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SPOKANE COUNTY

Early Learning

Childcare Provider Needs Assessment

2026 Workforce & Training Survey Report

45 County Respondents | 22 City of Spokane Respondents

Prepared by the Spokane Workforce Council. Made possible with Community Development Block Grant funds from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development through the City of Spokane.

Executive Summary

This report presents findings from a 2026 needs assessment survey of 45 early learning providers across Spokane County, including 22 within the City of Spokane, representing licensed childcare centers, in-home providers, and ECEAP/TK programs collectively serving 3,190 licensed slots.

Three cross-cutting themes emerged consistently:

01

Compensation

93%

Wages ranked as the #1 recruiting barrier and the top funding priority for county providers.

02

Training Access

89%

cite scheduling conflicts; 71% cite cost; 51% lack substitutes to cover staff during training.

03

Workforce Demand

62%

anticipate growing staffing needs over the next 1–2 years. Sustained investment is needed now.

AT A GLANCE

45

early learning providers across Spokane County

22

providers within the City of Spokane

3,190

licensed slots county-wide

1,678

licensed slots within the city

Respondent Profile

Survey respondents represent 45 licensed childcare providers across Spokane County, including 22 within the City of Spokane. The vast majority operate licensed centers; a small share are licensed in-home or ECEAP/TK programs. Together they account for 3,190 licensed slots county-wide and 1,678 within the city.

Licensed Capacity

ALL COUNTY (N=45)

3,190

Total licensed slots

71

Avg slots per program

6–150

Range of licensed slots

CITY OF SPOKANE (N=22)

1,678

Total licensed slots

76

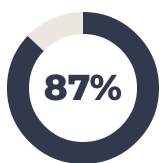
Avg slots per program

6–134

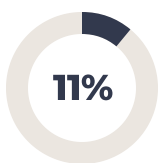
Range of licensed slots

Type of Care

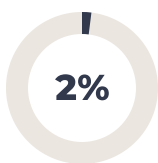
ALL COUNTY (N=45)



Licensed center
39 providers

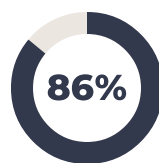


Licensed in-home
5 providers

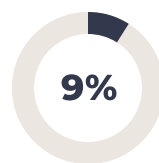


Center / TK / ECEAP
1 provider

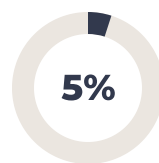
CITY OF SPOKANE (N=22)



Licensed center
19 providers



Licensed in-home
2 providers



Center / TK / ECEAP
1 provider

Workforce Conditions & Hiring

Nearly seven in ten county providers are currently hiring or anticipate openings within 90 days, signaling persistent acute demand. The majority expect staffing needs to grow over the next 1–2 years. Wage competitiveness is a core driver: 33% of county providers report wages are “much lower” than competing industries, and an additional 11% report “slightly lower,” meaning nearly half fall below industry pay norms.

HIRING NOW OR WITHIN 90 DAYS

69%

of county providers are currently hiring or anticipate openings in the next 3 months (64% in the City of Spokane).

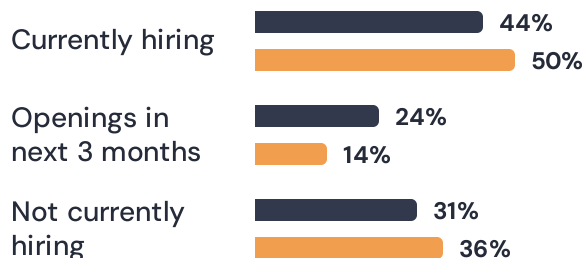
WAGES VS. OTHER INDUSTRIES

44%

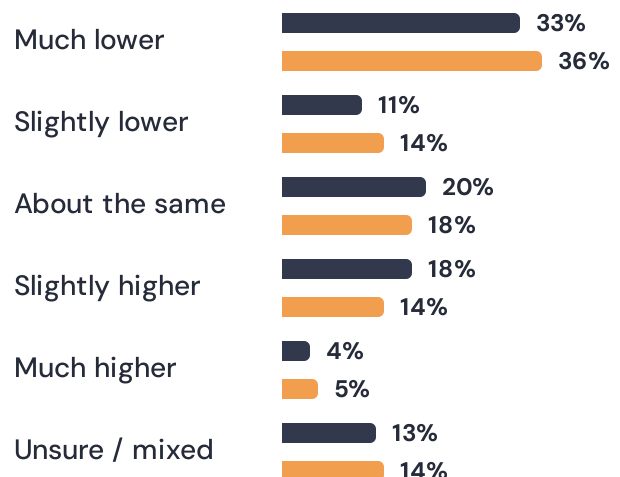
of county providers report wages lower than competing industries (33% much lower, 11% slightly lower).

■ All County (n=45) ■ City of Spokane (n=22)

Hiring Status



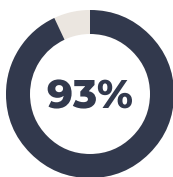
Wages vs. Other Industries



Workforce Investment Priorities

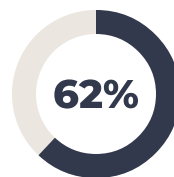
Providers selected their top 3 priorities if additional funding were available. Wage increases were selected by 93% of county providers, the clearest signal in the entire survey. Health/mental health benefits ranked second.

IF ADDITIONAL FUNDING WERE AVAILABLE, PROVIDERS WOULD PRIORITIZE



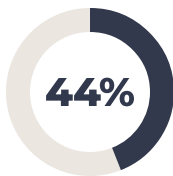
Wage increases

County: 93% (42 of 45)
City of Spokane: 95% (21 of 22)



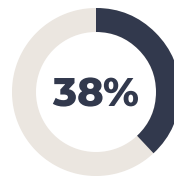
Health / mental health benefits

County: 62% (28 of 45)
City of Spokane: 50% (11 of 22)



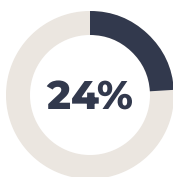
Substitutes / floaters

County: 44% (20 of 45)
City of Spokane: 32% (7 of 22)



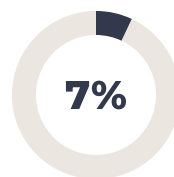
Training stipends

County: 38% (17 of 45)
City of Spokane: 27% (6 of 22)



Mentorship / coaching

County: 24% (11 of 45)
City of Spokane: 18% (4 of 22)



Other

County: 7% (3 of 45)
City of Spokane: 14% (3 of 22)

BURNOUT REDUCTION

Burnout reduction responses clustered around the same themes:

◆ Pay

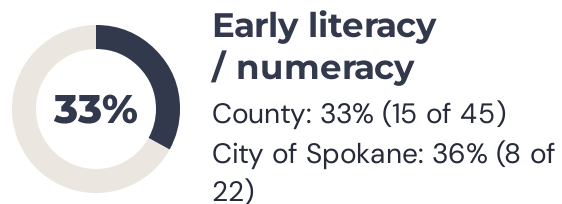
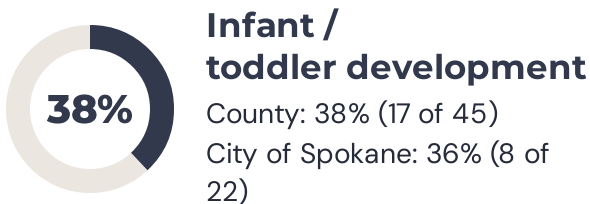
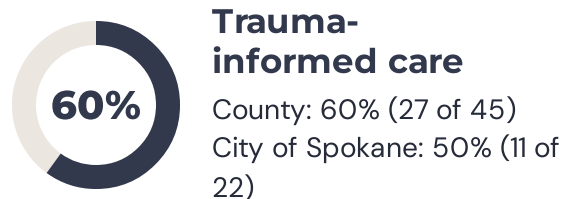
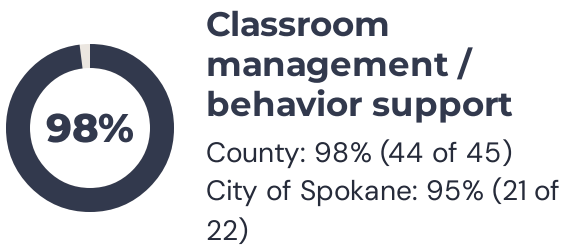
◆ Benefits

◆ Paid time off

Professional Development

Classroom management and behavior support is the near-universal training priority, cited by 98% of county providers. Time and cost are the primary barriers, with 89% citing scheduling conflicts. Lack of substitutes to cover staff during training affects half of all providers, compounding the access problem.

TOP TRAINING TOPICS REQUESTED



Training Barriers

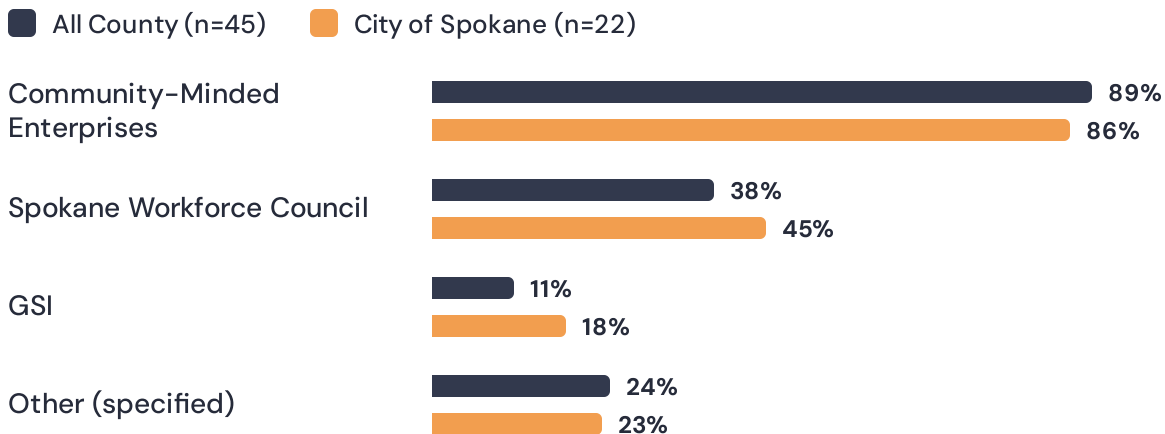


Share of county providers citing each barrier to training participation.

Community Partnerships & Engagement

Community-Minded Enterprises has the strongest reach among respondents. Spokane Workforce Council is engaged with 38% of county providers, a significant foothold with room to deepen penetration. A strong majority of providers expressed interest in receiving Labor Market Information to help benchmark wages and make the case for increased funding.

Partner Organization Engagement



LABOR MARKET INFORMATION INTEREST

69%

of county providers
(31 of 45) want LMI
to benchmark
wages

59%

of city providers (13
of 22) want LMI to
benchmark wages

Regional Wage Comparison

In response to that interest, the Spokane Workforce Council analyzed Lightcast labor market data (Q2 2026) to benchmark early learning wages against other occupations in Spokane County. The median compensation for childcare occupations (including preschool teachers, teaching assistants, and childcare workers) is \$18.28 per hour, or approximately \$38,022 annually.

By comparison, electrical and electronics technician roles in the same region, positions that often require similar or lower levels of formal education, post at a median of \$27.81 per hour, or approximately \$57,845 annually. This means childcare workers earn approximately 34% less than technicians in the local labor market.

34%

THE WAGE GAP

less earned by childcare workers than by electrical and electronics technicians in Spokane County

Childcare occupations (blended median)

\$38,022 / yr

\$18.28 / hr

Robotics technicians

\$54,080 / yr

\$26.00 / hr

Electrical / electronics technicians

\$57,845 / yr

\$27.81 / hr

Median hourly wages. Source: Lightcast Q2 2026, Spokane County, WA.

Wage Benchmarks

Occupation	Median Hourly	Annual Salary†	Source
Childcare Workers	\$18.28	\$38,022	Lightcast 2026
Preschool Teachers	\$18.28*	\$38,022*	Lightcast 2026
Teaching Assistants	\$18.28*	\$38,022*	Lightcast 2026
Electrical/Electronics Techs	\$27.81	\$57,845	Lightcast 2026
Robotics Technicians	\$26.00	\$54,080	Lightcast 2026

*Median shown is the blended rate across all three childcare occupations. †Annual salary = median hourly × 2,080 hours. Sources: Lightcast Q2 2026, Spokane County, WA.

COMPETITION FOR EARLY LEARNING TALENT

174

companies actively
posting for childcare roles

65

average job postings per
month

4,201

workers in the local
childcare workforce

With 174 companies actively posting for childcare roles and an average of 65 job postings per month against a workforce of just 4,201, competition for early learning talent is high. Yet wages remain well below what workers can earn in comparable positions.



This data validates what providers are reporting: the wage gap is structural, and it is the primary driver of the hiring and retention crisis across the early learning sector.

Provider Voices

Providers were asked what they want funders and decision-makers to understand about the early learning workforce. Their responses reflect urgency, pride, and frustration, and reinforce every quantitative finding in this report.



There are so many educated and hard working people in the field that need to be compensated as professionals."



Childcare is an economic engine. We allow parents to work. If we aren't funded properly, the whole economy suffers."



It is a dead industry. Too many requirements for teachers with too low of pay."



Children deserve safe, quality care. Qualified childcare workers cannot live off of the salaries they are being paid."



We are competing with food, hospitality, and medical industries that offer higher starting salaries and benefits but require far less education."



We can't pay enough to get qualified employees. We can't charge more. It already costs so much to put a child in care."



Childcare is infrastructure. It is a necessary resource to attract and retain people to our region."



We need organized, accessible health care and retirement options that centers can enroll in. We need a larger pool to bring down costs."

Strategic Plan

Priority Actions for 2026–2027

Based on survey findings, the following strategic priorities represent the highest-impact, most actionable areas. Each priority is directly supported by data and provider voice.

◆ SECTION 1 • COMPENSATION & WORKFORCE SUSTAINABILITY

PRIORITY 1 Advocate for and Implement Wage Parity

Data: 93% would prioritize wages with additional funding; 33% report wages “much lower” than competing industries.

1. Direct state and federal childcare funding streams toward wage supplements and salary floor programs for licensed providers.
2. Partner with DCYF to advocate for Early Achievers wage incentive expansion at the state legislative level.
3. Distribute Labor Market Information (LMI) to the 69% of county providers who requested it, and use the data to build the business case for increased public investment.

◆ SECTION 2 • TRAINING ACCESS & PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

PRIORITY 2 Remove Barriers to Training Participation

Data: 89% cite scheduling; 71% cite cost; 51% lack substitutes to cover staff during training.

1. Expand evening, weekend, and fully asynchronous training options.
2. Develop and fund a regional substitute pool or floater bank accessible to all licensed Spokane County providers.

PRIORITY 3

Launch a Regional Early Learning Workforce Recruitment Campaign

Data: 69% are hiring or expect openings within 90 days; 62% anticipate growing staffing needs in the next 1–2 years.

1. Launch a coordinated early learning workforce recruitment campaign in partnership with SFCC, WSU, EWU, and local high schools.
2. Develop an early learning career pathway marketing toolkit highlighting wages, credentials, and advancement opportunities.
3. Begin pipeline development now: engage community colleges and other programs to grow the credentialed applicant pool.

With Appreciation

This report was prepared by the Spokane Workforce Council and made possible with Community Development Block Grant funds from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development through the City of Spokane. Thank you to the early learning providers across Spokane County who shared their time and perspectives.



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Questions about this report? Contact Bianka DeSure at bdesure@spokaneworkforce.org.

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