leading families to move away due to "job change" or "cost of housing." During COVID-19, parents adapted to managing children at home, making it harder or less desirable for some to transition back to "full-day care" programs. Some families have reduced enrollment hours due to WFH's flexibility, while others have found enrolling in part-day or co-op models beneficial. Many parents are returning to the office, and the demand for FT care has increased for some schools.

Pandemic Related Challenges

According to preschool directors, the COVID-19 pandemic profoundly impacted operations, enrollment, and program delivery. One director explained, "We had to close the school for a year, and although enrollment initially boomed afterward, it has not come back to pre-pandemic levels." Several directors mentioned that parents found "alternative care" during the pandemic (nannies, grandparents, neighbors) and were hesitant to return to a childcare environment. Staffing challenges have also been significant, as many centers struggle to hire staff, with one director noting, "It's difficult to find teachers because housing is so expensive and the cost of living keeps increasing." One director highlighted that "more staff are taking sick time off," reflecting the ongoing challenges of maintaining a stable workforce. Despite these hurdles, preschool directors report ongoing efforts to adapt their programs to serve families and

children, with one director affirming, "We're finding more creative ways to provide care and build back that sense of community and connection."

Transitional Kindergarten (TK)

Preschool directors universally report the introduction of Universal Transitional Kindergarten (TK) age expansion to children age four (4) as the most significant factor impacting their preschool's enrollment. One director stated, "We've lost over half of our students transitioning into [age] 5's," as families opt for TK due to its free tuition. One director said they now have classes with as few as six children compared to 18-20 children before COVID-19. While free TK is enticing, many were concerned that it doesn't address the nuanced learning needs of young children. One director noted, "TK helps financially but does not necessarily meet the nuanced needs of young children." Directors expressed ongoing concerns about enrollment trends over the long term, which may necessitate reevaluating their programs.

Program Design

Preschool directors adapt their programs to ensure sustainability in response to changing demand. Some directors combine classes, such as the 3-4 age group, to support a play-based curriculum while managing staffing and space limitations. Many are seeing increased 3-year-old enrollment, with one director noting that 19 out of 29 students are three years old. Concerns about the quality of preschool education at school district Transitional Kindergarten (TK) have prompted some parents to return, as one director stated, "Our quality is better than TK." Many centers have started enrolling toddlers (18 months to 2 years) in more significant numbers or offering toddler care for the first time. However, challenges like inflation and the need for lower student-to-teacher ratios for younger children raise concerns about financial sustainability.

Enrollment

Recent enrollment trends reveal a mixed recovery from pre-pandemic levels. While three of the schools report a complete return to full enrollment, four remain below their previous numbers, and three are close to pre-pandemic enrollment. Still, waitlists are significantly shorter and are primarily for younger ages. The two infant programs were reported as "full," seven toddler programs had waitlists, and three preschool programs had waitlists. It is important to note that having a waitlist does not guarantee that families will enroll if a spot opens. However, it indicates the potential to keep a school operating at "full" capacity. Directors reported that families' preferences regarding preschool hours varied, with some requesting more hours based on longer work hours and some requesting shorter ones to address affordability and flexible schedules. This

variation in enrollment and family needs highlights the evolving landscape of early childhood education as it adapts to changing circumstances.

Important Factors for Families

Interviews with preschool directors revealed key reasons why families choose their programs. Directors highlighted the importance of fostering a strong inter-family community, using terms like “trusted community” and “community events” to describe the welcoming atmosphere parents seek. Reputation was also critical, with “word of mouth” and “good Yelp reviews” cited as trust indicators. The quality of staff, including “long-time staff” and “high-quality teachers,” was frequently mentioned for building solid relationships with families. Educational approach terms like “play-based curriculum” and “Montessori” were used to align with parents’ educational values. Lastly, practical factors such as “affordability” and “flexible scheduling” were noted as essential for meeting families’ logistical needs.

More detailed information is in the Appendix: Preschool Director Interviews Snapshot.



Report: Focus Groups with Staff and Families

Focus groups were facilitated with Belle Haven Child Development Center (BHCD) and Menlo Children's Center (MCC) staff and parents/guardians to listen to key stakeholders and help answer the question that guides this study. Four focus groups were conducted in October 2024 to identify strengths, challenges, and opportunities at BHCD and MCC. Each Center had two focus groups—one with staff and one with parents/guardians. A total of 30 staff and family members shared their insights and ideas.

Common themes emerged across all groups, particularly regarding the centers' strengths in staff quality and longevity, challenges with the cost of living and affordable care, and solutions focused on expanding community outreach and adjusting program offerings.

Methodology

Three Solutionary Advisors consultants co-facilitated four separate group sessions and shared the research work's general background and the focus groups' reason. Three groups were in-person, and one was virtual.

The staff focus groups included all childcare employees and represented various roles and levels of experience. The parent/guardian groups consisted of people who chose to participate. All parents had researched different childcare options in the community, chose to place their child in a City-operated center, and have at least one child currently enrolled. While some parents had moved their children to the free TK option, we did not speak with any parents who did not choose the center or who had left the program because of dissatisfaction. Admittedly, this type of focus group inherently includes a degree of selection bias in favor of the City-operated centers. However, the insights gained remain invaluable to the overall assessment.

Each focus group started with a short presentation on the research background to set the stage for the conversation: As a result of Universal TK, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and declining birth rates, many preschool centers in the state face enrollment challenges. The focus group also utilized suggestions given by survey respondents to see what ideas resonated with parents/guardians and staff closest to the preschool experience. (*Slides are in the Appendix.*)

Common Strengths

Parents universally praised both City-operated centers' long-tenured and diverse staff for providing stable, nurturing care. Staff are valued for their trusting relationships with families and children and the high-quality care they provide. The convenient, central locations of both BHCD and MCC make them favorable for families, enhancing both

centers' appeal in their respective communities. Participants consider both preschools more affordable than many other private options, especially for families facing financial pressures and the high cost of living in the region.

Common Challenges

Both staff and parents/guardians shared that families often leave the centers because they are moving out of the community due to job changes/losses or seeking a more affordable place to live. Both centers have historically relied on word-of-mouth as the primary recruitment tool which was effective in the past. But in more recent years and with families new to the area, word-of-mouth is no longer as effective and there is more reliance on online research. The challenge of finding affordable quality child care creates a significant financial burden for parents. Participants in all four groups acknowledged that the public school's free Transitional Kindergarten at age four is an attractive option.

Continuity of care was a significant topic with parents at both sites. Changing schools is a difficult transition for most young children and parents. Once working parents put an infant or toddler into childcare, they prefer not to change care options as it can be disruptive. Because MCC has limited toddler spaces and BHCDC starts care at an older age, many families may not consider the City-operated programs. Other FT childcare centers take children at younger ages and provide a longer continuity of care as the child ages, and this was cited as a potential reason for lower enrollment at City-operated centers. Continuity of care was also acknowledged as an appealing factor in favor of placing children in a TK program provided through the public school system.

Families expressed a need for more flexible schedules and age-appropriate program expansions. Given the many scheduling demands on working families, they expressed the need for more childcare options for younger children (infants and toddlers), as well as for more half-day, drop-in, and extended hours. Transportation constraints impact the families at BHCDC and MCC, especially for families who need after-school care for TK students but face logistical issues with multiple school or daycare drop-offs.

Participants indicated that low wages and high living costs in the area affect both centers' ability to attract and retain qualified staff. The need for greater community awareness about the high-quality programs offered at MCC and BHCDC was also a common theme among parents/guardians and staff.

Participant Suggestions for Increased Enrollment

Both staff and parent/guardian focus group participants saw a significant opportunity for enhanced community outreach and marketing as a strategy to boost enrollment. Suggestions included increasing visibility with tabling/flyers at City events and centers, social media, and updating websites to better reflect program strengths. BHCDL staff and parents recommended in-person events and partnerships with local schools, while MCC staff and parents suggested leveraging foot traffic in and near City facilities for greater outreach. It was noted that both centers would benefit from updating their websites to provide more straightforward information about program offerings, fees, and testimonials. Parents in both centers mentioned streamlining the application process and timely communications to make enrollment more accessible.

All four parent and staff focus groups discussed the challenges of finding affordable childcare in the community. The most universally agreed-upon solution was to lower fees for middle-income families who do not qualify for state-subsidized care but can not afford the childcare needed. Ideas included scholarships, sliding scale fees beyond the state income fee schedule, drop-in or half-day care, and affordable care for City employees.

Both parent/guardian groups recommended offering programs for younger children, with BHCDL considering toddler programs and MCC focusing on the demand for infant and toddler care. Parents suggested flexible scheduling, including half-day and drop-in options, to make care affordable for parents with flexible schedules.

All groups identified partnerships with schools and/or local transit or shuttle services as potential solutions to help address transportation limitations for families needing after-school care for TK students or multi-location drop-off options.

Focus Group Insights

One core strength of the City-operated preschools that was identified in the focus groups is the long-term and high-quality staff, which participants perceived to be not well-known in the community. Many families who participated in the focus group reported that they had a friend or family member who recommended the preschool to them. However, with the significant community shifts after the COVID-19 pandemic, word-of-mouth appears to be not as prevalent as it once was, and new families appear to rely more heavily on online searches and reviews to find childcare. Participants suggested that both preschools' online presence should include testimonials from families and students.

Conclusion

This analysis of Menlo Park's childcare landscape helps to inform the central question of how the City-operated early care and learning programs, and by extension other child care programs throughout Menlo Park can adapt to meet evolving community needs while maintaining financial sustainability. While affordability remains a significant barrier for families and centers alike, particularly given the region's high cost of living, the research confirms that the quality of the City-operated centers' experienced staff, strategic and convenient locations, and robust enrichment programs provide a strong foundation for adaptation and future growth.

The preschool landscape is at a pivotal moment, shaped by the introduction of Universal Transitional Kindergarten and evolving family needs during the pandemic. While disruptive, these changes have illuminated several potential opportunities to increase enrollment at City-operated childcare centers. The extensive input from preschool directors, staff, and families has provided invaluable insights into the community's evolving needs and potential solutions, creating a framework to support deliberation and decision-making.

By strategically expanding infant and/or toddler care programs, the centers could potentially attract students at earlier ages, likely increasing the duration of their time enrolled in City-operated centers and helping to maintain a more stable and sustainable enrollment pool through the preschool years. Implementing a more flexible fee structure, such as sliding scale options for middle-income families and variable scheduling choices, could help retain families who might otherwise be forced to seek alternatives. However, it is noted that this solution would require further analysis of the financial implications to the City.

Modernizing marketing efforts through updated websites, social media presence, and strategic community partnerships could significantly improve program visibility and enrollment. The community is experiencing transition; thus, focusing on website presence and community outreach is needed instead of solely relying on word-of-mouth, as has been the tradition at MCC and BHCD. While these improvements require initial investment, they position both centers to serve community needs better and create more sustainable enrollment patterns.

The Menlo Park community's needs continue to evolve, as does the region and state's approach to early childhood education. This research bridges the gap between community needs and program sustainability, providing a foundation and strategies for increasing enrollment and accessibility of early care and learning programs. With the insights and opportunities identified in this report, Menlo Park has new tools and

strategies to adapt its childcare infrastructure in ways that serve young children and families and help assess long-term program viability.



Recommendations

Overview

The following recommendations were informed by the needs analysis and are intended to provide a foundation for deliberation and decision-making to address community needs, increase enrollment, and improve the financial sustainability of the city-run early care programs in Menlo Park. The recommendations are further informed by and aligned with the California Master Plan for Early Learning and Care,²⁴ and the San Mateo County Universal PreK Mixed Delivery Planning Report,²⁵ which offer recommendations to increase access to high-quality early learning and care for children who otherwise receive it. The research team extensively consulted with Menlo Park families, childcare center staff, and local preschools to identify the most pressing community needs. This included the design and execution of a comprehensive survey of Menlo Park families, focus groups with city-run childcare center staff and families, and one-on-one interviews with center directors and childcare advocates. The insights gained from this local research have shaped this analysis and recommendations.

The recommendations are intended to help address four primary community challenges: affordability, flexible scheduling, infant and toddler care, and communicating quality care. Multiple recommendations are proposed to address these challenges. Each recommendation requires some adaptations to the existing programming and operations. Given this, the recommendations are accompanied by recommended prioritization, as some recommendations may require more effort to implement and/or may not significantly impact increasing enrollment as other recommendations.

Potential Strategies

Potential strategies were identified to help address the community's needs around affordability, flexible scheduling, new provision of infant and toddler care, and enhanced communication about the availability of quality care. In the below chart, the first column describes the possible strategies grouped by area of need. The second and third columns indicate which center is recommended and/or feasible to implement the strategies. While all the recommended strategies are feasible at MCC, state grant program requirements currently in place at BHCDRC render some strategies infeasible at that location. Strategies marked with an "X" are considered feasible for the site under

²⁴ [Master Plan for Early Learning and Care](#)

²⁵ [Universal PreK Mixed Delivery Planning Report](#)

current conditions. The fourth column indicates the estimated level of impact, and the fifth column indicates the estimated level of effort anticipated to implement each strategy. The level of impact is based on the potential impact the strategy would have on 1) increasing enrollment and 2) supporting the program's financial sustainability. The level of effort is a composite factor that considers the overall change management effort needed (staffing changes, facilities upgrades, new licensing, etc.), cost impact to the City, and the estimated timeline for implementation. This process helped to prioritize the final recommendations, which are described in the next section.

Menlo Park City-Operated Preschool Potential Strategies Snapshot

	BHCDC	MCC	Impact	Effort
<i>Need: Affordability</i>				
Create a sliding scale that provides tuition assistance to middle-income families who do not qualify for other income-based tuition assistance	X	X	High	High
Institute discounts for city employees and local educators.		X	Low	Medium
Create a “cooperative” childcare option for some families.		X	Medium	High
<i>Need: Flexible Scheduling</i>				
Allow families to choose days/schedules.		X	High	Medium
Earlier drop-off and later pick-up.	X	X	Medium	High
<i>Need: Toddler Care</i>				
Open space for 2-year-olds.	X	X	High	High
Open space for 18-month-olds.		X	High	High
<i>Need: Infant Care</i>				
Add infant care.	X	X	High	High
<i>Need: Communicating Quality Care</i>				
Update the website.	X	X	Medium	Low
Host community events: open houses, preschool fairs, etc.	X	X	Medium	Medium

Update marketing materials: flyers, brochures, signage	X	X	Medium	Low
Utilize existing city channels to “tell the story.”	X	X	Medium	Low

Highlighted Recommendations for Deliberation and Decision-making

The findings inform the following recommendations and include proposed strategies to address the community's expressed needs for *affordability, flexible scheduling, infant and toddler care, and communication of quality care*. Highlighted recommendations include strategies with the most potential for increasing enrollment and enhancing financial sustainability within the near-term (0-6 months) to mid-term (6-18 months) and/or with lower effort or cost needed for change management. These strategies are recommended for further deliberation, decision-making, and potential implementation in the near term. Additional recommendations may require more effort and may have a lesser impact. All the recommendations are summarized below, with notes to indicate some of the primary considerations and potential timeframes for implementation.

Highlighted Recommendation	Major Considerations	Estimated Time Frame
Sliding scale fees for middle-income families	Cost to the City, time to develop a fair and sustainable policy	Mid-Term
Subsidies for city workers and educators	Cost to the City, time to establish a fair and sustainable policy	Mid-Term
Flexible Scheduling at MCC	The financial impact of scheduling options	Short-Term
Begin serving 2-year-olds at BHCDC	New facility license	Mid-Term
Increase slots for 18-month-olds at MCC	New facility license	Mid-Term
Add Infant Care	New facilities license, fee structure, impact of space available for toddler and preschool programming	Long-Term
Communicate Quality Care	Management of the communication and marketing plan	Short-Term

Additional Recommendations:

- Cooperative childcare option
- Earlier drop off and later pick up times

Community Need: Affordability	Highlighted Recommendations for further deliberation: • Sliding Scale Fees • Subsidies for City Workers and Educators Additional Recommendations: • Cooperative Childcare Option
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Highlighted Recommendation: Sliding Scale Fees

The data indicates that implementing a comprehensive sliding scale fee structure that extends beyond the current California State Preschool Program (CSPP) scale would help to address community needs for more affordable childcare options. This would mean expanding the sliding scale fee structure at BHCD to include families who do not qualify for state-subsidized care but cannot afford the full price of childcare and introducing a parallel sliding scale fee at MCC with the same purpose.

The financial implications of this change require careful consideration. First and foremost, this strategy would likely result in significantly lower cost recovery due to lower tuition revenues without a corresponding reduction in operating costs. Alternative sources of revenue could be explored, such as by increasing tuition fees paid by higher-income families, a model similar to the program created in Menlo Park City School District. A key question to consider in that scenario would be to what extent the local market would reasonably bear increased fees to higher-income families at city-operated centers and remain competitive for that revenue source. In addition, decisions regarding the specific structure of the sliding scale and eligibility criteria could prove challenging and entail significant time and effort to resolve.

Highlighted Recommendation: Subsidies for City Workers and Educators

As an additional way to address the challenges around affordability, the data suggests that providing discounts for city workers and educators would meet a community's need and encourage some increased enrollment. Under the current fee structure, many City and school employees cannot afford to enroll their children in city-run early care programs. The need for these subsidies could be addressed through a sliding scale fee; however, it could also be explored as a stand-alone option. Like the sliding scale fees, providing subsidies would also result in less tuition revenues without a corresponding reduction in operating costs. This option could be explored for both centers, although

there may be constraints to providing this support to BHCDC families, given the requirements of the CSPP program.

Additional Recommendation: Cooperative Childcare Option

Families surveyed expressed interest in a cooperative care model. However, implementing it would likely require a high level of effort and planning for the city, and any resulting enrollment increase would likely be minimal. Childcare cooperatives can be structured in various ways. However, they require significant planning and ongoing management to ensure that all legal and licensing requirements are met and that families are trained to provide high-quality care.

This model presents additional challenges for BHCDC. The co-op option would be available only to families who do not participate in the state-subsidized program, which has historically been less than a quarter of the families. Offering the program only to these families, likely in a higher income bracket by default, may create unintended inequities. For these reasons, exploring a cooperative childcare model at BHCDC is not recommended. However, if enrollment targets are unmet after implementing other program adaptations, this option may be considered at MCC in the future if desired.

Community Needs: Affordability and Flexible Scheduling	Highlighted Recommendations for further deliberation: • Flexible Scheduling at MCC Additional Recommendation: • Earlier Drop-off and Later Pick-up
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Highlighted Recommendation: Flexible Scheduling at MCC

The data suggests that a flexible scheduling system, allowing families to choose their days and schedules, would entice more families to enroll. This recommendation is more appropriate for MCC; it is infeasible for BHCDC due to current CSPP contract constraints. The new scheduling system could include varied packages to meet diverse family needs, such as Monday/Wednesday/Friday versus Tuesday/Thursday or morning and afternoon options. Key decisions include establishing specific scheduling parameters and determining fee adjustments for various schedules. Additionally, the financial impact of different scheduling options, which could increase operating costs, should be carefully evaluated to assess long-term sustainability.

This recommendation has the potential to be implemented at MCC this calendar year. Phase one could begin in Spring 2025, with the determination of scheduling parameters

and financial modeling in April. This could position the new schedule to be ready for rollout by August 2025, following additional analysis of self-service scheduling software, community outreach, and staff engagement.

Additional Recommendation: Earlier Drop-off and Later Pick-up

Offering families the option of an earlier drop-off or later pick-up time is proposed as a low-impact, high-effort solution. Although offering extended hours may accommodate the needs of some families, it is challenging to implement from a staffing perspective, would likely increase operating costs, and is unlikely to impact overall enrollment substantially. Because of this, offering earlier drop-off and later pick-up for families is not expected to generate significant new revenue for the center.

Community Need: Infant Care and Toddler Care	Highlighted Recommendations for further deliberation: • Begin Serving 2-year-olds at BHCDC • Increase Slots for 18-month-olds at MCC Additional Recommendations: • Provide Infant Care
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Highlighted Recommendation: Begin serving 2-year-olds at BHCDC

For BHCDC, lowering the minimum age for enrollment to 24 months and initiating services for 2-year-olds has good potential to increase enrollment. The survey and focus groups revealed that this is a significant unmet need in the community and that many families would welcome enrolling their children at the center when they are younger. This expansion could maintain the overall capacity of 96 children while incorporating up to 30 two-year-olds. (This is currently allowed per licensing as long as the two-year-olds do not exceed 30% of total enrollment in a classroom.) It can be accomplished through either mixed-age classrooms or dedicated toddler rooms. However, mixed-age classrooms have the benefit of a higher allowed student/teacher ratio of 1:8. If a stand-alone classroom of just 2-year-olds is formed, it requires a ratio of 1:4. This option has been ruled out as it would both lower the overall enrollment capacity and require additional staff.

Expanding to service 2-year-olds at BHCDC requires a longer timeline to allow for the application for a new facility license to serve younger children. To provide for this, as well as the requisite training of staff and facility modifications, we recommend planning to enroll the first cohort of 2-year-olds in Fall 2026.

Highlighted Recommendation: Increase slots for 18-month-olds at MCC

We recommend doubling MCC's toddler capacity from 12 to 24 slots by utilizing currently unused space. The current toddler program is generally fully enrolled, with vacancies only occurring when students move on to preschool. Currently, MCC is licensed to serve 12 toddlers ages 18-30 months and 60 preschoolers ages 2-5 years. Increasing the number of spaces for 18-month-olds at MCC will require a new facility license to serve more children in this age range. Expanding the number of toddlers served will require a new license. Once this is done, the overall program capacity will increase by 12 children.

Once the state approves the new license, it will be reasonably easy, as the site already serves children in this age range. However, this expansion will require hiring two more teachers and updating the facilities. To accommodate this, we recommend planning to enroll the first cohort of 18-month-olds in Fall 2026.

Highlighted Recommendation: Add Infant Care

While the data shows a clear and strong community need for infant care, this strategy would require significant outlays of effort and financial resources and likely would not increase overall enrollment. Dedicating a space for infants would reduce the capacity to expand toddler care, which is currently in high demand. In addition, the lower staffing ratio needed for infants (3 adults for every child) makes it challenging to provide this service at an affordable cost. Adding infant care would require potentially substantial physical modifications to classrooms and an additional license from the state, which would increase the price and timeframe for implementing this change. If this strategy is implemented at BH CDC, then it is recommended that BH CDC also acquire a license to add services for 18-24-month-olds to bridge the gap between infant and preschool care.

Focusing on other priorities in the near term would not preclude the City from pursuing infant care in the future if other options fail to increase enrollment or if demand for infant care significantly increases. For this reason, we recommend that the City prioritize infant care planning while implementing different strategies to increase enrollment in the toddler and preschool programs.

Community Need: Communicating Quality Care	Highlighted Recommendations for further deliberation: • Website Update • Community Outreach • Updated Marketing Materials • Utilization of the City's Communication Channels
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Developing a communication plan is a key recommendation from the San Mateo County Universal PreK Mixed Delivery Planning Process Report.²⁶ Survey and focus group results reinforced this need, indicating uneven awareness about the quality of the early care and learning programming provided by the City of Menlo Park. To address this gap, we recommend implementing a comprehensive communication and marketing plan to ensure the preschools have a heightened presence in the community and provide multiple entry points for families to learn about the programming. This plan includes four priority recommendations: updating the website, increasing community outreach, updating marketing materials, and utilizing the city's communication channels to promote the programs. A full description of the communication and marketing plan can be found in the appendix.

**"Recommendation 1C:
Communication**

Develop and implement a communications plan that informs families, UPK providers and Community about UPKMD options in a centralized, clear manner."

San Mateo County UPK Mixed
Delivery Planning Process
Report, pg. 21

Highlighted Recommendation: Website Update

Website updates should focus on advertising the quality of the programs while answering key parent questions about the centers' philosophy of early childhood development, scheduling, special enrichment activities and support services, pricing, and fees. A compelling website will also include descriptions of facilities and staff, photos of children, and family testimonials.

As additional support for Menlo Park families, we recommend the city add a page to its website with a list of all Menlo Park preschools and early learning centers. This will not only support the families who are looking for care but also benefit other preschools in the community. Several local examples of this resource include a recently launched website curated by the Ravenswood School District for local families and a list and map of licensed childcare centers and homes in Palo Alto maintained by the Office of Human Services in the City of Palo Alto.

Highlighted Recommendation: Community Outreach

Multiple initiatives can increase the presence of city-run early care and learning centers in the city and provide opportunities for families to build connection and community. Hosting an annual or bi-annual open house at each site is the most high leverage. These open house events would feature preschool-age activities, invite current families, and leverage city communication channels for advertising. Placing flyers in city buildings

²⁶ [Universal PreK \(UPK\) Mixed Delivery System Planning Report](#)

and inviting waitlist families to the open house would help build community connections, generate interest, and create interactive family experiences.

The city may also consider hosting an annual citywide preschool fair to provide a one-stop opportunity for families to meet school directors and explore various programs. This event could be strategically hosted at different sites to target diverse community segments. Additional targeted community outreach methods include tabling at city and community center events, connecting with neighboring elementary schools, and offering site visits to build trust and program awareness.

Highlighted Recommendation: Updated Marketing Materials

As a relatively low-effort and high-impact strategy, we recommend updating marketing materials to reflect current program changes and include strategic new signage. This includes developing photo-rich, laminated brochures and flyers with QR codes linking to the website, which can be distributed across city buildings frequented by families. Materials should be bilingual (Spanish and English) to ensure broad accessibility.

Comprehensive brochures highlighting each center's unique programs should be created and made available at city buildings, during tabling events, and for potential family tours. As soon as possible, colorful banners advertising preschool programs, ages, and enrollment status should be displayed outside facilities, with plans to refresh permanent signage soon.

Highlighted Recommendation: Utilization of the City's Communication Channels

We recommend leveraging existing city communication channels as another low-effort and high-impact strategy for increasing awareness about the City's early care programs. This includes regular social media posts showcasing preschool highlights such as library visits, special events, children's artwork, and teacher stories. Email and printed newsletters can share key registration information, early learning parenting tips, and articles celebrating long-serving teachers.

A targeted approach includes sending postcards to families in the Belle Haven neighborhood, specifically highlighting subsidized pricing options for those who might benefit but may be unaware of the opportunity.

Implementation Phasing Example

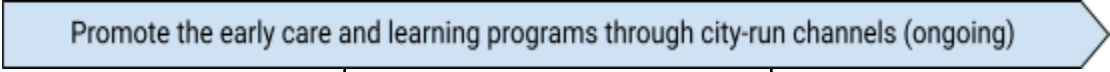
Many of the recommended strategies in this report would entail multiple implementation phases. The phases and overall timeframe would vary depending on the combination of the City's strategies. This example illustrates the potential phasing to implement several of the highlighted recommendations listed above.

In this example, Phase 1 would begin in Spring 2025, with the implementation of key elements of the communication and marketing plan and planning for program adaptations such as expanding access to children as young as 18 months, more flexible scheduling, and implementing sliding-scale tuition assistance for middle-income families. Phase 2 would take place in the Fall 2025 and Winter 2026, including implementing subsidies and sliding-scale fees across both sites. Throughout this time, planning is underway to begin serving 2-year-olds at BHCDC and increase spaces for 18-month-olds at MCC, which is planned for Phase 3 in the Fall of 2026. In this example, ongoing planning is also taking place for beginning infant care at each site, so this program could be introduced should enrollment targets not be met after the above strategies are implemented.

Clear targets for the enrollment increases expected after each implementation phase will need to be set. Progress towards the goals should be reviewed after the first phase of implementation. If the targets are unmet, the strategies should be revisited and adjusted.



Phased Planning and Implementation

Phase 1 Spring/Summer 2025	Phase 2 Fall 2025/Winter 2026	Phase 3 Spring/Summer 2026
Communication and Marketing: - Update communication and marketing materials - Host the first open house at each center	Communication and Marketing: Attend community and school events to market programs	Communication and Marketing: - Host an open house at each center - Host first city-wide preschool fair
		
Plan for Program Adaptations: - Apply for a license to serve 2-year-olds at BHCDC - Flexible scheduling - Sliding Scale Fees - Subsidies - Increase spaces for 18-month-olds at MCC - Begin planning for infant care	Implement Program Adaptations - Implement sliding-scale tuition assistance for middle-income families Plan for Program Adaptations - Continue planning to serve 2 year olds at BHCDC - Continue to plan to increase spaces for 18-month-olds at MCC - Continue planning for infant care	Implement Program Adaptations - Begin serving 2-year-olds at BHCDC* - Increase spaces for 18-month-olds at MCC* <i>*timing contingent upon licensing approval</i> Plan for Program Adaptations - Final planning for infant care** <i>**Implementation contingent upon the success of other program adaptations</i>

Conclusion

The recommendations outlined in this report provide a foundation to help address the critical challenges facing Menlo Park's early care and learning programs. The data-driven strategies in this report present opportunities to enhance access and enrollment by prioritizing affordability, flexible scheduling, toddler care, and improved communication around program quality while fostering financial sustainability. A phased implementation plan offers a flexible, practical approach for making near- and mid-term service adaptations while maintaining focus on long-term goals. These strategies are further informed by and aligned with the California Master Plan for Early Learning and Care, reflecting the City's commitment to best practices in equitable, high-quality childcare for families. With thoughtful execution and ongoing community engagement, these recommendations hold the potential to benefit both the programs' financial sustainability and the families they serve.

While these recommended strategies can potentially increase enrollment, some would likely entail additional one-time and ongoing costs to the City. It is recommended that the City carefully and continually evaluate the cost-benefit relationship of any strategy implemented and adjust as necessary to meet City goals. For example, the City could decide that the benefits to the community are meaningful enough that taking on additional costs to retool classrooms and retrain staff for infant care is warranted. In another example, the City could decide that the community benefits of providing tuition assistance to middle-income families justifies the additional cost to the City. However, the City could also decide that the financial impacts of strategies that increase costs are unsustainable for the City. For example, if the economic effects of these strategies are deemed unsustainable, the City could consider consolidating its preschool program to one site and leasing the other site to a private care provider, which could reduce costs and generate revenue while preserving the availability of child care services to the community, just through a different provider. In any event, it is recommended that the City carefully evaluate the financial implications of any of the strategies suggested in this report before, during, and after implementation, considering community needs and the City's long-term goals and needs.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Preschool Landscape: Local Context

A1: City Run Preschools: Historical Enrollment Detail

A2: Menlo Park Early Learning Landscape Map Key

Appendix B: Data Analysis

B1: Childcare Needs Assessment Survey Additional Documents

- Childcare Needs Assessment Survey Questions and Responses (Website)
- Cross Tab Analysis
- Comments Categorized by Top Five Challenges
- Comments Categorized by Neighborhood

B2: Preschool Director Report

- Preschool Director Interview Report

B3: Focus Group Report

- BHCDC and MCC Staff and Family
- Participant Slides/Handouts

B4: Additional Reports

- Nearby City-Based Childcare Programs
- Local Preschools that Have Recently Closed

Appendix C: Recommendations

C1: Communication and Marketing Suggestions

Appendix A: Preschool Landscape: Local Context

A1: City Run Preschool Historical Enrollment Detail

Belle Haven CDC Enrollment Data Sept 2018 - Sept 2024

Column Definitions:

- Students: actual number of students enrolled that month
- Capacity: number allowed for full capacity enrollment
- Subsidized Students: number of students with subsidized tuition
- % Capacity: percentage of full capacity based on the actual student enrollment
- Open Spots: number of unfilled spaces based on capacity and actual student enrollment

Quarter	Students	Capacity	Subsidized Students	% Capacity	Open Spots
Sep 2018	77	96	76	80%	19
Dec 2018	84	96	83	88%	12
Mar 2019	95	96	92	99%	1
Jun 2019	95	96	92	99%	1
Sept 2019	85	96	81	89%	11
Dec 2019	95	96	91	99%	1
Mar 2020	96	96	92	100%	0
Jun 2020	93	96	89	97%	3
Sep 2020	53	52	49	102%	-1
Dec 2020	55	52	51	106%	-3
Mar 2021	55	52	50	106%	-3
Jun 2021	54	52	49	104%	-2
Sept 2021	39	52	35	75%	13
Dec 2021	45	52	41	87%	7
Mar 2022	58	64	55	91%	6
June 2022	62	64	59	97%	2
Sept 2022	39	64	36	61%	25
Dec 2022	46	64	43	72%	18

Mar 2023	63	64	59	98%	1
Jun 2023	65	96	41	47%	51
Sept 2023	48	96	45	50%	48
Dec 2023	60	96	57	63%	36
Mar 2024	62	96	59	65%	34
June 2024	63	96	60	66%	33
Sept 2024	43	96	37	45%	53
Dec 2024	48	96	42	50%	48

Green: Pre-pandemic

Gray: Center closed, distance learning

Purple: Hybrid in-person and distance learning

Yellow: Post-pandemic, limited capacity

Orange: Post-pandemic, fully restored capacity

Menlo Childcare Center Enrollment Data Sept 2018 - Sept 2024

Column Definitions:

- Students: actual number of students enrolled that month
- Open Spots: number of unfilled spaces based on capacity and actual student enrollment
- Capacity: number of students allowed for full capacity enrollment
- % Capacity: percentage of full capacity based on actual student enrollment
- Preschool Age: subset number of enrolled students aged 2.5-5 yrs
- Toddler Age: subset number of enrolled students aged 18 mos - 2.5 yrs

Quarter	Students	Capacity	Open Spots	% Capacity	Preschool Age (2.5-5 yrs)	Toddler Age (18 mos- 2.5 yrs)
Sep 2018	58	72	14	81%	46	12
Dec 2018	61	72	11	85%	49	12
Mar 2019	66	72	6	92%	54	12
Jun 2019	63	72	9	88%	53	10
Sep 2019	46	72	26	64%	42	4
Dec 2019	48	72	24	67%	38	10
Mar 2020	51	72	21	71%	42	9

Jun 2020	0	39	39	0%	0	0
Sep 2020	20	39	19	51%	17	3
Dec 2020	26	39	13	67%	26	0
Mar 2021	36	39	3	92%	28	8
Jun 2021	39	39	0	100%	28	11
Sept 2021	31	39	8	79%	20	11
Dec 2021	33	39	6	85%	26	7
Mar 2022	36	60	24	60%	26	10
June 2022	39	60	21	65%	29	10
Sept 2022	31	60	29	52%	21	10
Dec 2022	29	60	31	48%	22	7
Mar 2023	36	60	24	60%	26	10
Jun 2023	38	72	34	53%	34	4
Sept 2023	23	72	49	32%	14	9
Dec 2023	28	72	44	39%	21	7
Mar 2024	33	72	39	46%	23	10
June 2024	41	72	31	57%	30	11
Sept 2024	28	72	44	39%	20	8
Dec 2024	32	72	40	44%	24	8

Green: Pre-pandemic

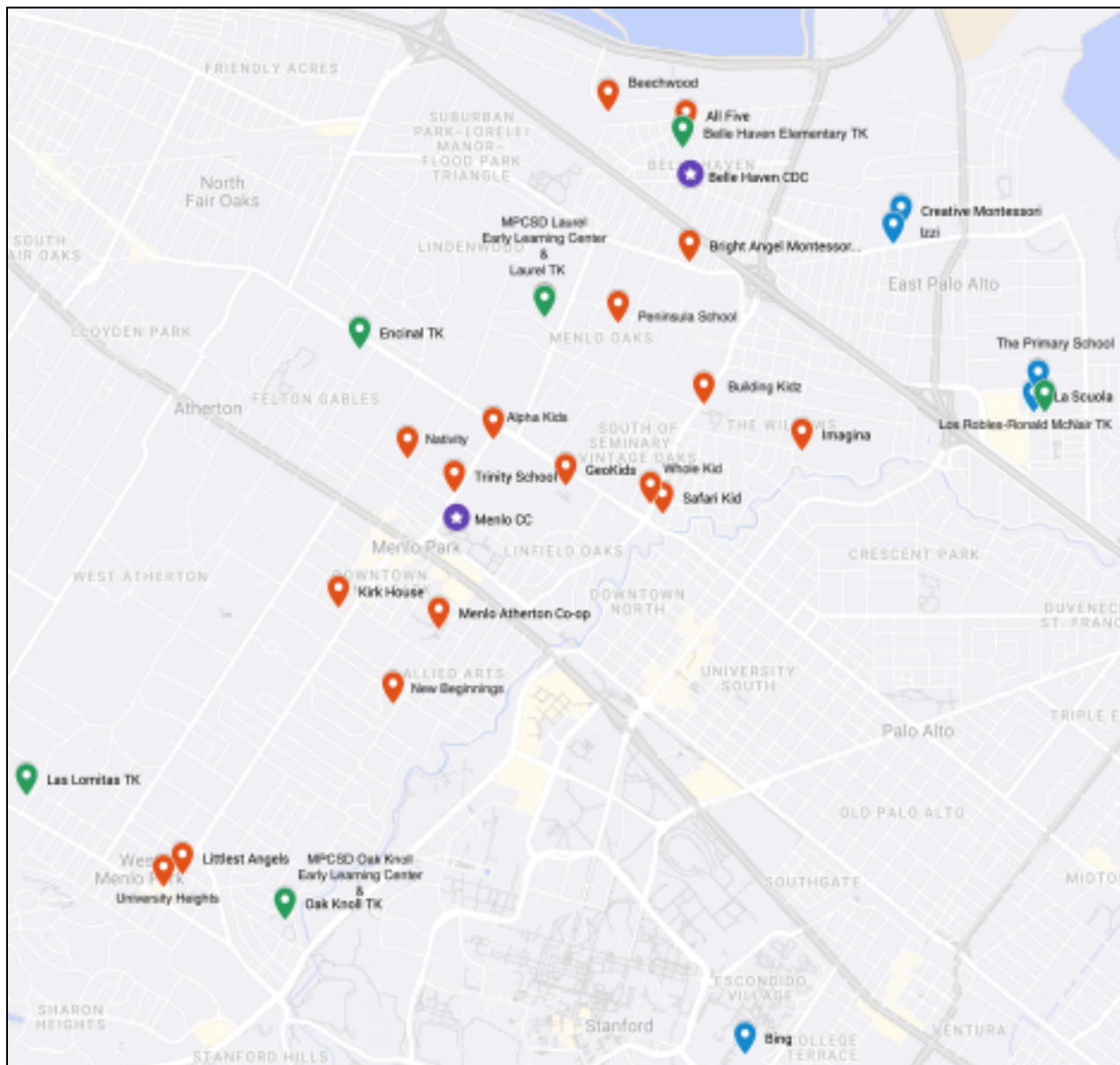
Gray: Center closed, distance learning

Yellow: Post-pandemic, limited capacity

Orange: Post-pandemic, fully restored capacity

Appendix A: Preschool Landscape: Local Context

A2: Menlo Park Early Learning Landscape Map





City of Menlo Park Run Preschool Centers

School & Address	Hours & Schedule	Ages Served
Belle Haven Child Development Center 410 Ivy Dr. Menlo Park	7:30-5:15	2.9 - 5 years
Menlo Children's Center 801 Laurel St. Menlo Park	8:00-6:00	18 months - 5 years



Menlo Park Preschool Centers

School & Address	Hours & Schedule	Ages Served
All Five , 1391 Chilco St Menlo Park	7:30-5:30	6 weeks - 5 yrs
Alpha Kids Academy , 201 Ravenswood Ave Menlo Park	School day: 7:30-3:30 Extended day: 7:30-6	6 months - 6 yrs
Bright Angel Montessori , 695 Bay Rd. Menlo Park	School program 8-3 After care 3-5:30	Infant, toddler, preschool
Building Kidz , 490 Willow Road Menlo Park	7:30-5:30	2-6 yrs
GeoKids , 345 Middlefield Rd Menlo Park	8:00-6:00	6 months - 5 yrs
Imagina , 1916 Menalto Ave Menlo Park		
Kirk House Preschool , 1148 Johnson St. Menlo Park	9:00-12:00 Lunch bunch: 12- 1 or 2	2.5 - 5 yrs
Littlest Angels , 1095 Cloud Ave Menlo Park	Early care 8:00-8:30 School program: 8:30-12 Lunch Bunch 12:00-1:00 Extended care: 1:00--5:30	2-5 yrs
Menlo Atherton Co-op , 802 Middle Ave Menlo Park	9:00-3:00 2-4 days/week for 2.5 hrs	2 yrs 3 months - 5 yrs 3 months
MPCSD Oak Knoll Early Learning Center , 1895 Oak Knoll Ln. Menlo Park	Full day: 7:45-5:30 School Day 7:45-3:15 Part Day 7:45-12	2 - 5 yrs
Nativity School , 1250 Laurel Street Menlo Park		3-6 yrs
New Beginnings , 1100 Middle Avenue Menlo Park	9:00-1:00 Extended day 8-3:30 2, 3 or 5 day,	2-5 yrs

Peninsula School , 920 Peninsula Way Menlo Park		preschool
Safari Kid , 107 Clover Ln, Menlo Park		2 - 5/6 yrs
Trinity School , 330 Ravenswood Avenue Menlo Park		2-5 yrs
University Heights Montessori , 2066 Avy Avenue Menlo Park	7:45-5:30	2-6 yrs
Whole Kid School , 135 Willow Rd. Menlo Park	8:00-6:00	3 months - 5 years



Neighboring Preschool Centers

School & Address	Ages Served
Bing 850 Escondido Road, Stanford	2-5 yrs
Creative Montessori Learning Center 1421 Bay Rd., East Palo Alto	2-5 yrs
Izzi 1395 Bay Rd, East Palo Alto	6 weeks - 5 yrs
La Scuola 2086 Clarke Ave, East Palo Alto	2-5 yrs
MPCSD Laurel Early Learning Center 95 Edge Rd., Atherton	2 yrs 9 months - 5 yrs
The Primary School 2086 Clarke Ave, East Palo Alto	2 yrs 9 months - 5 yrs



Elementary School with TK

School Address City	Schedule
Belle Haven Elementary TK 415 Ivy Drive Menlo Park	Full Day
Encinal TK 195 Encinal Ave. Atherton	Half Day
Las Lomas TK 299 Alameda de las Pulgas Atherton	Half Day
Laurel TK 95 Edge Rd. Atherton	Half Day
Los Robles-Ronald McNair TK 951 O'Connor St East Palo Alto	Full Day
Oak Knoll TK 1895 Oak Knoll Ln. Menlo Park	Half Day

Appendix B: Data Analysis

B1: Childcare Needs Assessment Survey Supporting Documents

[Childcare Needs Assessment Survey Questions and Responses](#) (Website)

Menlo Park Childcare Needs Assessment Survey: Cross-tab Analysis

Summary

The data was disaggregated in two ways to better understand the needs of subgroups and target populations. The data was disaggregated for the neighborhoods closest to BHCDC and MCC, as well as the Belle Haven neighborhood for both questions and comments. The data was also disaggregated for families with children with special needs.

Neighborhood Analysis

The following questions were looked at:

- How easy was it to find affordable care?
- How easy was it to find your desired schedule?
- How easy was it to find transportation between childcare and school? (additional cross tab analysis with TK)
- How easy was it to find support with potty training?
- What is your preferred childcare for children aged 0-24 months?
- What is your preferred child care for children aged 2-4 years?

In the survey questions, there was not a significant difference in the responses across neighborhoods. The one area where with a significant difference is the ability to access transportation between school and childcare for families with children in TK. We found 60% of MCC neighborhood families with a child in TK found transportation between school and childcare "somewhat" to "very hard" to find, whereas only 11% of BHCDC families had this challenge.

More differences were apparent when the comments were disaggregated by neighborhood and key themes were identified. For all neighborhoods, affordability was a common theme. Communication and marketing rose up as a key theme in the BHCDC and Belle Haven neighborhoods, and flexible scheduling in both MCC and BHCDC neighborhoods. Finding infant and toddler care was a key theme for families in the MCC neighborhoods. Multiple families in the Belle Haven neighborhood identified a need for Spanish language programming and support.

Children with Special Needs

The data was also disaggregated for families with a child with a disability, special needs, or an IEP to analyze their response to the question, “How easy was it to find inclusive learning environments for children with disabilities?” This revealed that families of students with special needs experience great difficulty in finding inclusive learning environments for their children.

Neighborhood Analysis

Menlo Children’s Center (MCC)	Belle Haven Child Development Center (BHCDC)	Belle Haven
Neighborhoods: Allied Arts, Central MP, Downtown MP, Felton Gables, Linfield Oaks	Neighborhoods: Belle Haven, Suburban Park / Lorelei Manor / Flood Triangle, The Willows	Neighborhood: Belle Haven Only
161 responses 91% parent or guardian 17 % have child in TK Fall 2024	159 responses 87% parent or guardian 29% have child in TK Fall 2024	40 responses 90% parent or guardian 8% have child in TK Fall 2024

Affordable Care

How easy was it to find Affordable Care?

There was not a significant difference in the response to this question by neighborhood. Across the board, 85-89% of families reported that affordable care was “somewhat” to “very hard” to find.

	MCC Neighborhoods	BHCDC Neighborhoods	Belle Haven Neighborhood	All Respondents
Very hard to find	69%	62%	52.5%	66%
Somewhat hard to find	20%	23%	32.5%	21%
Somewhat easy to find	10%	9%	12.5%	9%
Very easy to find	0%	3%	2.5%	12%
Don’t know	1%	3%	0	3%

Flexible Schedule

How easy was it to find your Desired Schedule

There was not a significant difference in the response to this question by neighborhood. Although most families in these neighborhoods report that it is “somewhat” to “very easy” to find their desired schedules, over 40% of families across all neighborhoods find it “somewhat” to “very hard to do so.

	MCC Neighborhoods	BHCDC Neighborhoods	Belle Haven Neighborhood	All Respondents
Very hard to find	15%	17%	21%	18%
Somewhat hard to find	28%	23%	31%	29%
Somewhat easy to find	42%	46%	31%	41%
Very easy to find	16%	15%	18%	12%

Transportation

How easy was it to find transportation between childcare and school?

Analyzing this question by neighborhood does not show a significant difference across MCC and BHCDC neighborhood families, however in general families living in Belle Haven have less of a challenge in this area.

	MCC Neighborhoods	BHCDC Neighborhoods	Belle Haven Neighborhood	All Respondents
Very hard to find	24%	24%	18%	26%
Somewhat hard to find	12%	11%	20%	14%
Somewhat easy to find	28%	30%	10%	24%
Very easy to find	7%	7%	13%	6%
Don't know	29%	29%	40%	30%

How easy was it to find transportation between childcare and school *with a child in TK?*

However, the experience of families by neighborhood varies greatly when this data is disaggregated for families with a child in TK this school year. BHCDC neighborhood families with a child in TK find transportation between childcare and school was much easier to find than survey respondents as a whole. Only 11% reported it was “somewhat” to “very hard” to find, whereas 85% found it “somewhat” to “very easy” to find. This is a big contrast with MCC

neighborhood families, with 60% reporting that transportation was “somewhat” to “very hard” to find, and 22% reporting it was “somewhat” to “very easy” to find.”

(This question was not analyzed for the Belle Haven Neighborhood given the small sample size - only three respondents from this neighborhood indicated they had a child in TK.)

	MCC Neighborhoods	BHCDC Neighborhoods	All Respondents
Very hard to find	41%	8%	21%
Somewhat hard to find	19%	3%	15%
Somewhat easy to find	15%	82%	44%
Very easy to find	7%	3%	7%
Don't know	19%	5%	14%

Potty Training

How easy was it to find support with potty training?

Approximately half of families in MCC and BHCDC report that support with potty training was “somewhat easy” to “very easy” to find, a little less than a quarter found it “somewhat hard” to “very hard” to find, and a little over a quarter said they did not know. Families from Belle Haven reported more challenges with finding support with potty training, with 45% saying it was “somewhat easy” to “very easy” to find, and 36% saying it was “somewhat hard” to “very hard” to find.

	MCC Neighborhoods	BHCDC Neighborhoods	Belle Haven Neighborhood	All Respondents
Very hard to find	10%	7%	18%	8%
Somewhat hard to find	12%	16%	18%	16%
Somewhat easy to find	39%	40%	35%	38%
Very easy to find	11%	12%	10%	12%
Don't know	28%	26%	20%	26%

Preferred Childcare Setting for Children by Age

Children 0 - 24 months

Across all survey respondents, most families with children under the age of two would prefer to care for by themselves at home if cost were not an issue. This remained true when the data was disaggregated by neighborhood. With MCC Neighborhood families, having a paid provider in the home was the second most popular choice, and a childcare or preschool center in the community was the third most popular choice. This was reversed with BHCDC neighborhood families, who selected a childcare or preschool center in the community as the second most popular choice, and paid provider in the home as the third. Families in Belle Haven also selected a childcare or preschool center in the community as a second choice, however, no families in the Belle Haven neighborhood preferred having a paid provider in the home.

Most Preferred Childcare Settings for Children 0-24 Months

(number of respondents listed who preferred each setting)

	MCC Neighborhood Families n=161	BHCDC Neighborhood Families n=159	Belle Haven Neighborhood Families n=40
Self	39 (24%)	41 (26%)	11 (28%)
Paid provider in home	35 (22%)	15 (9%)	0
Childcare or preschool center (in community)	23 (14%)	23 (14%)	9 (23%)
Childcare or preschool center at school	N/A	N/A	N/A
Licensed family childcare home	4 (2%)	2 (1%)	1 (3%)
Parent Participation/Co-op	0	3 (2%)	1 (3%)
Family, friend, or neighbor you do not pay	3 (2%)	5 (3%)	3 (8%)

Children 2-4 years old

This preferred setting for childcare changes when children get a little older. The overwhelming majority of families with children aged 2-4 years across all neighborhoods analyzed prefer a child care or preschool center for this age group if cost were not an issue. In the MCC Neighborhoods, this is split evenly between school and community childcare centers. In the BHCDC and Belle Haven neighborhoods, there was a slightly stronger preference for childcare located at a school.

Most Preferred Childcare settings for 2-4 year olds

(number of respondents listed who preferred each setting)

	MCC Neighborhood Families n=161	BHCDC Neighborhood Families n=159	Belle Haven Neighborhood Families n=40
Self	11 (7%)	8 (5%)	4 (10%)
Paid provider in home	14 (9%)	6 (4%)	1 (3%)
Childcare or preschool center (in community)	34 (21%)	35 (22%)	9 (23%)
Childcare or preschool center at school	33 (20%)	46 (29%)	11 (28%)
Parent Participation/co-op	11 (7%)	8 (5%)	1 (3%)
Licensed family childcare home	15 (9%)	13 (8%)	0

Comments

The optional comments submitted from participants at the end of the survey added more detail and around the early learning childcare needs of the Menlo Park community.

Top themes from MCC Neighborhood Comments

1. Affordability
2. Expanded and Flexible Schedules
3. Infant and Toddler Care

Top themes from BHCDC Neighborhood Comments

1. Affordability
2. Expanded and Flexible Scheduling
3. Communication and Marketing

Top theme from Belle Haven Neighborhood Comments

1. Affordability
2. Communication and Marketing
3. Spanish Language Support

A full list of comments organized by theme and neighborhood can be found at the end of this analysis.

Children with Disabilities

37 people who responded to the survey reported that they had children with disabilities or special needs. Of those, 25 have an IEP (Individualized Education Plan) or IFSP (Individualized Family Service Plan) for special educational services. Families of students with special needs experience great difficulty in finding childcare. 63% of parents of students with special needs find it “somewhat” to “very hard” to find an inclusive learning environment with support for children with disabilities.

How hard was it to find an inclusive learning environment with support for children with disabilities?

	Parents of students with special needs	All respondents
Very hard to find	43%	8%
Somewhat hard to find	20%	12%
Somewhat easy to find	9%	7%
Very easy to find	0%	3%
Don't know	29%	69%

Appendix B1: Childcare Needs Assessment Survey

Comments Categorized by Top Five Challenges

Prompt: "Please tell us your ideas, needs, and suggestions for childcare programs."

Affordable Care

- *Free childcare is desperately needed here in Menlo Park.*
- *We need affordable, good-quality daycare for our toddler.*
- *Affordability, availability, and flexible schedules are the most pressing issues surrounding childcare for our family (and presumably many others). It would be helpful to consider what additional subsidies or discounts we can offer for those in need.*
- *It must be as affordable as possible,*
- *More preschool scholarships*
- *more affordable, better childcare subsidies. Both my husband and I are medical trainees and early <\$100K each per year, making much of the Bay Area childcare options very difficult to afford, particularly given high rental costs as well.*
- *Affordable preschool*
- *Also, tuition rates should be made more reasonable for families.*
- *Affordable child care for my twins, 2 yrs 10 months.*
- *Safe, affordable*
- *I am very low income and I applied for every program I could find, 4c's, etc... I have never received any funding or subsidy for child care. I currently pay approximately half of my salary annually for child care alone. I am on food stamps and struggling financially because of how much money I pay to a childcare provider. I am a single mother, and it feels like even though there "appears" to be help for child care in the city/county, in reality, it is almost impossible to access.*
- *subsidized programs*
- *More affordable price*
- *there is no affordable childcare center in Menlo Park.*
- *Reasonable fee for childcare*
- *Pricing is just too high for what you're getting. Teachers at the local Menlo Park city-run daycares are not qualified and overworked*
- *Year-long full-time quality and affordable child care near home*
- *more affordable,*
- *affordable with a qualified teacher*
- *I need affordable and safe childcare programs*
- *Sliding scale-based tuition should be implemented in all city childcare programs as soon as possible. The demographics in Menlo Park are very mixed. Some are very wealthy, and*

others have to choose between work and their children. Menlo Park has only widened the gap by not making any changes in a timely matter, not months or years.

- *I would like affordable, high-quality childcare within the community/school system.*
- *We need subsidies that are above the poverty line or maximum income benchmarks. We also need to increase how much pretax salary can go towards health, daycare etc.*
- *Equal services for those who live in unincorporated Menlo Park without the fee markup*

Infant and toddler care

- *Programs like PACCC in Palo Alto: Our children attended infant daycare and preschool with PACCC, partly due to the lack of similar options in Menlo Park.*
- *We need more child care options for 3mo - 2 years old and full time.*
- *More availability for under two-year-olds;*
- *I love that MPCSD offers care at the early learning centers. I wish that had been available when my kids were younger. That said, it feels like there is a gap for 2-3-year-olds. Infant/toddler programs typically only offer care for children under 24 months, so I'm not sure what you do when your child ages out of infant/toddler but isn't old enough for the early learning center.*
The PACCC model might be a good model for the City of Menlo Park/MPCSD to consider. Even though we live in MP, our children attended PACCC programs from birth until they were able to attend kindergarten.
- *more programs for children 18 months - 3 years old.*
- *Infant programs need to be more available. At five weeks pregnant, we placed ourselves on eight waitlists. One year later, when our child was four months old and needed to start in daycare, we were off the waitlist at one location. This required a 30-minute drive from our house to the center. We got into our desired center seven months later (total wait time of 19 months). This center costs \$35,000 per year but has the required hours and is near our home and work.*
- *More affordable childcare options for infants.*
- *Low-cost multilingual colocated infant and toddler programs*
- *adding an option for infant care 0-24 months)*
- *It was extremely difficult to find affordable, available childcare options for my infant.*
- *affordable for infants and good hours*
- *The city needs more options for children less than 18 months of age, at least 12 months.*
- *MCC is amazing; I wish it were more affordable for smaller kids (I can't afford 2,5k per child per month; we have twins).*
- *We need more infant capacity.*
- *We were fortunate to get into the Google Children's Center when our firstborn was 8 months old. They employed excellent teachers, had great Reggio Emilia enrichment opportunities, and fed the children daily. It is very difficult to find programs like that, and now that one is also dismantled. A place that could take infants and work on potty training was an absolute must.*

- *We currently use a nanny share program because we weren't able to find childcare from the city before 18 months. Once our child was old enough, we reached out, but weren't able to get in. We live right across the street from Menlo Children's Center and would love nothing more than to send our child there. The city needs options for younger kids and more options for families to use childcare close to their homes.*
- *It would be great if it started earlier than 18 months so the newborn stage would be great to have city resources that can help with versus MCC only starts at 18 months*
- *More openings and classes for infants*
- *Quality childcare program near home for young toddlers and older toddlers.*
- *It would be great if there's zero to affordable cost for child care for ages 0-2 because we are planning to have another baby, and finances are one of the hindrances.*

Flexibility

- *Separately, drop-in child care (with advance reservation?) would be helpful.*
- *We need programs that open at 6:30*
- *Along with full-time daycare, create part-time daycare and drop-in daycare so parents can have flexibility.*
- *Longer hours,*
- *provide flexibility to change the daycare schedule in line with the changing schedules of the surrounding schools every trimester (ie ability to choose any day(s) at least between M-F).*
- *flexible schedules*
- *Please provide longer hours to those of us who work in medicine.*
- *Flexible and extended hours available with activities available that foster the child/children's social and emotional growth, play-based.*
- *Available, extended hours,*
- *Drop-in care/as-needed care would be great!*
- *More drop-ins*
- *child care may needed from 5-9 pm when parents need to go out for events*
- *Childcare programs should offer flexible options to accommodate parents' work schedules.*
- *The most difficult part is finding part-time childcare*
- *Having a backup/occasional care option like a drop-in center might be the form of outside-of-the-home childcare that we'd be most likely to use*

Seven respondents asked for full-day TK programming in Menlo Park:

- *It would be great to have a TK after-school option through Menlo Park.*
- *It would be great to extend the TK day so the young kids do not spend so much time at the aftercare program at school. I think they need more intimate support at the age of 4. If TK cannot be extended, maybe combine TK kids with Menlo Park preschools for the second half of the day.*
- *MCC is amazing...and I wished it would support after-school care after TK. We had to move to Newton at Laurel and it's not as nice as MCC.*

- *It would be great to have the TK day longer so the young kids do not spend so much time at the aftercare program at school, I think they need more intimate support at the age of 4. Maybe combine TK kids with Menlo Park preschools for the second half of the day if TK cannot be extended.*
- *Free cost for TK programs or reduced extended care cost*
- *Make MPCSD TK a full school day. It should be 8:15 am - 3:00 pm.*
- *TK that goes all day instead of a half day.*

Safety and trustworthiness

- *For birth to age 4 range, I would definitely need the childcare to be safe, clean, and CPR trained, and the workers would need to have a lot of care and love for children.*
- *Safe, affordable, flexible and extended hours available with activities available that foster the child/children's social and emotional growth, play-based.*
- *Teachers at the local Menlo Park city-run daycares are not qualified and overworked.*
- *I don't trust childcare around here since I have heard comments that the babies are not treated well.*
- *I need affordable and safe childcare programs.*
- *Our top two priorities would be care that's healthy and safe (good indoor air quality is really important to us), and provides an enriching learning environment for our curious and determined little one.*

Educational Value

- *It would be helpful to have more art programs for kids in the community. Currently we have to go to Palo Alto for these.*
- *Parents are looking for childcare that will also help prepare their children for elementary school and middle school, not just play-based activities. They want a learning aspect in child care now.*
- *...activities available that foster the child/children's social and emotional growth, play-based.*
- *I want good Montessori child care for my younger daughter.*
- *Publicize method of curriculum (Reggio, Montessori, etc.)*

Interest in language immersion programs:

- *I would love a Spanish immersion preschool option*
- *Immersive language program*
- *I would love someone to teach Spanish in the program.*
- *Mandarin Immersion*

Summary

Families were engaged with the Childcare Needs Assessment Survey, with many needs and solutions expressed through the comments. The Survey provided qualitative and actionable data that will be critical for determining recommendations for the city's operated preschool

programs. It will provide insight for all local preschools to be able to better meet the childcare needs of the community.

Appendix B1: Childcare Needs Assessment Survey

Comments Categorized by Neighborhood

MCC Neighborhood Comments

Key themes

#1 Affordability

Many respondents emphasize the high cost of childcare, which creates financial strain, particularly for families with multiple children. Suggestions include subsidized options, scholarships, and city-supported programs.

- Affordable child care for my twins 2 yrs 10 months.
- affordable for infants and good hours
- Financial support for nanny care including payroll or other help
- Free childcare is desperately needed here in Menlo Park.
- I need affordable and safe childcare programs
- I wish there was subsidized health insurance for me to be able to leave my job while my child is less than 2 years old to care for them. Following this, I would like affordable, high quality childcare within the community/school system
- more affordable, weekend activities
- Reasonable fee for child care
- There should be more co-op programs and there should be subsidized programs through the city of Menlo Park Menlo Park has plenty of money and could help struggling parents not everyone and Menlo Park as well off

"We need more affordable, and/or subsidized, childcare options so that people who work in Menlo Park have options for childcare that is convenient. There is no day care/pre-school offering in Menlo Park that I am aware of that is less than \$2k a month. Meaning people with even two young children are paying at least \$4k out of pocket every single month in order to be able to work and given their children an opportunity for learning, socialization and more. That is not realistic for the vast majority of our community and city employees. We must do better."

#2 Expanded and Flexible Schedules

Many respondents requested expanded schedules and hours, including drop-in care, and weekend or evening options to accommodate working parents. Issues with restrictive pickup times and lack of part-time or as-needed care were also noted.

#3 Infant / Toddler care

- more child care options for 3mo - 2 years old and full time.

- Affordable child care for my twins 2 yrs 10 months.
- affordable for infants and good hours
- more programs for children 18 months - 3 years old.
- Would love more Menlo Children's Center-like options for kids under 18 months!
- Would be great if it started earlier than 18 months so the newborn stage would be great to have city resources that can help with versus mcc only starts at 18 months
- We need more infant capacity
- We need more child care options for 3mo - 2 years old and full time.

All Comments from MCC Neighborhoods

Affordable child care for my twins 2 yrs 10 months. I'm a single mother. 4c wait list group 81. Izzi wait list. My parents are caring for them while I work full time. They are 70 and can't do so much longer. Would love any additional resources. I pulled my children from Learning Links end of June. 3k a month at 40% off... I had a job change and my take home is 4k.
affordable for infants and good hours
After school care should have trained people who have experience with 4-5 year olds. I would love someone to teach Spanish at the program.
Any afterschool program or care during minimum days would be super helpful. Thanks!
available, extended hours, quality staff that has experience in childhood development.
Better community run opportunities to connect babysitters (e.g. MA students) with local families
Bring child care and senior day care facilities together.
Do not provide child care services via the city. People can choose to be single income if they want and most choose not to be and aren't willing to compromise on the type of housing they have.
drop in care/ as needed care would be great!
Financial support for nanny care including payroll or other help
Free childcare is desperately needed here in Menlo Park.
Good quality after school care
honestly, I don't know how you could provide teachers a living wage and affordable daycare for parents at the same time. Our area is just so expensive.
I need affordable and safe child care programs
I really appreciate the music classes and story time activities for infants and toddlers at the library - these are services that can benefit many children and their caregivers
I wish there was subsidized health insurance for me to be able to leave my job while my child is less than 2 years old to care for them.
Following this, I would like affordable, high quality childcare within the community/school system
If I had any I would have used them.

It would be great to have the TK day longer so the young kids do not spend so much time at the aftercare program at school, I think they need more intimate support at the age of 4. Maybe combine TK kids with Menlo Park preschools for the second half of the day if TK cannot be extended.
It would be nice to have public transportation for kids (i.e from schools or central locations to Burgess Park for activities)
It would be helpful to have more art programs for kids in the community. Currently we have to go to Palo Alto for these.
It's better to have a child after school care at campus during 3-5pm. Kids can be with the teachers who have experienced, especially can resolve the emotional issues for the students. The tuition can be affordable, around \$3000 per year.
Make MCC easier to understand (schedule, holidays, process for getting in, etc.). Similar for TK spanish immersion at Encinal for people closer to Oak Knoll.
Menlo Park is doing a great job with childcare programs. Love the early learning center at oak knoll.
more affordable, weekend activities
More city programming for young kids, and especially parents of young kids. I'd love some parenting classes or other activities to meet other parents
More drop ins
More preschool scholarships
more programs for children 18 months - 3 years old. Make MPCSD TK a full school day. It should be 8:15 am - 3:00 pm.
Prefer in home or a centralized location that supports multiple ages.
8 year old - 2nd grade at Encinal 5 year old - ELC at Laurel 1 year old - licensed daycare at provider's house in Palo Alto that has restrictive pick up times
Programs like PACCC in Palo Alto, our children attended infant daycare and preschool with PACCC. Partly due to lack of similar a option in Menlo Park.
Quality childcare program near home for young toddlers and older toddlers. Immersive language program
Reasonable fee for child care
The most difficult part is finding part-time child care and or transportation enrichment activities that are nearby but not at my child's school
The pre-school program at MCC is great. The after school program seemed a bit uninspired so we use the private Newton service at Encinal which is okay but not great, and it's expensive. The city should offer an affordable after school program which is engaging for kids.
There is a need to have more childcare centers /preschools in menlo park. Also tuition rates should be made more reasonable for families.

There should be more co-op programs and there should be subsidized programs through the city of Menlo Park Menlo Park has plenty of money and could help struggling parents not everyone and Menlo Park as well off
We loved Menlo Children's Center! I love how integrated the program is with the other resources within the community (gymnastics, library, police, etc). We have enjoyed the toddler music class at the community center. I think MCC could benefit from a weekly visit.
We need more adorable classes or childcare for kids and teens, safe roads for in dependable biking and hours for these classes till 8pm. We also need raise salary for teachers to invite more experienced educators.
We need more affordable, and/or subsidized, childcare options so that people who work in Menlo Park have options for childcare that is convenient. There is no day care/pre-school offering in Menlo Park that I am aware of that is less than \$2k a month. Meaning people with even two young children are paying at least \$4k out of pocket every single month in order to be able to work and given their children an opportunity for learning, socialization and more. That is not realistic for the vast majority of our community and city employees. We must do better.
We need more child care options for 3mo - 2 years old and full time. Help save geo kids
We need more infant capacity
Would be great if it started earlier than 18 months so the newborn stage would be great to have city resources that can help with versus mcc only starts at 18 months
Would be nice to have quality childcare in all neighborhoods, so that families across the city can access city services. Currently it seems like most community services are offered in the Belle Haven neighborhood.
Would love more Menlo Children's Center-like options for kids under 18 months!

BHDCD Neighborhood Comments:

Key Themes

#1 Affordability

Many respondents emphasize the high cost of childcare, which creates financial strain, particularly for educators and families with multiple children. Suggestions include subsidized options, and rates for teachers.

- "We are educators and parents of twins...Some daycares are 3000 per child per month. That's more than my salary. Plus housing and cost of living. We need subsidies that are above the poverty line or maximum income benchmarks."
- "Affordable pre school and after school care that has selections, like art programs"
- "more affordable, better childcare subsidies"
- "Having a teacher rate would be ideal to help pay for high costs of childcare."

#2 Expanded & Flexible Schedules

Many respondents requested expanded schedules and hours, including weekend or evening options to accommodate working parents. Issues with restrictive pickup times and lack of part-time or as-needed care were also noted.

- “More weekend options. Would love to see parents night out on the weekend, drop in childcare for days my school doesn’t cover, weekend camps, holiday coverage camps”
- Longer hours please, to facilitate those of us who work in medicine
- “provide flexibility to change the day care schedule in line with the changing schedules of the surrounding schools every trimester (ie ability to chose any day(s) at least between M-F).”

#3 Communication and Marketing

Many respondents identified a need for better communication and marketing about the city run child care programs.

- “Better advertise / disclose child care programs to parents residing in Menlo Park”
- “More announcements via mail. I had to look into the BHCDC program and gather information because the city website does not give much information with specific details like applications and enrollment process”

All BHCDC Neighborhood Comments

Affordable pre school and after school care that has selections, like art programs. We drive too much to Palo Alto for their sports and art programs but sometimes can’t even get in.
After-school programs that run until 6. Neighborhood-based shared child care.
An option for child care for age group 5+ after 6pm would be really nice because my husband and I are trying to go back to school while working full-time. Also, it would be great if there’s zero to affordable cost for child care for ages 0-2 because we are planning to have another baby and finances is one of the hindrances.
Better advertise / disclose child care programs to parents residing in Menlo Park. We did not know about most of the options upon becoming parents.
Childcare after school hours are very helpful in supporting working parents since the cost of living in menlo park is so high.
Community classes/center where kids get picked up from school, given snack, help with homework, taken to classes on campus and kept happy and safe
Everything is good
Free cost for TK programs or reduced extended care cost
Full day summer camp
Gracias por la preocupación, desearía que la encuesta sea en español y servicios en español.

I am a teacher in the area. Child care is necessary and very valuable to me and my family. Having a teacher rate would be ideal to help pay for high costs of childcare.
I wish there was childcare for kids that are SLIGHTLY sick (runny nose, cough) so they could stay home and I wouldn't have to miss so much work. I obviously stay home with my kids when they are very sick or really not feeling well.
I would love a Spanish immersion preschool option.
It must be as affordable as possible, provide flexibility to change the day care schedule in line with the changing schedules of the surrounding schools every trimester (ie ability to chose any day(s) at least between M-F).
It was extremely difficult to find affordable available childcare options for my infant.
It will be nice to have childcare as part of the assigned school, so the kids can grow together and be familiar. It's rather hard to switch them every year or 2 based on the age group at such early years.
It would be great to have a TK after school option through menlo park.
keep the childcare programs open we really need it.
Longer hours please, to facilitate those of us who work in medicine. Gives us lots of flexibility to in turn help serve the community by providing care.
Longer hours, more affordable, better childcare subsidies. Both my husband and I are medical trainees and early <\$100K each per year, making much of the Bay Area childcare options very difficult to afford, particularly given high rental costs as well.
Low cost multilingual colocated infant and toddler programs for one pick-up located near where I live. Thank you!
MCC is amazing, I wish it was more affordable for smaller kids (I can't afford 2,5k per child per month, we have twins). And I wished it would support after school care after TK. We had to move to Newton at Laurel and it's not as nice as MCC.
More annoucenemnts via mail. I had to look into the BHCD program and gather information because the city website does not give much information with specific details like applications and enrollment process
More availability for under two year olds; TK that goes all day instead of a half day; better quality after school programs on school campuses
More quality after school care especially for TK
More support should be given to mothers of infants
More weekend options. Would love to see parents night out on the weekend, drop in childcare for days my school doesn't cover, weekend camps, holiday coverage camps. So many gaps in childcare which make it hard when we don't have a regular babysitter
Our kids both attend the Menlo-Atherton Co-op Nursery School, and we LOVE it. It's been a really magical experience - both for our kids, who are both thriving there, and for us as parents. The co-op model has been amazing. Before attending the co-op, we felt like a family that happened to live in Menlo Park - now, we feel like we're really part of the community and connected to our town. We have a ton of new parent-friends through the co-op who also live in Menlo Park, and we've all learned - together, through the invaluable parent education classes

provided as a (mandatory) part of enrollment at the co-op - about how to be parents, and how to be active parents in our community. The co-op isn't really a child-care provider - we, as parents, work in the classroom 2.5 hours a week for each kid, and our kids only attend a total of 5 hours a week (for the younger kid) and 7.5 hours a week (for the older kid). Outside of the co-op, child-care is provided by one parent as a stay-at-home-parent and we also employ a part-time nanny to make it all work. But it's WORTH IT. We're investing a ton of time and expense into making it work for our kids to attend the co-op, both because it's a magical place for them to grow, and because we really, REALLY value the parent education we've received through the co-op and the community we now have, thanks to it. So - my #1 priority and motivation in responding to this survey is to tell the City of Menlo Park what a magical thing you have in the MA Co-op, and to thank you for supporting our wonderful little nursery school and parent community. The co-op has transformed us from people who just happen to live in Menlo Park, into loyal Menlo-Park-ians who are probably going to live here for life.

Pricing is just too high for what you're getting. Teachers at the local Menlo Park city run daycares are not qualified and over worked

Providing healthy lunch and snacks; Please start providing healthy lunch and snacks

Someone who can pick up from school and take to activities for drop off

The Belle Haven After School Program is a God send. I don't know what I would do without it. The City really should have more programs like this available to the community. So many people struggle financially right now, and the safety and care of our children are always a priority.

We are educators and parents of twins. Some daycares are 3000 per child per month. That's more than my salary. Plus housing and cost of living. We need subsidies that are above the poverty line or maximum income benchmarks. We also need to increase how much pretax salary can go towards health, daycare etc.

We LOVE gymnastics program at the Arrillaga gymnasium in Burgess park and wish there were more classes available - it is often difficult to get a spot

We often don't have childcare for MPCSD school events in the evening, like parents-only gatherings. There are many after-school programs offered through MPCSD, but we don't participate in any of them because I am the primary childcare provider.

Some of your questions don't allow for all possible responses. For the "In a typical week..." we don't use any child care because I have chosen to work part time in order to be the primary child care provider.

We participated in childcare at MCC. Having centrally located childcare at a reasonable price, with a diverse student/ family population and that was supported by the community was the single biggest factor in our decision to settle in Menlo Park. It was be a disservice to the community if that changes

We were very lucky to get into the Google Children's Center when our firstborn was 8 months old. They employed excellent teachers, had great Reggio Emilia enrichment opportunities, and fed the children every day. It is very difficult to find programs like that, and now that one is dismantled as well. A place that could take infants and work on potty training was an absolute must.

Would be a great Idea to have better prepared staff,that's why I chose a family member to take care of my baby because I dont trust child cares around here since I have heard comments that the babies are not treated good
Would be great to have child care programs in elementary schools around the neighborhood which will make it so convenient for working parents.
Year long full-time quality and affordable child care near home (Willows)

Belle Haven Neighborhood Comments

Key Themes

#1 Affordability

Many respondents emphasize the high cost of childcare, which creates financial strain, particularly for educators and families with multiple children. Suggestions include subsidized options and rates for teachers.

- “We are educators and parents of twins. Some daycares are \$3,000 per child per month. That's more than my salary. Plus housing and cost of living. We need subsidies that are above the poverty line or maximum income benchmarks. We also need to increase how much pretax salary can go towards health, daycare etc.”
- “it would be great if there's zero to affordable cost for child care for ages 0-2 because we are planning to have another baby and finances is one of the hindrances.”
- “I am a teacher in the area. Child care is necessary and very valuable to me and my family. Having a teacher rate would be ideal to help pay for high costs of childcare.”

#2 Communication and Marketing

Several respondents identified a need for better communication and marketing about the city run child care programs.

- “Better advertise / disclose child care programs to parents residing in Menlo Park. We did not know about most of the options upon becoming parents.”
- “More announcements via mail. I had to look into the BHCDC program and gather information because the city website does not give much information with specific details like applications and enrollment process”

#3 Spanish Language Support

Several respondents identified a need and/or opportunity for more Spanish language support and services, including a Spanish immersion preschool option.

- “I would love a Spanish immersion preschool option.”
- “Gracias por la preocupación, desearía que la encuesta sea en español y servicios en español.”

[Thank you for the concern, I would like the survey to be in Spanish and the services in Spanish]

All Belle Haven Neighborhood Comments

An option for child care for age group 5+ after 6pm would be really nice because my husband and I are trying to go back to school while working full-time. Also, it would be great if there's zero to affordable cost for child care for ages 0-2 because we are planning to have another baby and finances is one of the hindrances.

Better advertise / disclose child care programs to parents residing in Menlo Park. We did not know about most of the options upon becoming parents.

Community classes/center where kids get picked up from school, given snack, help with homework, taken to classes on campus and kept happy and safe

Gracias por la preocupación, desearía que la encuesta sea en español y servicios en español.
[Thank you for the concern, I would like the survey to be in Spanish and the services in Spanish]

I am a teacher in the area. Child care is necessary and very valuable to me and my family. Having a teacher rate would be ideal to help pay for high costs of childcare.

I wish there was childcare for kids that are SLIGHTLY sick (runny nose, cough) so they could stay home and I wouldn't have to miss so much work. I obviously stay home with my kids when they are very sick or really not feeling well.

I would love a Spanish immersion preschool option.

keep the childcare programs open we really need it.

More announcements via mail. I had to look into the BHCDC program and gather information because the city website does not give much information with specific details like applications and enrollment process

More support should be given to mothers of infants

Pricing is just too high for what you're getting. Teachers at the local Menlo Park city run daycares are not qualified and over worked

Someone who can pick up from school and take to activities for drop off

The Belle Haven After School Program is a God send. I don't know what I would do without it. The City really should have more programs like this available to the community. So many people struggle financially right now, and the safety and care of our children are always a priority.

We are educators and parents of twins. Some daycares are 3000 per child per month. That's more than my salary. Plus housing and cost of living. We need subsidies that are above the poverty line or maximum income benchmarks. We also need to increase how much pretax salary can go towards health, daycare etc.

Would be a great Idea to have better prepared staff,that's why I chose a family member to take care of my baby because I don't trust child cares around here since I have heard comments that the babies are not treated good

Appendix B2: Preschool Director Report

Interview Synopsis

PROGRAM STRUCTURE

- ***How long has your school been in the community?***
 - Less than 10 years: 3/10
 - 10-40 years: 4/10
 - Over 50 years: 3/10
- ***Open hours***
 - Open time ranges from 7:30-9:00 am
 - Closing time ranges from 3:00-6:00 pm
- ***Operation dates***
 - Year Round: 5
 - School + Summer Program: 4
 - School Year Only: 1
- ***Schedule Offering***
 - Full Day: 3/10
 - Half Day: 1/10
 - Option for Full/Half Day: 3/10
 - Option for Full / Half / Multi-Day: 3/10
- ***Ages***
 - Infants: 2/10 serve infants (3 mos - 17 mos)
 - Toddlers: 9/10 (starting at 18 mos or 2 years)
 - Preschool only: 1/10 (age 3-5)
- ***Number of students***
 - Less than 30 children: 2 schools
 - 30-50 Children: 3 schools
 - 50-85 Children: 5 schools
- ***Funding type***
 - Fully Fee-based: 6
 - Both Fee-based and Subsidized tuition: 2
 - Co-op: 2
- ***What enrichment activities of special programs do you offer?***
 - All offered various enrichment activities included in the program, like music and art.
 - Other included enrichment options cited: language immersion, STEM & science vendors, dance, chapel, field trips, gardening, and cooking.
 - Most schools support children with special needs by partnering with families on IEP needs and/or OT therapists to come into the school.

- Additional fee-based options cited: Sports programs like soccer or gymnastics, lunch meals, transportation from TK to after-school program

EXTERNAL IMPACT FACTORS

- ***How has the increase in work-from-home arrangements affected your enrollment or program structure?***
 - No impact: 6/10 Directors said WFH is not currently impacting enrollment. Parents are back to regular (or sometimes increased) work schedules, whether WFH or in the office.
 - Improved impact: Co-op schools have seen increased enrollment because families can have more flexible WFH schedules
 - Some impact: 2/10 schools said it has had some enrollment impact on enrollment, mostly with people who delay in enrolling children in childcare to a later age as they have more flexible WFH hours.
- ***How has the COVID pandemic impacted your operations, enrollment, and program delivery?***
 - Staffing challenges: 5/10. Half of the people said they had difficulty finding and retaining staff. One significant factor was the high cost of living and qualified staff moving out of the area.
 - Financial challenges: 6/10 The COVID-based school closures and fear around health and safety had a significant impact on enrollment. Even if enrollment is back to normal, they are making up for losses.
 - Primarily 'back to normal': 2/10. Several schools stated that their operations, enrollment, and programs have rebounded from the impact of COVID-19.
- ***How has the introduction of transitional Kindergarten in California impacted your program?***
 - Very Significant: 7/10
 - Some impact: 3/10:
 - No impact: 0/10
- ***In what ways are you adjusting to ensure program sustainability in light of any changes in demand?***
 - Fewer staff, not re-hiring: 2/10
 - Extended Hours: 2/10 (others are considering this but have not yet made the change)
 - Change classroom age configuration: 2/10. Combining age groups because there are fewer children age 4+ (others considering this change next year).
 - Increased enrollment number for students age 3 and younger: 4/10
 - Added a Toddler (18 mos -2's) program: 2/10 (others are considering this)

ENROLLMENT and TUITION

- ***What are your current enrollment numbers, and how do they compare to pre-pandemic levels?***

- 4/10 Not back to full enrollment
- 3/10 Back to full enrollment this year, but no waitlist or smaller than pre-pandemic
- 3/10 Back to full enrollment
- ***Do you have a waitlist, and if so how long is it?***
 - 2/2 Waitlist for Infant
 - 7/9 Waitlist for Toddler
 - 3/10 Waitlist for Preschool
- ***Have your families wanted more or less time in preschool since the pandemic?***
 - 4 Earlier/ later hours requested from full-day programs
 - 3 more hours requested from shorter day programs
 - 2 Half-day or fewer-day requests from FT programs
 - 1 No difference

PROGRAM STRENGTHS

- ***What are the most common reasons families choose your preschool?***

1. Strong Community and Family Connections

- Families value preschools that build solid relationships and provide a welcoming environment where parents and children can form lasting connections.
- Key Words: "trusted community," "families for generations," "community events," "families get to know each other," "building of community," "collective family support," "parent education," "involved in child's education," "culture and feel welcome," "co-op aspect."

2. Reputation and Trustworthiness

- The trust built through an established reputation and positive feedback from current and past families significantly influences parents' decisions.
- Key Words: "reputation of 35 years," "trusted community," "word of mouth," "referrals," "good Yelp reviews," "long-time staff," "excellent program."

3. High-Quality Staff and Teacher Engagement

- The quality and consistency of the teachers, including their interactions with both children and parents, play a major role in choosing a preschool. Families appreciate experienced, engaging, and supportive teachers.
- Key Words: "long-time staff," "teacher retention & familiarity," "high-quality teachers," "professional development (PD)," "good management," "connection with parents," "teachers developing an inviting atmosphere," "interaction with children."

4. Educational Philosophy and Curriculum Approach

- Parents look for educational approaches that match their values, whether through structured play, academic balance, or specialized curriculum programs. The focus on child engagement and unique activities is also appealing.
- Key Words: "play-based curriculum," "Montessori," "child-initiated learning," "routine," "differing curriculum daily," "play-based learning with academics," "gymnastics," "ability to be outside a lot," "engaged kids."

5. Accessibility and Practical Features

- Practical considerations such as cost, location, flexible schedules, and unique offerings like language immersion are key reasons families select a preschool. The school's ability to meet logistical needs is essential for many parents.
- Key Words: "affordability," "flexible scheduling," "full-time care to 5:30," "co-op aspect with lower price," "Spanish speaking or immersion," "full day program," "scheduling flexibility," "live nearby."

Appendix B3: Focus Group Reports

Belle Haven Child Development Center: Staff Focus Group Report Notes

Date: October 8, 2024

Participants: 13 staff (4 - 20+ year tenure) with various roles, bringing diverse insights to the discussion.

Facilitators: Marissa McGee, Katherine Carter, Tricia Singleton

Q: What are the school's biggest strengths that you hear from families?

- **Staff:** Due to staff longevity, families value the strong bonds between teachers and children. The staff helps parents connect with educational resources and provide consistent care.
- **Location:** The center's convenient, accessible location in a residential neighborhood is a draw.
- **Quality of care & trust:** Families recognize the center's high standards of care, owing to its affiliation with several reputable organizations.
- **Affordability:** Compared to other local options, the center is considered affordable.

Q: Do you know people who have left, and if so, why?

- **Free Transitional Kindergarten (TK):** Public schools offering free TK is understandably attractive.
- **Convenience:** Increasing traffic congestion and limited transportation options make multiple drop-offs challenging for parents, especially those without cars.
- **Cost of living and affordability:** Many families face financial challenges due to the high cost of living and job loss, leading them to keep their children home.
- **Community gentrification:** Due to rising housing costs, low-income families are displaced, and younger, career-focused people are moving into the area.

Q: What programmatic changes do you think would bring more families?

(Examples shared from the resident survey)

- **Community-building events:** Host weekend carnivals or after-school events to raise awareness and attract families from the community.
- **Enhanced advertising:** Use banners, better online presence, and parent testimonials to increase visibility and attract new families.
- **Revamped website:** The center's website should be updated to showcase photos of the facilities, teachers, and detailed program offerings, including subsidized tuition options.
- **After-school TK program:** Develop partnerships with nearby schools, such as Belle Haven Elementary, to offer after-school care and share referrals.

- **Transportation:** Partner with local shuttle services or Menlo Park Transit to offer transportation for families who struggle with drop-offs.

Q: What do you think is the main reason it is difficult to find people to work in a childcare center?

- **Low wages:** The center's pay is not competitive, given the rising cost of living in the area.
- **Available and affordable childcare for teachers:** Provide incentives like priority access to city-based childcare, community classes, summer camps, or transportation benefits.
- **Workload:** The loss of teachers or support staff increases the burden on the remaining staff.

Q: What are the challenges you anticipate if BHCDC were to expand to infant and/or toddler care?

- **Educational requirements:** Staff would need education units that would take time to complete.
- **Facility changes:** Significant investment in the facility, equipment, and administration would be required. Staff would want a voice in the process to determine how this would work.
- **Uncertainty about demand:** There is concern that families may not enroll toddlers based on cultural norms to keep kids home until age 3. Parents have difficulty with separation as much as the kids do.

Belle Haven Child Development Center: Parent/Guardian Focus Group Report Notes

Date: October 24, 2024

Participants: 4 parents with children of varying ages enrolled at BHCDC

Facilitators: Marissa McGee, Katherine Carter, Tricia Singleton

Q: How did you find Belle Haven and why did you choose this school?

- **Community Connections:** Many families have long-standing ties to the center, with multiple generations attending.
- **Staff:** Long-tenured staff are pillars of the community and childhood experience. Their creative and inspiring classrooms are evident in their children's enjoyment and learning at school.
- **Trust and Safety:** Parents feel comfortable leaving their children, praising the center's safe environment and the caring attitude of teachers.
- **Affordability:** Compared to other options, the center is more affordable, especially for working-class families.
- **Bilingual Staff:** Spanish-speaking parents value the support, and non-Spanish-speaking parents appreciate the bilingual exposure. The teaching is in English, but it supports dual language.
- **Convenience:** Proximity to home and local employers makes it an easy choice.

Q: What one thing would you change if you could?

- **Extending age range:** Starting care at age two or younger would be welcomed, especially for FT working parents. They had flexible WFH during/post-Covid, but back-to-office policies make it difficult.
- **Longer/flex hours:** Current hours (7:30-4:45 p.m.) can be difficult to accommodate for working parents. *(Note: Center is extending pick-up to 5:15 in January.)*

Q: What would make it a more desirable program for other people you know?

- **Broader Age Offerings:** Parents expressed a need for care options starting at 18 months or 2 years.
- **Knowing more about BHCDC:** High-quality care that more people should know about. Brainstorm ideas: bilingual flyers at community center, elementary schools, local events, toddler classes, direct mail postcards, city newsletters, and elementary school communication.
- **Enhanced Website:** Show the facilities, teachers, parent, and student testimonials, sample daily and monthly schedule, enrichment activities, curriculum, extensive safety protocols, fee structure, and downloadable application, and explain the play-based learning style.

- **Simplified Application Process:** Simplify the initial application and have open office hours to get help completing the complicated state requirements.
- **Fee Clarity:** The sliding scale fee option isn't clear in the application materials or online. People don't know the price until far into the application process, so they don't bother applying.
- **Community Outreach:** Host a multicultural event on campus, and increase visibility through the local community center, events, and Belle Haven Elementary.
- **Improved Communication-** Challenges in reaching the center by phone or email were noted.
- **Transportation:** Bring students to the center for after-school activities such as sports, dance.
- **Classroom Updates:** Invest in upgrading classroom technology.

Q: How does cost of living affect your decisions for childcare?

- **Significant factor: Higher cost options are not a consideration.** "Affordable care is a blessing to working-class families."
- **Tension:** Pulled between quality care and balancing the cost. Do not want to put children in a place that is such a low cost that they worry about their care. There are unlicensed options, but they are not as trustworthy.

Q: What does affordable care mean to you?

- **Sliding Scale:** The school takes your financial situation into account and makes clear upfront.
- **Fair treatment:** Group appreciated that they received the same treatment regardless of the fee they paid.

Menlo Children's Center: Staff Focus Group Report Notes

Date: October 11, 2024

Participants: 7 staff (4 mos – 20+ yrs) Range of roles, bringing diverse insights into the issues discussed.

Facilitators: Marissa McGee, Katherine Carter, Tricia Singleton

Q: What are the school's biggest strengths that you hear from families?

- **Experienced Staff:** Families appreciate the longevity and experience of the teaching staff.
- **Supportive Atmosphere:** The center provides a nurturing environment where kids receive personal attention. They have continuity with kids who continue in after-school programs through high school.
- **Diversity:** A culturally diverse and inclusive environment that mirrors the community.
- **Prime Location:** Close to Burgess Library, gymnastics, pool, and other local facilities. Central location.
- **Reputation:** Being city-run lends credibility compared to private or home daycare options.

Q: Do you know people who have left, and if so, why?

- **Cost:** Some find the tuition unaffordable.
- **Relocation:** Families moved for work or more affordable locations, especially with WFH options. The Menlo Park community has changed a lot in the years since Covid.
- **Free TK Programs:** Parents move children to free TK.
- **Schedule:** Families seek 2-3 days/week, half days, or drop-in care that is not offered.
- **Academic Focus:** Some parents prefer more academically driven programs.
- **Transportation:** Families with TK children do not have transportation to MCC after-school care

What programmatic changes do you think would bring more families?

(Examples shared from the resident needs survey)

- **Expand Toddler Capacity:** Open a second toddler room and/or transition kids to older classrooms when ready. Add necessary facilities like diaper-changing areas in preschool rooms.
- **Half-Day Programs:** Provide morning-only or half-day care options, especially for toddlers.
- **Community Outreach:** Improve visibility through banners, social media, booths at city events, QR codes & flyers at city facilities. Need to move beyond word-of-mouth with the community changes.

- **Update Website:** Ensure the website is current and highlights the center's offerings. Explain the educational value of the play-based model.
- **Income-Based Pricing:** Introduce tiered pricing based on family income. Consider affordable care pricing for city staff.
- **Lunch Program:** Reinstate hot or vendor-provided lunches (discontinued during COVID-19).
- **Enrichment Programs:** Offer additional activities like music, and Spanish immersion.
- **Enhanced Staffing:** Increase full-time, permanent staff to accommodate more children.
- **Parent Communication:** Increase administrative support to ensure timely response to parents.
- **Facility Improvement:** Aging infrastructure and playgrounds need renovation to remain competitive.

What do you think is the main reason it is difficult to find people to work in a childcare center?

- **Application process:** Extensive process with high requirements for PT staff.
- **Staff Shortages:** Limited staffing creates more workload and prevents the center from increasing capacity, especially due to the reliance on provisional staff with restricted hours.
- **Lack of career path:** Can take years to move from provisional to permanent staff.

Menlo Children's Center: Parent/Guardian Focus Group Report Notes

Date: October 16, 2024

Participants: 6 parents with children ranging in age from toddler to preschool, new and longtime residents

Facilitators: Marissa McGee, Tricia Singleton

Q: How did you find MCC and why did you choose this school?

- **Teachers:** Long-tenured, experienced teachers with low turnover and dedication to supporting children with all different developmental needs. Only positive feedback about the quality of teachers and care.
- **Location:** Conveniently located near home, work, and local parks.
- **Word of Mouth:** Positive recommendations from friends and local groups.
- **Facilities & Environment:** Spacious play areas and a diverse, affirming environment.
- **Pricing:** Mid-range with discounts for Menlo Park residents.

Q: What one thing would you change if you could?

- **Infant Care:** There are very few infant care options available. Parents need high-quality care like MCC and will pay for dependable care they trust. Quality is more important than price at this age.
- **Academic Exposure:** Incorporate more academic learning for older children, particularly in the afternoons. Kindergarten now has a higher academic starting point with school-based TK.
- **Flexible schedule/pricing:** Requests for more flexible hours and pricing to reflect hours needed, like a half-day or shorter day (3 pm) option, early/late drop-off, etc.
- **Potty Training:** Some parents felt the potty training process at MCC could be more structured or supported.
- **Lunch** - Some parents would like to have a paid lunch option available.

Q: What would make it a more desirable program for other people you know?

- **Younger age enrollment:** Most FT working parents need care before 18 months, so it's difficult to transition to new care at 18 mos and then again at age 4 for TK. Care transitions are hard on kids and parents, so the fewer, the better!
- **Expand Toddler Care:** There is a significant need for toddler care in the community.
- **Enhance Communication and First Impressions:** Prompt responses to all inquiries, planned tours, printed information, and a chance to meet the amazing teachers at a meet-and-greet.
- **Address the Waitlist Issue:** Streamlining the process and providing clearer timelines could reduce frustration for families trying to enroll their children. Better communication

about anticipated availability would also help manage expectations if space limitations exist.

- **Increase Community Outreach:** Promote MCC within local networks and larger institutions like Stanford to boost visibility.
- **Consider Financial Aid:** Explore scholarships or additional discounts to make the program more accessible, particularly for middle-income people who struggle with the high cost of living in the area.

Q: How does cost of living affect your decisions for childcare?

- **Look for the value:** Chose a program that has high quality and the price is in the mid-range of options.
- **Price is not the biggest factor:** Content is more important than the price at a certain age. Trustworthiness is the most important characteristic for childcare.
- **Scholarships available:** School District's program, Newtown, offers scholarships.
- **Infant care:** Very expensive, but you pay what you have to pay to keep your job.

Appendix B3: Additional Reports

Focus Group Participant Slides/Handouts

City of Menlo Park

Early Learning and Care Program Analysis

Focus Groups

October 2024

AGENDA

5 min Welcome and Introductions

5 min Initial research findings

40 min Focus group discussion

5 min Close

Ciudad de Menlo Park

Analysis de programas de preescolar

Grupos de enfoque

Octubre 2024

AGENDA

5 min Bienvenidos

5 min Resultados iniciales de la investigación

40 min Discusión con el Grupo de enfoque

5 min Cerrar



PURPOSE

The first few years of a child's life lay the foundation for lifelong health and well being.

Center-based preschools and early childhood staff provide a critical service for working families and have a lasting, positive impact on the lives of young children through the quality care and educational activities that they provide.

Childcare is essential for the health of our community.

The city-run preschools in Menlo Park are currently under enrolled and require subsidized funding from the city, yet there are still unmet needs for early care in our community.

We are conducting this study to determine what shifts can be made to ensure the programs meet the needs of the families in our community and are financially stable.

PROPOSITO

Los primeros años de la vida de un niño forman las bases para la salud y el bienestar durante toda la vida.

Los centros preescolares y el personal de primera infancia brindan un servicio fundamental para las familias trabajadoras y tienen un impacto positivo y duradero en las vidas de los niños pequeños a través de la atención de calidad y las actividades educativas que brindan.

El cuidado infantil es esencial para la salud de nuestra comunidad.

Las escuelas preescolares administradas por la ciudad en Menlo Park actualmente tienen una matrícula insuficiente y requieren fondos subsidiados de la ciudad; sin embargo, todavía hay necesidades insatisfechas de atención temprana en nuestra comunidad.

Estamos realizando este estudio para determinar qué cambios se pueden

hacer para garantizar que los programas satisfagan las necesidades de las familias de nuestra comunidad y sean financieramente estables.

***How might the City of Menlo Park's
early care and learning programs
better meet the evolving needs of the community
while ensuring the financial sustainability of the
programs?***

***¿Cómo podrían los programas de cuidado y
aprendizaje temprano de la ciudad de Menlo Park
satisfacer mejor las necesidades cambiantes de la
comunidad y, al mismo tiempo, garantizar la
sostenibilidad financiera de los programas?***

Three things impacting enrollment in early care programs in Menlo Park

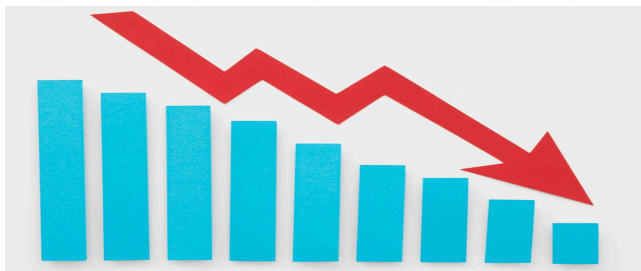
Tres factores que afectan la inscripción en los programas preescolares en Menlo Park



**Full implementation
of free TK for 4 year
olds in California**



**Work from home and
other lifestyle
changes since the
pandemic**



**Declining birth rates
across the city and
county**



“Head Start and state preschools are now dramatically under enrolled: Head Start/Title 5 programs around the state went from **average enrollments of 94 pre-pandemic to an average of only 55** enrollments in 2023.”

California’s Transitional Kindergarten: Lessons Learned – NASBE

“The expansion of TK will impact the demand for Preschool and after-school in San Mateo County. By 2032, there will be a **significant decrease in demand for Preschool**, and an increase in demand for after-school care.”

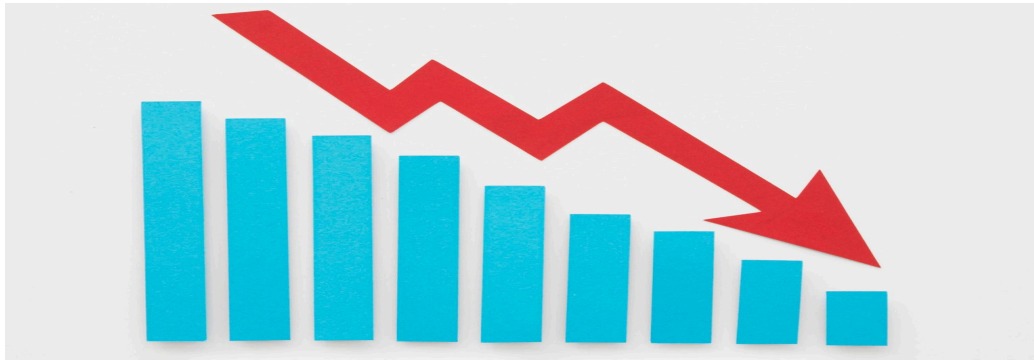
2022 SMC Childcare Needs Assessment

“Los programas Head Start y de preescolar estatales tienen actualmente una matrícula muy baja: los programas Head Start/Título 5 en todo el estado pasaron de tener una **matrícula promedio de 94 antes de la pandemia a una media de solo 55 inscripciones** en 2023.”

California’s Transitional Kindergarten: Lessons Learned – NASBE

“La expansión del jardín de infancia de transición afectará la demanda de preescolar y de actividades extraescolares en el condado de San Mateo. Para 2032, **habrá una disminución significativa de la demanda de preescolar** y un aumento de la demanda de atención extraescolar.”

2022 SMC Childcare Needs Assessment



DECLINING BIRTH RATES

Birth numbers in zip codes 94025, 94027 & 94028 declined
both before and during the pandemic.*

Source: Las Lomitas and Menlo Park Enrollment Projections

“By 2032, the population of the City of Menlo Park is expected to increase (by 15% or 8,000 people), but the number of children under the age of 5 is projected to be relatively stable (increasing by only 2.9%, or 125 children).”

Source: 2022 SMC Childcare Needs Assessment

**This is different from the 2016 Needs Assessment, which projected an increase.*

La cantidad de nacimientos en los códigos postales 94025, 94027 y 94028 disminuyó

tanto antes como durante la pandemia.*

Fuente: Proyecciones de inscripción de Las Lomitas y Menlo Park

“Para 2032, se espera que la población de la ciudad de Menlo Park aumente (en un 15 % u 8000 personas), pero se proyecta que la cantidad de niños menores de 5 años se mantendrá relativamente estable (aumentando solo un 2,9 %, o 125 niños).”

Fuente: 2022 SMC Childcare Needs Assessment

**Esta es una diferencia con la Evaluación de 2016, que proyectó un aumento.*



“Nearly one in five children in families using paid child care services stopped doing so during the pandemic, severely disrupting the child care industry. And despite a strong recovery in the labor force and the broader economy, **the number of children in paid care remained nearly 10% below pre-pandemic levels through at least 2022.**”

Report: Child Care Industry Struggling in Pandemic's Aftermath

“Family data reveal a **13% drop in Preschool enrollment** for incoming kindergarten families compared to before the pandemic.”

2022 SMC Childcare Needs Assessment

“Casi uno de cada cinco niños de familias que utilizan servicios de cuidado infantil remunerados dejaron de hacerlo durante la pandemia, lo que afectó gravemente a la industria del cuidado infantil. Y a pesar de una fuerte recuperación de la fuerza laboral y de la economía en general, **la cantidad de niños en preescolares remuneradas se mantuvo casi un 10 % por debajo de los niveles previos a la pandemia al menos hasta 2022.**”

Report: Child Care Industry Struggling in Pandemic's Aftermath

“Los datos familiares revelan una **caída del 13 % en la inscripción en preescolar** para las familias que ingresan al jardín de infantes en comparación con antes de la pandemia.”

2022 SMC Childcare Needs Assessment

Questions for Staff

- What are the school's biggest strengths that you hear from families?
- Do you know people who have left and if so, why?
- What programmatic changes do you think would bring more families?
- What do you think is the main reason it is difficult to find people to work in a child care center?
 - Examples we have heard: wages, hours, awareness, education, job requirements
- The next slide has a beginning list of ideas to increase enrollment. These came from our research and from survey results with local families. What are your thoughts on these ideas?

BRAINSTORM OF WAYS TO INCREASE ENROLLMENT

- Expanding infant and toddler programming *to* BHCDC
- Expanding infant and toddler programming *at* MCC
- Creating an afternoon program for children enrolled in morning TK
- Incentivizing City employees to enroll their children
- Expanding subsidized child care to MCC
- Affordable care for middle income families
- Flexible Scheduling
- Enhanced marketing

**Note: This is a brainstorm of ways to increase enrollment, based on preliminary research. We expect these ideas to grow and change after engaging with members of the community through focus groups and design sessions.*

Questions for Families

- How did you find BHCDL and why did you choose this school?
- What one thing would you change if you could?
- What would make it a more desirable program for other people you know?
- Do you know families who have not been able to find care or enroll at BHCDL who were not able to? Why?
- How does cost of living affect your decisions for childcare?
- What does affordable care mean to you?

Preguntas para Familias

- ¿Cómo encontró BHCDL y por qué eligió esta escuela?
- ¿Qué cambiaría si pudiera?
- ¿Qué haría que este programa fuera más atractivo para otras personas que conoce?
- ¿Conoce familias que no hayan podido encontrar atención o inscribirse en BHCDL y que no hayan podido hacerlo? ¿Por qué?
- ¿Cómo afecta el costo de vida sus decisiones sobre el cuidado infantil?
- ¿Qué significa para usted la atención asequible?

Appendix B4: Additional Reports

Nearby City-Based Childcare Programs

In local counties, there are two types of city-based childcare:

1. **Full Day Preschool Centers** are more robust programs with longer hours that serve a broader age range. Pacifica, Belmont, San Mateo, Palo Alto, and Menlo Park fall into this category.

Pacifica is an example similar to Menlo Park's Preschool Program, as a two-site full-day preschool operated by the city. Some families pay full fees, and some are subsidized based on need. Their funding model is based on four sources: 1) Participant fees, 2) Grants from CA Department of Education and San Mateo County, 3) City of Pacifica General Fund, and 4) Fundraisers by a Parent Advisory Committee and Pacificans Care. Like other preschools, they experienced declined enrollment from Universal TK and post-Covid changes. They recently instituted a strong city-wide advertising campaign that has increased enrollment.

2. **Half Day Preschool-age Programs** are in community centers with more limited schedules and age eligibility. Redwood City, Mountain View, Los Gatos/Saratoga, Los Altos, and Campbell fall in this category. Los Gatos/Saratoga, Los Altos, and Campbell only offer morning classes, while Redwood City and Mountain View offer a choice between morning and afternoon. Many are facilitated through Park and Rec as classes not licensed preschools.

Mountain View is an example of this style of Preschool program. They have one room in a community center dedicated to preschool-age children. They offer a half-day program in the morning or afternoon. It is full-fee based with a resident and non-resident rate. The half-day program addresses the challenge of affordable care. The audience is primarily a family that does not need FT care during standard work hours. They are not a licensed preschool. They have felt the impact of free school-based Universal TK and some decreased enrollment. Families choose their preschool because of the quality of care, convenience, flexible part-time schedule options, and parent communication during the day (photos).

It is important to note that the listed preschools predominantly advertise and manage programs through their city. The exception is PACC in Palo Alto, which is a program that originated with the city and is now its own non-profit. There may be other preschool programs nearby that rent city buildings but are not affiliated with the city.

Nearby Cities that operate a preschool program:

San Mateo County					
City	Type	Age	# Sites	Hours	Type of Building
Belmont	Full Day	2-5 yrs	1 site	8am - 6 pm Full or Half Day option	City community center
Pacifica	Full Day	2.9 - 5 yrs	2 sites	7am - 6pm	City buildings
Burlingame	Half Day	2-3 yrs	1 site	8:45am - 3:30pm Morning or afternoon	City building
Redwood City	Half Day	3-5 yrs	1 site	9am - 3:30pm Morning or afternoon	City community center
San Mateo	Half Day	2-5 yrs	2 sites	8:30am - 3:30pm Morning or afternoon	City community center
City	Type	Age	# Sites	Hours	Type of Building
Palo Alto - PACCC	Full Day	2 mos- 5yrs	5 sites 2 infant/ toddler	7:30am - 6pm	School district and city buildings
Campbell	Half Day	2yr 8 mos- 5.5 yrs	1 site	Morning only 3-4 Days/week	City community center
Los Altos	Half Day	4-5 yrs	1 site	8:45 - 11:45am Mon-Thurs	City building
Los Gatos/Saratoga	Half Day	3-5 yrs	1 site	8:30 - 11:30am 2-4 Days/week	City community center
Mountain View	Half Day	3-5 yrs	1 site	Morning or Afternoon	City community center

Appendix B4: Additional Reports

Local Preschools that Have Recently Closed

This is a list of known local preschools that have recently closed. The closures listed start in March 2020, after the pandemic caused temporary shutdowns of many preschools. The data is based on reporting from the [California State Licensing website](#), and/or online research stating the closure, and/or a website address that is no longer valid. We are continuing to research this information. We hope to learn more about the reasons for closure, but it is difficult to contact closed businesses. Please contact tricia@solutionaryadvisors if you have any details about closed preschools in Menlo Park and surrounding communities.

NAME	ADDRESS	CITY	FULL CAPACITY	CLOSED DATE
Circle Of Friends Preschool	3214 Alameda De Las Pulgas	Menlo Park	Not listed	Not listed
Roberts School	641 Coleman Ave	Menlo Park	50	Not listed
Crescent Park Community Child Care	4161 Alma Street	Palo Alto	66	8/31/2021
Genius Kids	569 San Antonio Road	Palo Alto	45	8/11/2020
Good Neighbor Montessori	4000 Middlefield Road #K4	Palo Alto	60	10/31/2020
Love -N- Care Christian Preschool & Day Care Center	2490 Middlefield Road	Palo Alto	75	7/3/2020
Sora International Preschool (Palo Alto Location)	701 East Meadow Drive	Palo Alto	26	5/31/2020
Young Life Christian Pre-School Center	687 Arastradero Rd	Palo Alto	31	7/31/2020

Appendix C: Recommendations

C1: Marketing & Communication Recommendations

Goal: Meet the expressed community need to have an easier time finding childcare, particularly the city-operated childcare programs, which will lead to financial sustainability.

Website Update

Website updates should focus on quality programming while answering key parent questions:

- **Philosophy of early childhood development:** Explain the play-based program and the research on how that benefits children's growth and learning.
- **Program details:** Include enrichment activities that build different skills, social-emotional learning, daily schedule, special enrichment activities like library, gardening, etc.
- **Pricing:** Include cost, year-round school calendar, discounts offered, flexible schedule options, etc.
 - **Subsidized pricing information and help (BHCD):** Include income levels that qualify for state funding, share helpful links like current state sliding scale, 4C's, forms help and FAQ's
- **Facilities:** Include photos of each classroom and outdoor space with descriptions.
- **Teachers:** Include photos of teachers, years at the preschool, why they love teaching kids, etc.
- **Special needs student support:** Share what services are currently provided for students with IEPs/IFSPs.
- **Testimonials:** Utilize quotes from current families and children.

Add a page with a list of all Menlo Park preschools: This benefits all preschools in Menlo Park and the families who are looking for care. It can be a central (opt-in) directory hub for licenced preschool information.

Community Outreach

We recommend that the preschools have a more heightened presence in the Community and provide easier entry points for families.

1. Citywide Preschool Fair

Create an annual preschool fair in Menlo Park where all the different schools can attend. It's a one-stop for parents who can meet school directors and learn about all the different programs. This could be done at each site, targeting different communities.

2. Preschool Site Open House Event

Host a fun Spring community event at each site with preschool-age activities that includes current families. Utilize City communication channels to advertise and post flyers at City buildings with potential parents present. Invite anyone on the waitlist. This

also builds a community for current families with preschool-age activities who can invite friends to come. Attendees will see the school location and teachers in action, building trust and interest. This could happen once or twice a year.

Example idea from BHCDL teachers: a cultural fair that includes food, crafts, art, music, games, etc.

3. Tabling

MCC and BHCDL can table at City or Community Center Events that expect parents.

4. Connect with the neighboring elementary school (BHCDL specific)

Table at community events, site visits with teachers and admin to build trust and program awareness, share printed materials, etc

5. Friends and family incentive

Create an incentive for current parents when they bring in another family who registers a student. This incentive can also be extended to the registering family.

Marketing Materials

We recommend updating printed marketing materials to reflect the changes and investing in new signage.

1. Flyer

Create a photo-heavy flyer in Spanish and English with student and parent testimonials. Have a QR code linked to the website and contact information. Available in print and laminated copy posted at all city buildings where children and families may go - community center, library, pool, etc.

2. Brochure

Create a brochure for each preschool that highlights their programs. This can be available at city buildings, and used for tabling, potential family tours, etc. Printed in Spanish and English.

3. New signage for community traffic

Create colorful banners to hang outside of each facility advertising preschool programs, ages, and enrollment. Consider refreshing permanent signage in the near future.

Utilize City's Communication Channels

There are many opportunities to share about the preschools in the City's existing channels.

1. Social Media

Regularly post highlights of the preschool on the City's social media: library visits, special events, artwork, garden harvest, teacher highlight stories, etc.

2. Communication in emails or printed newsletters

Share info at key registration times. Share early learning parenting tips. Write an article about a teacher to honor their long-time service to the preschool and the community.

3. Targeted mailings

Send a postcard to families in the Belle Haven neighborhood targeting families who would benefit from subsidized pricing and may not know it is available to them.

Ease Impact Matrix for Marketing & Communications

Impact is based on the number of interested families we can reach with this tactic.

Implementation is based on the level of difficulty to implement with

	HIGHER IMPACT	LOWER IMPACT
HARDER TO IMPLEMENT	• Citywide Preschool Fair • Connect with the neighboring elementary school	
EASIER TO IMPLEMENT	• Website update • Preschool Site Open House • Friends & family incentive • Tabling • Flyer & Brochure • City's Social Media • City Communication channels • New signage for community traffic	• Targeted mailings