



# Meaningful Family Choice

How State Child Care  
Infrastructure Can  
Make It Possible.

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740 E 52nd Street, Ste 7  
Indianapolis, IN 46205  
[www.tccsolutions.com](http://www.tccsolutions.com)

PHONE 1.866.563.6767  
FAX 1.877.448.9989  
EMAIL [info@tccsolutions.com](mailto:info@tccsolutions.com)



# Meaningful Family Choice:

## How State Child Care Infrastructure Can Make It Possible.

For many families with young children, choosing child care is one of the most important and most difficult decisions they will make. Meaningful choice means selecting care that fits a family's needs, not settling for whatever is available or affordable. That difference often comes down to whether states have the child care data infrastructure to support it: is there an opening, can we afford it, is it close enough, safe, and a good fit for our child? When data on availability, cost, quality, safety, and subsidy participation is outdated or scattered across disconnected systems, families are left to make one of life's most consequential decisions in the dark.

Information alone doesn't create choice. State policy and funding decisions shape what options actually exist in the first place, and every state already offers some tools to help families understand and compare their options. This article doesn't address how those policy decisions build capacity or affordability. It asks a narrower question: do states have the technology and data infrastructure to measure, monitor, and improve family choice as it actually works on the ground?

This article discusses why informed family choice matters, what research tells us about how parents search for and select child care, and how states can strengthen the data systems that support family decision-making. It is organized around two areas:

- The policy, practice, and technology decisions states can make to support parent choice and access.
- The data architecture and reporting infrastructure needed to measure and improve that access over time.

Together, these sections point toward what a modern state data platform for family choice looks like in practice, and what it makes possible for both families and state agencies.



## Key Takeaways

- Families rely most on personal networks and their own internet searches - not formal referral agencies making findability and trust the top priority for state tools.
- Meaningful choice depends on the child care data infrastructure states use to connect licensing, subsidy, quality and enrollment data.
- A single, mobile-first search portal reflecting the full mixed-delivery system helps families compare options across provider types in one place.
- States can only measure whether family choice is improving by treating it as a defined, trackable outcome with consistent indicators.

## How Do Families Search for and Choose Care: The Research

Research consistently shows that families rely most on personal networks and their own internet searches, not formal agencies, when choosing child care. There is a rich and growing body of research on how families choose a child care provider that meets their needs. This includes a literature review by NORC (National Opinion Research Center), a qualitative study by NORC, expanded data from OPRE (Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation), NORC, and the Urban Institute, a survey from Pew, and many more. This research is clear that families rely heavily on trusted personal networks, including relatives, friends, and neighbors, when looking for child care. Families also frequently use internet searches, while formal information sources such as Child Care Resource and Referral agencies are used less often. This pattern suggests that state consumer education systems must be easy to find, easy to understand, and trusted by families if they are to support real-world decisions.

Families weigh many factors when selecting care. Safety and quality are consistently important, but practical considerations often determine which options families can realistically pursue.

Other factors include:

- |                          |                    |
|--------------------------|--------------------|
| • Location               | • Curriculum       |
| • Hours                  | • Staff training   |
| • Scheduling flexibility | • Licensing status |
| • Provider reliability   | • Transportation   |
| • Ages served            | • Meals            |



- Languages spoken
- Subsidy acceptance
- Cost

Affordability is often the deciding factor, and families may narrow their search to care they believe they can afford, or choose care based on cost rather than preference.

Some families face additional barriers because of limited child care supply and other systemic challenges. Families seeking infant/toddler care and nontraditional or unpredictable hours, families living in rural or low-income areas, and immigrant families unfamiliar with the U.S. child care system may have fewer realistic options. Many families also rely on multiple arrangements to cover their work hours, a reminder that the child care market often asks families to piece together solutions rather than choose from a stable set of affordable, preferred options.

A mixed-delivery approach recognizes that no single provider type can meet the needs of every family.

Families may choose:

- Licensed center-based care
- Family child care homes
- Head Start
- Public preschool
- School-age programs
- Community-based organizations
- Family, friend, and neighbor care
- Nanny care

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# How Can States Use Technology to Strengthen Family Choice?

States strengthen family choice by pairing consumer-facing technology with policy decisions about what data gets collected and which providers are represented. State data systems should cover the full child care ecosystem, not just certain provider types. If a system leaves providers out, families never see the full range of options actually available to them. A well-designed system lets families compare across the mixed-delivery system, but the system only works if families know it exists. That's where an awareness campaign may be implemented to make sure the tool actually reaches the people it's built for.

Technology alone does not create informed choice. It has to be paired with policy: what gets built, who is required to report into it, and who is represented in it.

The recommendations that follow describe practical ways states can strengthen consumer-facing tools, along with the policy levers that keep them accurate and inclusive.

- **Build a single point of access for families.**

A comprehensive child care search portal lets families compare providers across center-based care, family child care, faith-based providers, public preschool, Head Start, and school-age programs in one place, rather than asking them to check multiple agency websites or call individual providers one at a time.

- **Design for how families actually search.**

Mobile-first design, along with search and mapping tools help a family filter by proximity to work and home, provider type, ages served, and tuition rates, turning an abstract list of providers into a practical set of options.

- **Show the full range of provider types.**

State policy should actively support provider diversity across settings, including faith-based providers, family child care homes, Head Start, PreK, and family, friend and neighbor care. The consumer-facing tools should reflect that diversity rather than defaulting to the most institutionally visible options.

- **Make cost transparent.**

Affordability is often the deciding factor in a family's search for care, and it's sometimes the hardest thing to find out without direct outreach to the provider. Publishing tuition ranges, subsidy eligibility criteria, and estimated family copayments can help a family estimate and compare costs across



provider options. Ideally, a cost calculator tool, rather than a static table, is embedded in the state's consumer education tools.

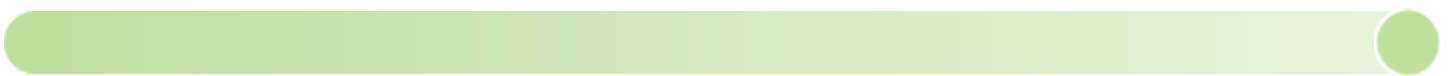
- **Translate compliance data into plain language.**

Licensing status, inspection history, corrective actions, and accreditation already exist in most states' systems, but usually in a format built for regulators, not for families. Presenting this information in plain, family-friendly language turns a compliance record into a genuine decision-making tool.

- **Incentivize providers to keep availability current.**

A portal showing outdated vacancy information can be worse than no portal at all, since it erodes families' trust in the tool itself. States can encourage providers to update vacancy status, waitlist position, enrollment capacity, and age-specific openings (infant, toddler, and preschool slots are rarely interchangeable) on a defined, regular cadence.

All these tools generate data as families use them, and the next section looks at how states can use that data to measure, monitor, and improve family choice.



# How Can States Use Data to Support Family Choice?

States can only tell whether choice is improving once licensing, subsidy, quality, and enrollment data are connected into one infrastructure. Without an integrated data infrastructure, states can build these tools and still not know whether choice is actually improving for families, or for which families, and in which places. Fragmented or outdated data across licensing, subsidy, quality, and enrollment systems makes it impossible to answer basic questions with confidence:

- *Where are families struggling to find care?*
- *What is the range and trend of care attributes that CCDF (Child Care and Development Fund) families need?*
- *Which communities lack infant and toddler capacity?*
- *Where are child care deserts emerging, or shrinking?*
- *How is affordability impacting family choice?*
- *Which providers are leaving the subsidy system, and why?*
- *Which families face the greatest barriers to accessing care?*
- *How effective are the state's consumer education efforts?*

These are outcome questions, not system-design questions. Answering them requires connecting data sources that many states currently maintain separately.

## Treat family choice as a measurable outcome.

States must make a shift to treat family choice as a measurable outcome, starting with a clear definition of what successful family choice looks like and the key indicators that signal it. **Availability, affordability, provider diversity, quality levels, geographic access, subsidy participation, and family satisfaction** can all be tracked as a defined indicator set, not an ad hoc list. Consistent definitions make trend analysis possible.

## Connect the systems that don't currently talk to each other.

Interoperability among licensing, subsidy, quality, family/child enrollment, and consumer education





systems is the foundation everything else depends on. Without it, "supply and demand" is just several disconnected spreadsheets that happen to describe the same providers.

### Build dashboards for the policymakers making investment decisions.

Dashboards that track enrollment trends, provider participation, vacancy, and capacity utilization let administrators measure and monitor family choice indicators and make policy and investment adjustments to address emerging gaps before they become a crisis.

### Use geographic data to target investment, not just display maps.

The same location data that powers a family-facing search can be analyzed at the state level to identify child care deserts, underserved areas, and age gaps where supply shortages are most acute.

### Track subsidy participation by geography and provider type.

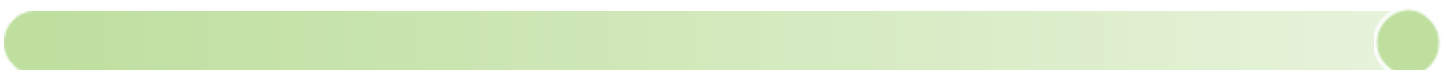
Monitoring where providers are entering or leaving the subsidy system, broken out by region and provider type, tells states whether families receiving assistance actually have a meaningful range of options.

### Collect the data families can't give you through a search portal.

Family experience data can be collected through surveys and structured feedback to capture what usage data alone can't. Collecting data directly from families can reveal search barriers, accuracy issues, trust in the information provided, and needs that may have gone unmet.

### Close the loop with continuous quality improvement.

The point of all of the above is to inform where the state invests next. Analyzing performance trends and identifying gaps only creates value if it's tied to a process for redirecting resources toward the areas the data identifies as underserved.



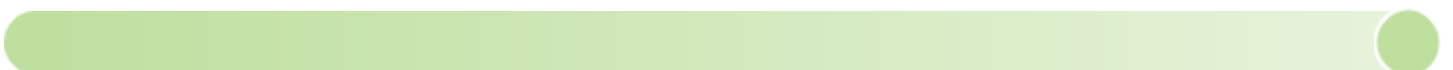


## Conclusion

Family choice is strongest when state data systems are designed around family decision-making. Families need access to the information they consider important when they need it, and just as important, they need to know where to find it. Policymakers need the same reliability on their end: data they can trust to identify access gaps, monitor provider participation, evaluate affordability, and determine whether their policies are expanding options or limiting them.

Investing in integrated, family-friendly technology is what turns family choice from a statutory principle into something states can actually measure and improve. In short, family choice is only as strong as the data infrastructure behind it.

States that are ready to take a closer look at their own data infrastructure, and what it would take to close the gaps, don't have to figure it out alone. We're available to help states think through what a stronger system could look like for them.





# From Recommendations to Solutions

TCC Solution's Ascend® platform gives states a practical way to put these recommendations into action. Ascend is an integrated, modular platform built to close the information gap at the center of this article. It brings availability, cost, quality, safety, and eligibility data into a single, connected system.

For families, Ascend's family portal brings GPS-mapped provider search, detailed provider profiles, and real-time eligibility and case status into one mobile-accessible experience. It answers the questions families ask in one place.

That search is only as good as the data behind it. Ascend's provider portal makes it easy for every type of provider — centers, homes, faith-based programs, legally license-exempt providers, Pre-K, Head Start, school-age, and summer care — to keep their license and profile current. The result is a state-wide picture of the full range of care options.

For state agencies, that same data becomes the foundation for measurement. Ascend's dashboards and analytics give policymakers the tools to track family choice as an ongoing, measurable outcome, and to see where access and capacity gaps persist.

And because Ascend is modular, states don't have to choose between starting small and thinking big. Agencies can deploy a single module or the full platform, and connect it to existing state systems through secure, API-based integration.





## Resources:

[Child Care in America: A Brief Look at the Mixed-Delivery System • Bipartisan Policy Center](#) – *Mixed Delivery System*

[Connecting Parents' Child Care Decisions with their Needs, Information Access, and Perceived Child Care Options \(2025\)](#) – *NORC*

[Parental Search and Selection of Child Care and Early Education: A Literature Review \(2024\)](#) – short NORC

[Parents' Experiences with Searching for and Selecting Child Care and Early Education: A Multi-Site Qualitative Study](#) – *NORC*

[Understanding Parents' Complex Child Care Choices or Lack Thereof \(2023\)](#)– *FYFF/BPC*

[What are parents' biggest challenges in finding childcare? | Pew Research Center \(2026\)](#)

[How Parents Search for, Consider, and Select Child Care and Early Education: A Conceptual Framework \(2025\)](#)



## Contributors:



**Leigh Bolick, M.Ed.**  
Early Childhood Project Manager

Leigh serves as a Project Manager for TCC Solutions®. She is a strategic and impact-driven Executive Program Leader fortified by over 20 years of expertise across nonprofit and public sectors, conceiving and actualizing innovative frameworks that reshape program controls, streamline critical workflows, and increase outreach. Leigh is highly adept at advancing formal definitions, promoting, and safeguarding the welfare of Early Care & Education & Social Services programs that reinforce the continuity of program initiatives.



**Melanie Brizzi**  
Vice President, Chief Growth Officer

Melanie brings more than 25 years of leadership in early childhood education, including experience as a licensed child care provider, Indiana State Child Care Administrator, and senior director of the national Child Care State Capacity Building Center. She led the design and implementation of Indiana's QRIS and the state's first pre-K program, a mixed-delivery system serving low-income 4-year-olds.



**Dawn Downer**  
Early Childhood Project Manager / Thought Leader,  
TCC Solutions

With more than 30 years in health and human services, Dawn has served as Indiana's State Director for early intervention and as Chief of Staff for the Division of Disabilities and Rehabilitation Services. She specializes in building local systems that support individual growth and effective outcomes.



## Lacey Kottkamp, M.Ed.

Vice President, Government Solutions and Partnerships,  
TCC Solutions

Lacey leads engagement and growth strategies with government agencies, bringing over a decade of experience in early childhood policy and public sector leadership. She has served as a State Systems Specialist with the Child Care State Capacity Building Center and Indiana's Director of Child Care Policy, among other leadership roles that focused on interagency collaboration and data-driven systems.



## Michelle Thomas, MSW

Vice President, Strategy and Marketing, TCC Solutions

Michelle leads strategy and marketing with deep experience translating evolving early childhood policy, funding, and legislative requirements into organizational and client-facing solutions. A former teacher and Indiana State Child Care Administrator, she has led major statewide data system implementations, including Indiana's first QRIS, and served as deputy chief of Child Care Aware of America and technical assistance consultant to Early Learning Challenge Grant recipients.





From Recommendations to Solutions

# TCC Solutions Meets Agencies Where They Are

Regardless of the phase your agency is in, we stand ready to strengthen CCDF program integrity with measurable results - without overwhelming agency staff.



## Our People

We bring experienced subject matter experts, including former CCDF State Administrators and policy staff who have deep insight into program integrity approaches and implementation.



## Our Processes

We have over 20 years of experience in CCDF program monitoring and fraud investigations, as well as quality assurance and improper payments monitoring protocols.



## Our Technology

Our flagship product, Ascend®, integrates CCDF eligibility with child care licensing, quality and workforce data. Additionally, Ascend is highly interoperable and can be easily connected for data validation and verification with external systems.

