



# Partnering with Faith Communities to Expand Early Care and Education Access for Children in Foster Care

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Young children in foster care (CiFC) need access to early care and education (ECE) that is responsive to their developmental needs. To support access to quality ECE for CiFC, Arkansas provides CiFC with categorical eligibility for child care subsidies: in other words, all CiFC in Arkansas are eligible to receive vouchers to support child care payments. Yet many Arkansas foster parents report difficulty finding open slots in high-quality ECE programs that accept vouchers (Grindal et al., 2025).

The faith-based community plays a key role in both the Arkansas foster care system and the Arkansas ECE system. Many faith-based organizations are involved in mission-driven work to recruit, certify, and support foster parents (Every Child Arkansas, n.d.), and many ECE programs are operated by or housed within faith-based organizations. However, despite these faith-based programs' strong connections to foster families and their role in providing child care, many do not accept the state's child care vouchers that foster families rely on.

This brief examines factors that limit faith-based ECE programs' participation in state quality and child care subsidy systems and identifies opportunities to strengthen their role in serving CiFC. Drawing on administrative data, a statewide survey, focus groups, and interviews with Arkansas faith-based ECE program directors, we identify key challenges and outline practical strategies states can use to more effectively engage this important sector.



We find that while many faith-based ECE providers already serve CiFC, they are much less likely than other ECE programs to participate in Arkansas's Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) or accept child care vouchers. Program directors cited administrative burden and limited financial incentives as primary reasons for not participating in these systems. Many also expressed concerns about faith-related restrictions, including fears they would need to adopt secular curricula, change hiring practices, or remove religious elements from their programs. These concerns were often based on misconceptions about state and federal policy. At the same time, many faith-based providers voiced a strong interest in serving more CiFC and identified a need for additional training and support, especially in responding to trauma and challenging behaviors.

Below, we describe faith-based ECE providers' participation and challenges to participation in the state systems. Then, we offer practical suggestions for how states can better engage the faith-based child care community to support young CiFC.

Nationwide, faith-based organizations play an important role in the delivery of center-based ECE. According to the 2019 National Survey of Early Care and Education, 6.2% of center-based programs for children birth through age 5 were sponsored by faith-based organizations, and an additional 12.1% were located in buildings affiliated with religious groups but not directly sponsored by them (Borton, 2022). Together, these centers served nearly 1.3 million children, accounting for about 18% of all children enrolled in center-based care. A 2020 Bipartisan Policy Center survey found that 31% of working-parent households used center-based care and 53% of these parents chose faith-affiliated programs (Morris & Smith, 2021). According to the survey, the reasons parents chose faith-based ECE programs included the values of providers, quality of caregivers, trust, opportunities for cognitive development, facility cleanliness, and safety.



## Methods

This study employed a mixed-methods approach to examine the role of faith-based ECE programs in serving Arkansas CiFC. Data sources included administrative data, a survey of Arkansas faith-based ECE program directors, and a focus group of directors of Arkansas faith-based ECE programs not currently serving CiFC through the subsidy system. The study was conducted as part of a collaborative project between the Arkansas Department of Education/Division of Elementary and Secondary Education/Office of Early Childhood (OEC), the Arkansas Department of Human Services/Division of Children and Family Services (DCFS), SRI International, the National Center for Children in Poverty, and the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences (UAMS). The collaboration team is focused on learning about the supply, quality, and stability of ECE settings for CiFC, as well as the factors that promote or reduce access to high-quality ECE.

### Administrative Data

Administrative data included Arkansas Child Care Licensing data on 1,562 child care programs licensed and open at any point between August 1, 2021, and July 31, 2022. Data were merged with a publicly available geocoded dataset with all 501(c)(3) nonprofit places of worship derived from federal Internal Revenue Service (IRS) records, used to identify 307 Arkansas faith-based ECE programs as faith-oriented, faith-affiliated, and/or co-located in a faith-based facility.

### Survey

The project team, in partnership with UAMS, administered an online survey in fall 2024 to a random sample of 256 ECE programs identified as faith-oriented, faith-affiliated, and/or co-located within a faith-based facility. The survey covered topics including QRIS participation, voucher acceptance, and program experiences serving CiFC. A total of 104 ECE program directors (41%) completed the survey.

### Focus Group

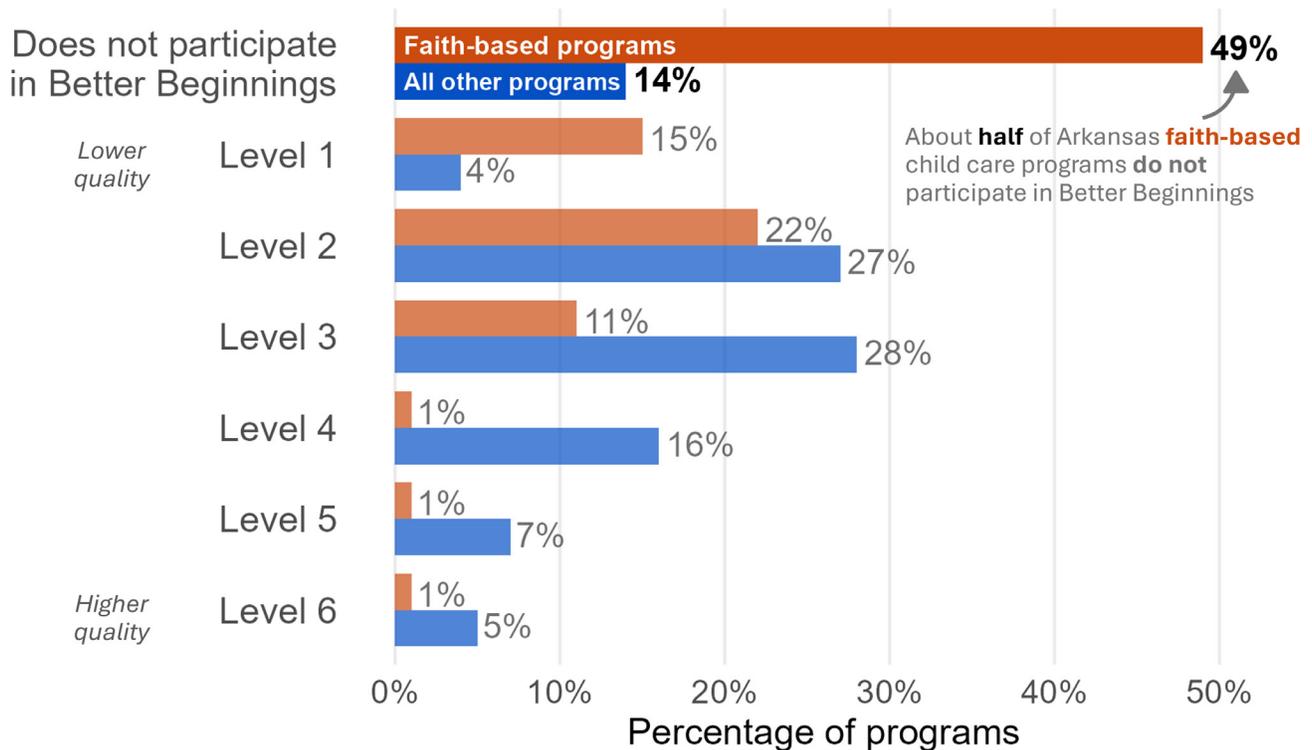
The team also facilitated a focus group with three directors of faith-based ECE programs that did not accept child care vouchers. Focus group questions asked directors about considerations that guide decisions on whether to participate in the state's child care subsidy system, the perceived benefits to participation, and their thoughts about serving CiFC.

# Findings

## Faith-based ECE programs participate in state systems at lower rates than other programs and perceive barriers to participation.

Overall, just over a third (37%) of faith-based ECE program directors reported accepting child care vouchers, consistent with national reports of subsidy acceptance rates for faith-based programs (36%; Borton, 2023). To accept child care vouchers in Arkansas, programs must participate in Arkansas's statewide QRIS, called Better Beginnings, and achieve a rating of Level 2 or higher. About half (51%) of Arkansas faith-based ECE programs participate in Better Beginnings, much lower than the participation rate of all other ECE programs (86%). Even those faith-based programs that participate in Better Beginnings are less likely to accept vouchers than non-faith-based programs: Among Better Beginnings programs rated Level 2 or higher, only 78% of faith-based programs accepted vouchers, compared with 85% of all other ECE programs.

### Percentage of Faith-Based Child Care Programs and All Other ECE Programs That Participate in Better Beginnings, by Level



**Note.** Faith-based child care programs: N = 307. All other child care programs: N = 1,255.

Faith-based ECE program directors cited both operational challenges and concerns about preserving their religious identity as key reasons for not participating in Arkansas's QRIS. The most common reason, reported by 59% of surveyed directors, was a belief that participation offered little benefit to their program. Other frequently mentioned concerns included the time and effort required to complete the QRIS certification process (51%), fears that their program would be required to use a non-faith-based curriculum (49%) or be unable to incorporate faith rituals into their program (46%), challenges with meeting QRIS requirements (42%), and concerns about potential requirements to change their hiring practices (27%).

Focus group participants expressed a strong interest in enrolling CiFC but described significant challenges, both financial and faith-related, that limit their ability to do so. They shared concerns raised in the survey, with one program director emphasizing, "Because we choose to use a Christian curriculum, that is one of the things that stops us from ... using government funding."

When asked what might increase their participation in QRIS, faith-based ECE program directors pointed to practical incentives and peer connections as potential motivators. About a third (34%) of surveyed program directors reported that an added financial or in-kind benefit could be motivating. Additionally, 22% stated that talking with other faith-based program directors who currently participate in Better Beginnings might make them more open to participation.

## **Many faith-based ECE programs serve children in foster care without participating in state systems.**

Despite lower levels of participation in state systems, faith-based ECE program directors reported high rates of serving CiFC. Nearly half (49%) of surveyed program directors indicated their program had served at least one child in foster care between birth and age 5 in the past 12 months, and 61% reported having done so in the last 3 years. These rates are substantially higher than the rate for Arkansas ECE programs statewide (20%).

Many of these faith-based programs are serving CiFC without accessing the financial and programmatic supports provided by the state. Of the program directors who reported serving CiFC during the past 12 months, about a quarter (26%) indicated their program does not participate in the state QRIS system and more than a third (36%) indicated their program does not participate in the child care subsidy system.

Faith-based ECE program directors who had served CiFC within the past 3 years generally described their experiences as positive. Seventy percent of surveyed program directors rated their experience as a 7 or higher on a scale of 1 *very negative* to 10 *very positive*. This includes more than a third (36%) who rated their experience as a 10 (very positive). Nearly a quarter (24%) rated their experience as a 5 (neutral).

## Faith-based programs reported needing more training to support children with trauma and challenging behavior.

Many faith-based ECE programs, even those currently serving CiFC, reported a strong need for additional training and support related to trauma and challenging behavior. Specifically, 78% of surveyed program directors indicated their staff need or very much need assistance with addressing challenging behavior, and 69% expressed a need for more training on working with children who have experienced trauma. Among those faith-based ECE programs not currently serving CiFC, a quarter of directors cited one or more concerns related to staff preparedness, stress, or their ability to meet children’s needs as barriers to serving this population.

Faith-based program directors also identified several resources that could help them continue to serve and better meet the needs of CiFC. More than two thirds of surveyed program directors reported that having “resources about how to access recommended trauma-informed trainings available at no cost to providers” (65%) and “resources about how to access support when there are child behavior concerns at no cost to providers” (67%) would be very useful for supporting ECE providers to serve and meet the needs of CiFC.

## Recommendations

Below, we provide recommendations that may help state leaders expand quality ECE for CiFC through engagement with faith-based ECE providers. Particularly as current federal education priorities focus on expanding parental choice and state education decision-making (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2025), collaboration between state agencies and faith-based ECE programs may be important for supporting access to quality child care for CiFC, in Arkansas and in other states.

### Recommendation 1: Dispel the Myths and Share the Benefits

State leaders and partners might consider targeted information campaigns to clarify program requirements and dispel myths about participation in the state QRIS and subsidy system that some providers may perceive as obstacles to participation. Such myths may include concerns about programs’ continued ability to implement faith-based curricula, engage in faith rituals, or consider faith as part of hiring practices. In these information campaigns, state leaders could reference federal rules and regulations that permit programs receiving Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) vouchers to carry out faith-based activities and specifically allow faith-based ECE providers additional flexibility with hiring practices (see Administration for Children and Families, 2025, p. 8). State leaders might also consider including information about the benefits of subsidy and QRIS participation. For example, communications can appeal to mission-driven providers by highlighting increased opportunities to serve families in need, including low-income families and foster families. Depending on the state, there may also be benefits specific to QRIS participation, such as access to training or higher child care voucher reimbursement rates for programs that reach higher levels of quality.

## **Recommendation 2: Message Through Communities, Rather Than To Communities**

State leaders might consider partnering with organizations in the faith community that are trusted and respected by faith-based ECE providers to help communicate benefits, address potential misconceptions, and share resources that can support providers in navigating the process of applying to participate in the state QRIS and subsidy system. For example, state leaders could work with faith-based partners to identify examples of providers who are successfully participating in the state QRIS or subsidy system and are willing to share their experiences. When members of the community speak of their own experiences, particularly how they were able to successfully navigate participation in the state QRIS or subsidy system while still meeting the obligations of their faith mission, other ECE providers may be more receptive to the messaging than if it comes from the state. Additionally, leveraging the support of these community partners might provide more organic reach and authentic engagement, such as through social media groups, than the state may be able to access.

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