



PARTNER UP! PROGRAM EVALUATION

2023 RESEARCH REPORT

APRIL 2023

From August 2022 to March 2023, KW2 conducted one-on-one interviews and fielded surveys with Wisconsin employers, child care providers, and families participating in the Partner Up! grant program. The Partner Up! program provides concrete benefits for Wisconsin businesses, child care programs, and employees across the state while ensuring a focused, stable workforce in Wisconsin. The goal of this research was to measure program outcomes, better understand participants' experiences and barriers, and identify opportunities to continue to improve the program to support Wisconsin families and stabilize the child care industry in the state.



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INTRODUCTION



RESEARCH OVERVIEW

KW2 conducted research with Wisconsin employers, child care providers, and families in three phases beginning in August 2022 and concluding in March 2023.

Phase 1: One-on-One Key Informant Interviews from Both Cohorts

COHORT 1: AUGUST 29 - OCTOBER 11, 2022 | COHORT 2: OCTOBER 25, 2022 - FEBRUARY 8, 2023

31

employers, including those in the child care industry

11

child care providers

22

participating employees

Phase 2: Online Surveys with Employers and Providers from Both Cohorts

GROUP 1: JANUARY 4 - JANUARY 29, 2023 | GROUP 2: MARCH 9 - MARCH 25, 2023

156

employers, including those in the child care industry

51

child care providers

Phase 3: Online Surveys with Employees from Both Cohorts

MARCH 9 - MARCH 25, 2023

131

participating employees

PROJECT GOALS

- Measure program outcomes on Wisconsin businesses, including employer perceptions of the effects of the child care benefit on worker satisfaction, recruitment, retention, and productivity.
- Measure program outcomes on child care organizations and determine how well the partnerships support their needs and provide opportunities for growth.
- Measure program outcomes on employees and families, including employee satisfaction, recruitment, retention, and productivity.
- Understand participants' experiences and pain points to identify areas of opportunity for improving the program moving forward.
- Determine perceptions around employer support of early care and education (ECE) and gather feedback for increasing employer involvement and support.

PARTICIPANT DETAILS: INTERVIEWS

Employer Industries

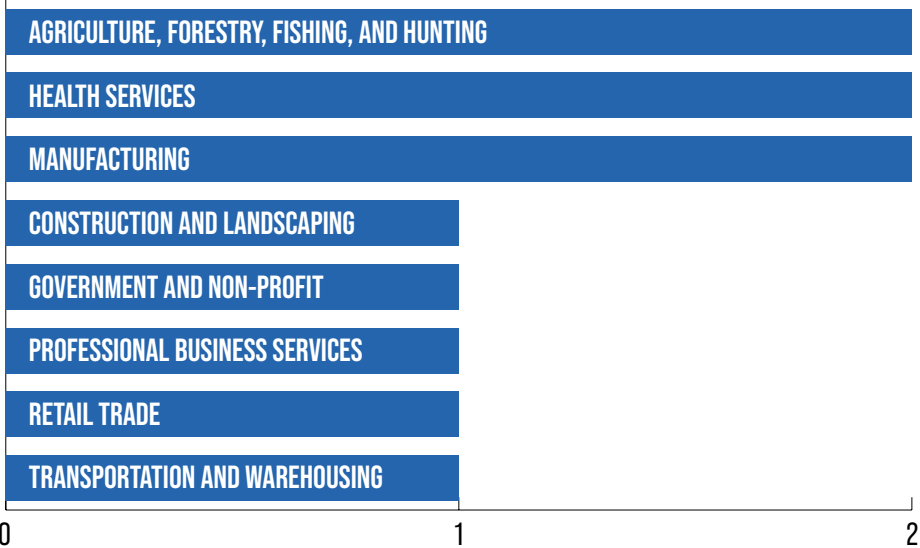
65%

of employer participants work in the child care and education industry (20 total participants)

35%

of employer participants work in another sector (11 total participants)

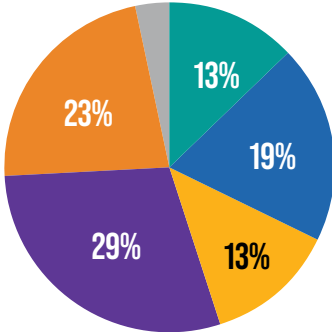
PARTICIPATING INDUSTRIES OUTSIDE OF CHILD CARE AND EDUCATION



Interviewee Regions

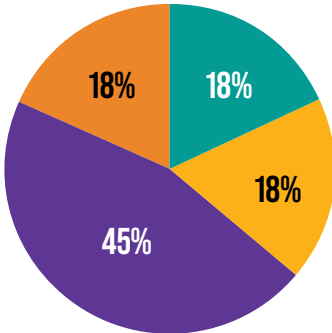
EMPLOYERS

- Northeastern
- Northern
- Southeastern
- Southern
- Western
- Unknown



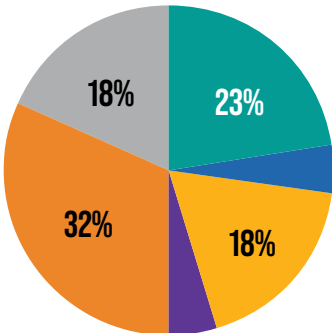
PROVIDERS

- Northeastern
- Northern
- Southeastern
- Southern
- Western
- Unknown



EMPLOYEES

- Northeastern
- Northern
- Southeastern
- Southern
- Western
- Unknown



PARTICIPANT DETAILS: EMPLOYER AND PROVIDER SURVEYS

Industry

74%

of participants work in the child care and education industry (153 total participants)

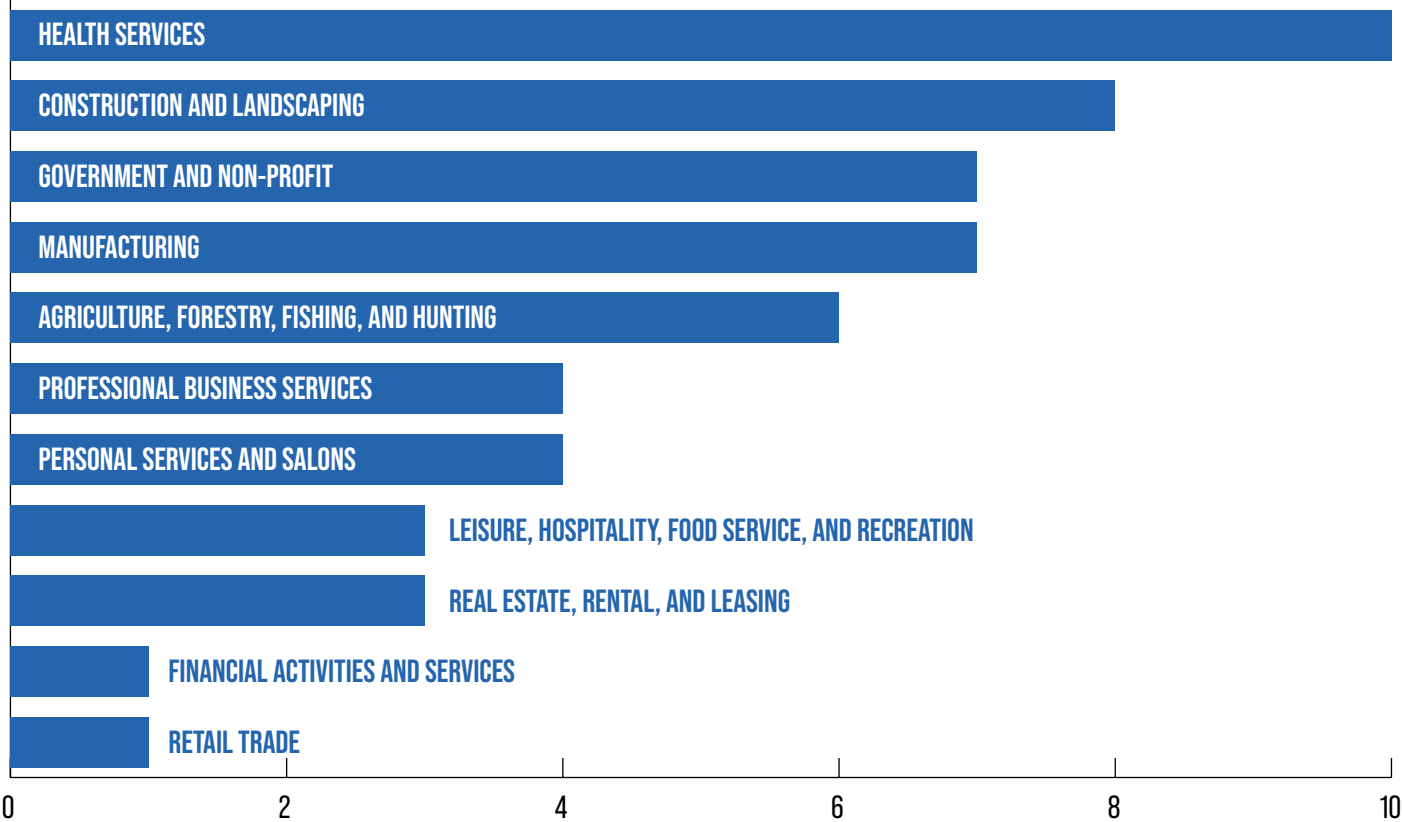
26%

of participants work in another sector (54 total participants)

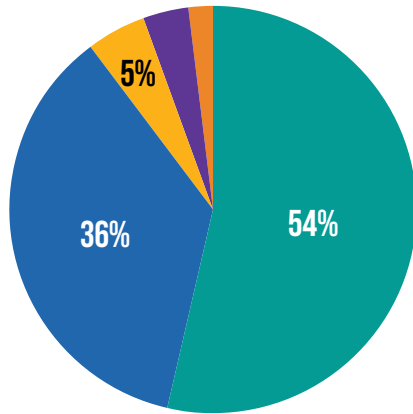
48%

of child care provider participants are partnering with other area businesses using the Partner Up! grant

PARTICIPATING INDUSTRIES OUTSIDE OF CHILD CARE AND EDUCATION

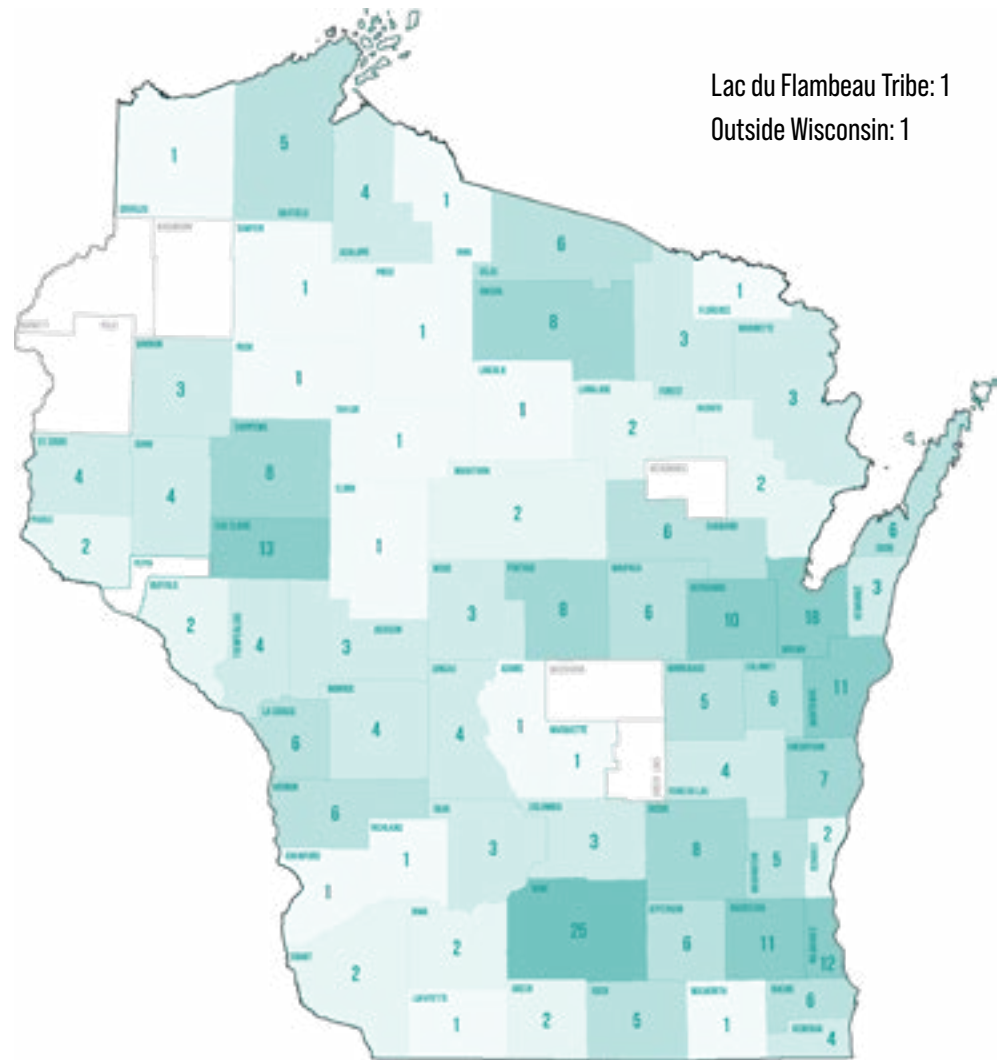


Role

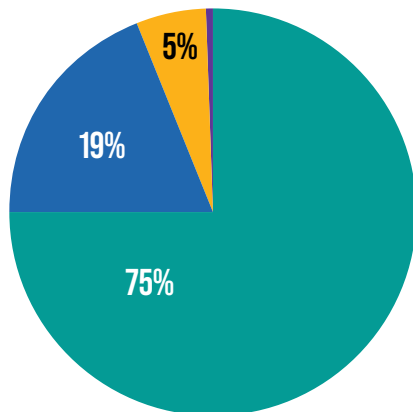


- Owner or proprietor
 Employee
- Manager, supervisor, or director
 Human resources
- C-suite/leadership role

Location



Organization Size



- Small (5-99)
 Mid-Size (100-999)
- Sole/Extra Small (1-4)
 Large (1000+)

Grant Program Participation

3

On average, employer participants are using 3 Partner Up! slots

7

On average, child care provider participants are using 7 Partner Up! slots

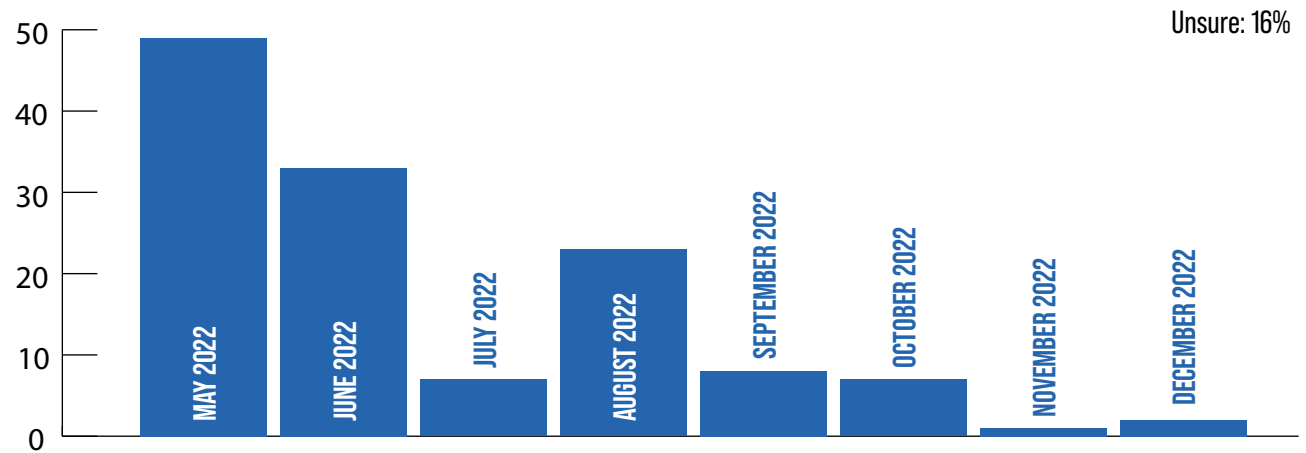
9%

of child care provider participants personally have a child or children enrolled in the Partner Up! grant

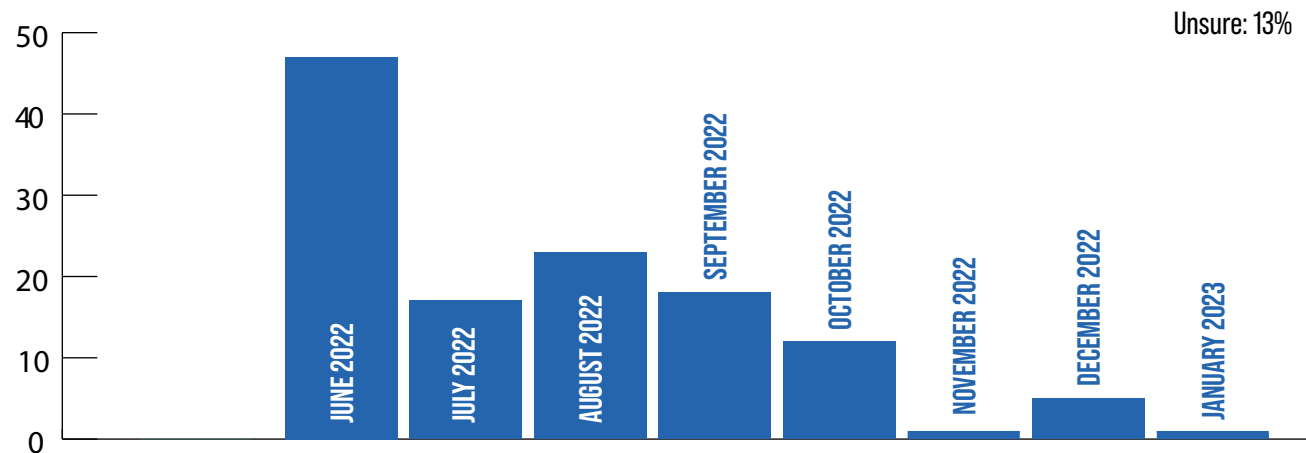
14%

of child care provider participants have employees using slots at another organization

CONTRACT TIMING



PROVIDER PAYMENT TIMING



PARTICIPANT DETAILS: EMPLOYEE SURVEYS

Industry

68%

of participants work in the child care and education industry (86 total participants)

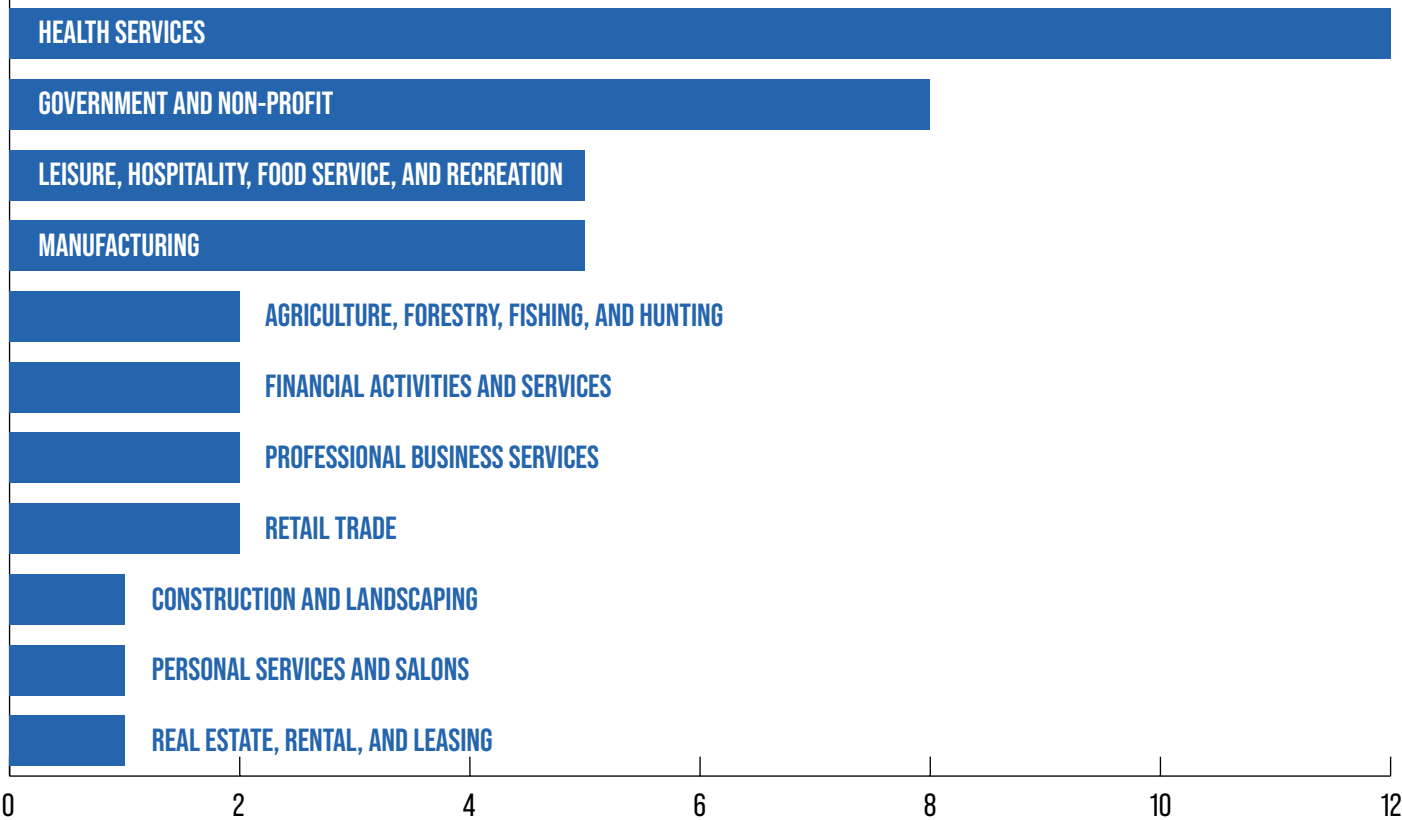
32%

of participants work in another sector (41 total participants)

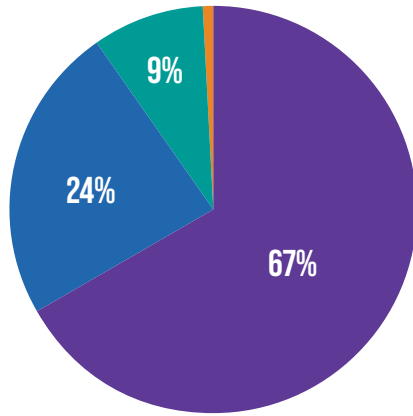
94%

of employee participants did not need to change providers to participate

PARTICIPATING INDUSTRIES OUTSIDE OF CHILD CARE AND EDUCATION

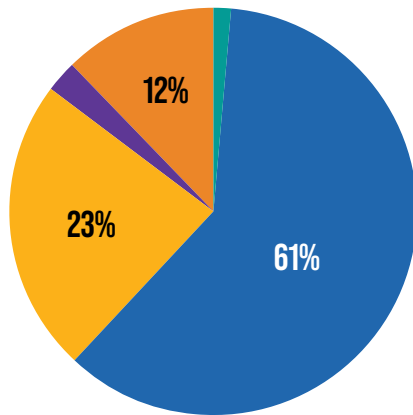


Role



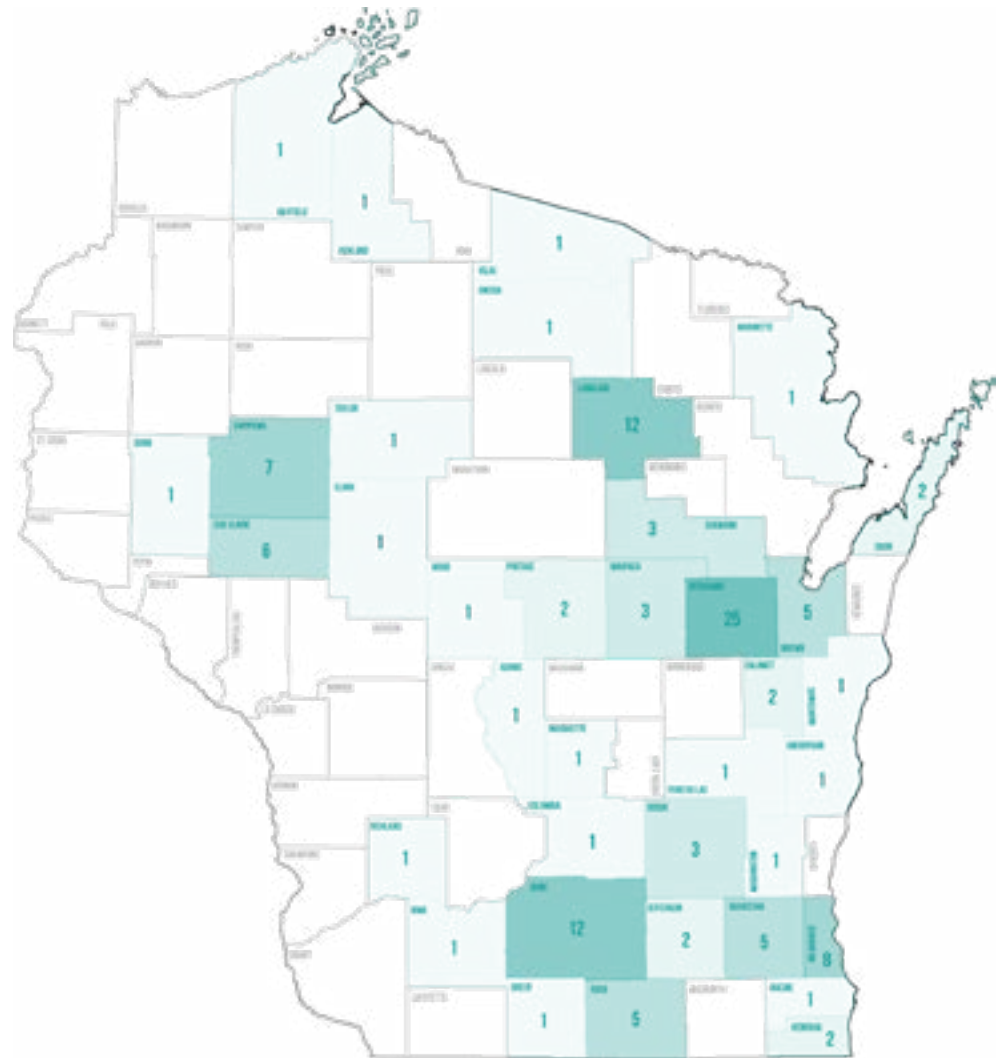
- Employee
- Owner or proprietor
- Manager, supervisor, or director
- Human resources

Number of Children Enrolled



- 0
- 2
- 1
- 3
- 4 or more

Location



IMPACTS





IMPACTING BUSINESSES, PROVIDERS, AND FAMILIES ACROSS THE STATE

From helping employers boost employee morale, improve retention, and attract new employees in a difficult labor market to stabilizing providers and providing them with funds to improve their businesses to helping Wisconsin families afford quality child care, the Partner Up! program has already had a significant impact on Wisconsin.

220

participating employers

1,269

child care slots

EMPLOYER IMPACTS

From improving employee retention in a competitive labor market to increasing productivity, employers reported that their participation in the Partner Up! program resulted in a number of significant, positive impacts to their organization. The Partner Up! program has directly helped employers address some of the challenges they reported in a 2021 statewide survey, where 73% of employers said they struggled to retain their current employees and 69% had difficulty attracting new workers.

Top impacts included:

Improved employee retention and satisfaction

Employers shared that their ability to financially support their employees' child care costs increased employee retention and overall job satisfaction. They noted that with child care costs covered, employees often no longer needed to make the difficult choice of being able to afford working full-time versus staying at home to care for children. For employers within the child care and education industry, participating employee morale was higher overall because staff felt as though they were being recognized and compensated for the true value of their work.

"The positive impact of the program has been instrumental in retaining staff with children, and allowed us to direct additional resources to staff benefits and increase staff compensation. It's a win-win as an employer who is committed to supporting employees in every way possible!"

- An employer in the child care and education industry in southeastern Wisconsin

"This is a great program for business owners—especially in our rural area—to take advantage of for an employee benefit. With our rural community, it has been so hard for people to find care—let alone care that is affordable—to make it worth it for employees to work instead of staying home because they can't afford the cost of child care."

- An employer in the real estate, rental, and leasing industry in northeastern Wisconsin

"I believe this is one of the most beneficial programs that have come out of the pandemic. Child care has been widely unrecognized and dismissed for the value of the work we do. It is well known that our employees have been underpaid and underappreciated. One of the only benefits child care programs have been able to offer employees over the years, aside from free meals and hugs, has been free or reduced child care. Partner Up! finally offers a way for child care programs and employees to both receive some benefits."

- An employer in the child care and education industry in western Wisconsin

"I've gotten tremendous feedback from our employees who received the funding. One family said that they weren't able to have a budget before this, and now they actually can save for things now that they're not paying for child care."

- An employer in the government and non-profit industry in western Wisconsin

93%

of employers surveyed would participate in the Partner Up! program again

Increased organizational competitiveness in a competitive labor market

Across industries and the state, employers consistently communicated that it is becoming increasingly difficult to attract and hire qualified employees in competitive labor markets. The ability to provide a “perk” such as paying for all or a portion of an employee’s child care costs was seen as a unique and valuable benefit that increased qualified prospective employee applicant pools.

“I think this is a great benefit for small businesses especially...[it allows] small businesses to offer a great employee benefit at a lower cost so they can compete with bigger companies.”

- An employer in the professional business services industry in western Wisconsin

“It’s such a huge benefit for employees and attracts talent to our company.”

- An employer in the child care and education industry in northeastern Wisconsin

“This is a win-win-win program for employers, employees, and child care providers. We attracted new employees into the child care profession due to this grant.”

-An employer in the child care and education industry in northeastern Wisconsin

“[It’s a] great benefit for employees and we were able to recruit some staff by offering this employee benefit. As a small business owner, it is very hard to compete with bigger companies on benefits and this helped a lot!”

- An employer in the professional business services industry in western Wisconsin

Bolstered organizational operations

Partner Up! employers said their organizations saw increased productivity, fewer absences and/or tardiness, and better overall job performance and were able to directly tie these improvements to reduced disruptions and turnover from employees who lacked consistent, quality child care.

“It has been a heaven-send to our staff. They do not feel the stress or burden of spending most of their hard earned salaries on child care costs. Staff feel as though they are able to focus on work while at work, and be more present with their children at home.”

- An employer in the child care and education industry in southern Wisconsin

“[It helped] one of our employees with child care so she could continue working the hours she needed to.”

- An employer in the manufacturing industry in northeastern Wisconsin

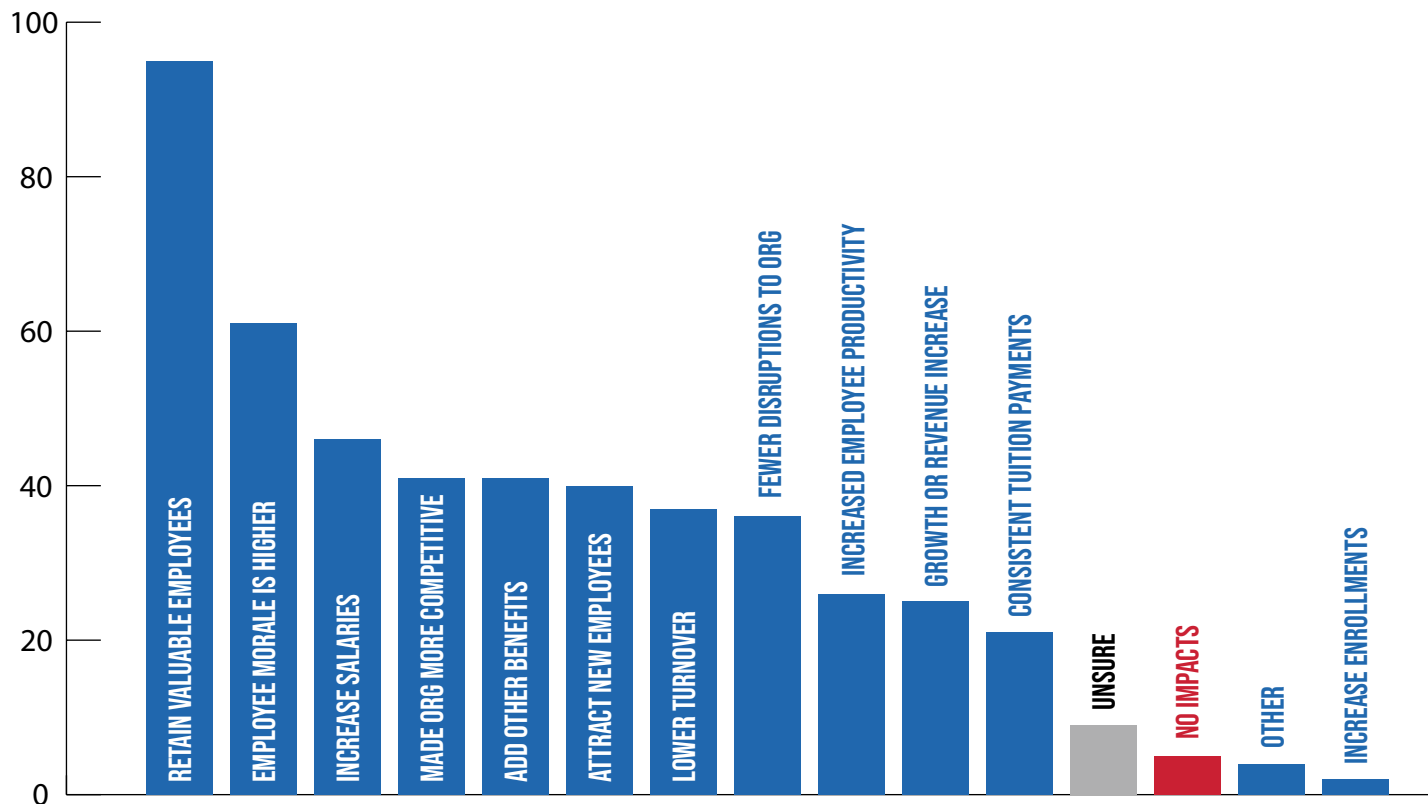
“My shop was becoming a daycare. I wanted to make the salon personal again. Even though I was offering help to my employees, it was still a business.”

- An employer in the personal services and salons industry in southeastern Wisconsin

Top Partner Up! Program Employer Impacts

When asked to choose the five most significant impacts the Partner Up! program has had on their business, employers chose retention, improved employee morale, the ability to increase salaries, that the program has helped their organization become more competitive in a tight labor market, and the ability to add other benefits.

Employers within the child care and education industry were more likely than average to say that the Partner Up! program allowed them to attract and hire new staff and increase salaries, as well as that the program made them more competitive in a tight labor market. Employers in industries other than child care and education were more likely than average to say that the Partner Up! program has increased employee productivity.



82%

agree that Partner Up! has directly impacted the success of their organization

70%

agree that Partner Up! has helped their organization avoid labor shortages and attract and retain quality employees

“ This helps child care centers retain their employees! We have not had a turnover rate at our center for the last year.”
- Employer

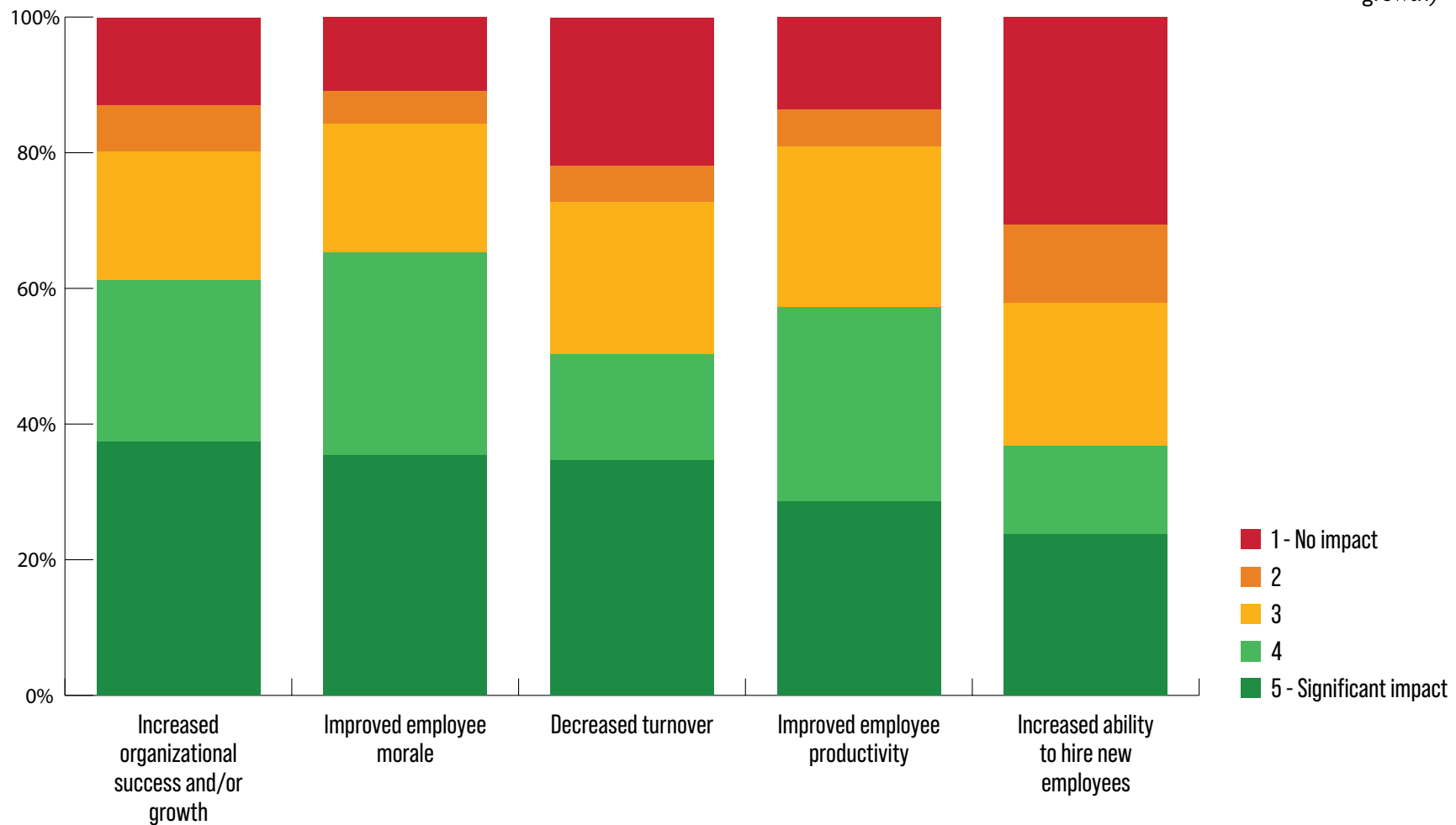
Quantifying the Impact of Partner Up!

Employers were also asked to quantify the impact of the program across several key business metrics. The most significant impacts reported by employers include increased organizational success, improved employee morale, and decreased turnover.

Employers in the child care and education industry reported a more significant impact in the ability to hire new employees, as well as their ability to retain existing employees.

61%

of employer participants said Partner Up! had a significant impact on their organization's success (revenue and/or growth)



CHILD CARE PROVIDER IMPACTS

Participating child care providers also reported considerable benefits to their organizations because of their participation in the Partner Up! program. Receiving the true cost of care for the children enrolled at the center allowed participating providers to increase salaries, add other employee benefits, and increase their purchasing power. In a few cases, Partner Up! enabled providers to reopen closed classrooms or expand their facilities.

Top impacts included:

Stability and growth in overall organizational operations

Many participating child care providers said that their participation in Partner Up! enabled them to stabilize and strengthen their financial positions and overall organizational operations. This was due primarily to the fact that the grant program pays the true cost of care for each participating child rather than a base tuition. The financial investment increased providers' abilities to invest in their businesses' infrastructures, purchase updated supplies, improve their curriculum, and save money due to lower employee turnover.

"It has helped our already-fragile business model and has given us the opportunity to have added benefits for employees we otherwise could not afford."

- A child care provider in northeastern Wisconsin

"It is an amazing program that enables our center to cover costs plus apply any additional funds to quality improvement."

- A child care provider in northeastern Wisconsin

"We are so thankful for the funding that [we] received through the Partner Up! grant. Expenses have increased and would have hurt the bottom line significantly without the grant. It has allowed us to pay our staff increased wages, assisted with hiring qualified staff, food costs rising, utilities, etc. [It] helped cover increased expenses, and has enabled us to stay afloat."

- A child care provider in northern Wisconsin

"With getting the true cost of care, it's really been able to help us. We've used the funding to buy some new supplies for the center and helping with everyday operating expenses too. It's helping us stay more afloat."

- A child care provider in northern Wisconsin

84%

of providers surveyed would participate in the Partner Up! program again

Improved current employee retention, boosted overall morale, and increased competitiveness in the labor market

Partner Up! child care providers said that their stabilized and bolstered financial position meant that many were able to increase salaries and other benefits for their child care staff. These actions in turn led to lower staff turnover, a more positive organizational environment, and an increased ability to attract and hire qualified child care staff.

“Overall, the program has been amazing and really helps afford qualified teachers.”

- A child care provider in southern Wisconsin

“I very much appreciate the support we have been given during this difficult time with staffing and being able to provide quality wages to our employees while still providing quality care to families.”

- A child care provider in southern Wisconsin

“The parents really appreciate it and it was a way for our employer to attract new employees.”

- A child care provider in northern Wisconsin

“Helps family with tuition; excess funds go toward employee salaries.”

- A child care provider in northeastern Wisconsin

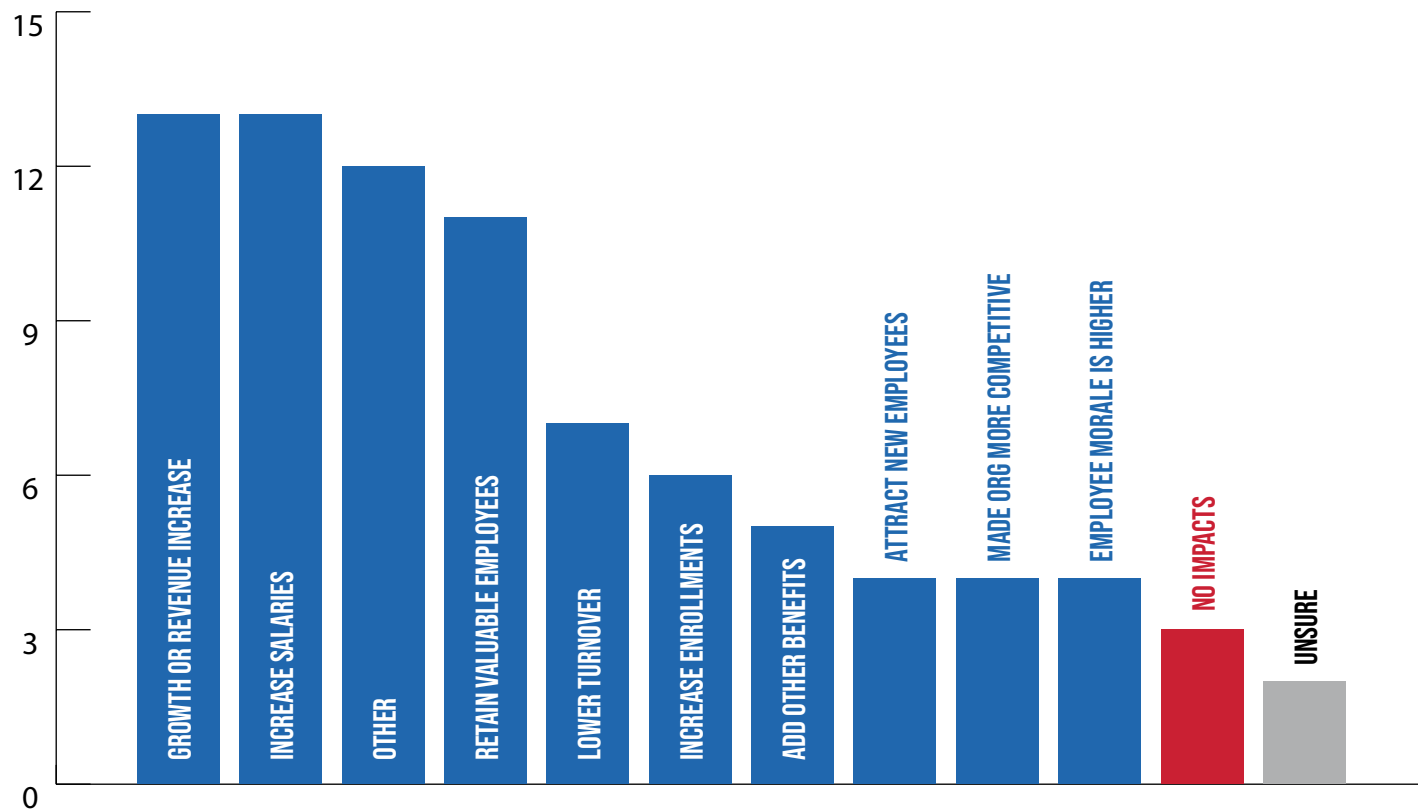
“The family that participated was really helped out a lot. The quality of care also went up as it was also income that helped the center.”

- A child care provider in western Wisconsin

Top Partner Up! Program Child Care Provider Impacts

When asked to choose the five most significant impacts the Partner Up! program has had on their business, child care providers said the program has directly impacted their businesses' success through growth or increased revenue, allowed them to increase salaries and retain valuable employees, and enabled them to save costs due to lower turnover. "Other" benefits mentioned included the ability to assist families enrolled at the center, as well as increased purchasing power for supplies and other resources.

Providers without employees participating in the program were slightly more likely than other audiences to say the program had no impact on their organization, though over half agreed or strongly agreed that Partner Up! has directly impacted the success of their organization.



56%

agree that Partner Up! has directly impacted the success of their organization

35%

agree that Partner Up! has helped their organization avoid labor shortages and attract and retain quality employees

“ This has allowed us to buy another building and will be increasing our capacity to double by August.”

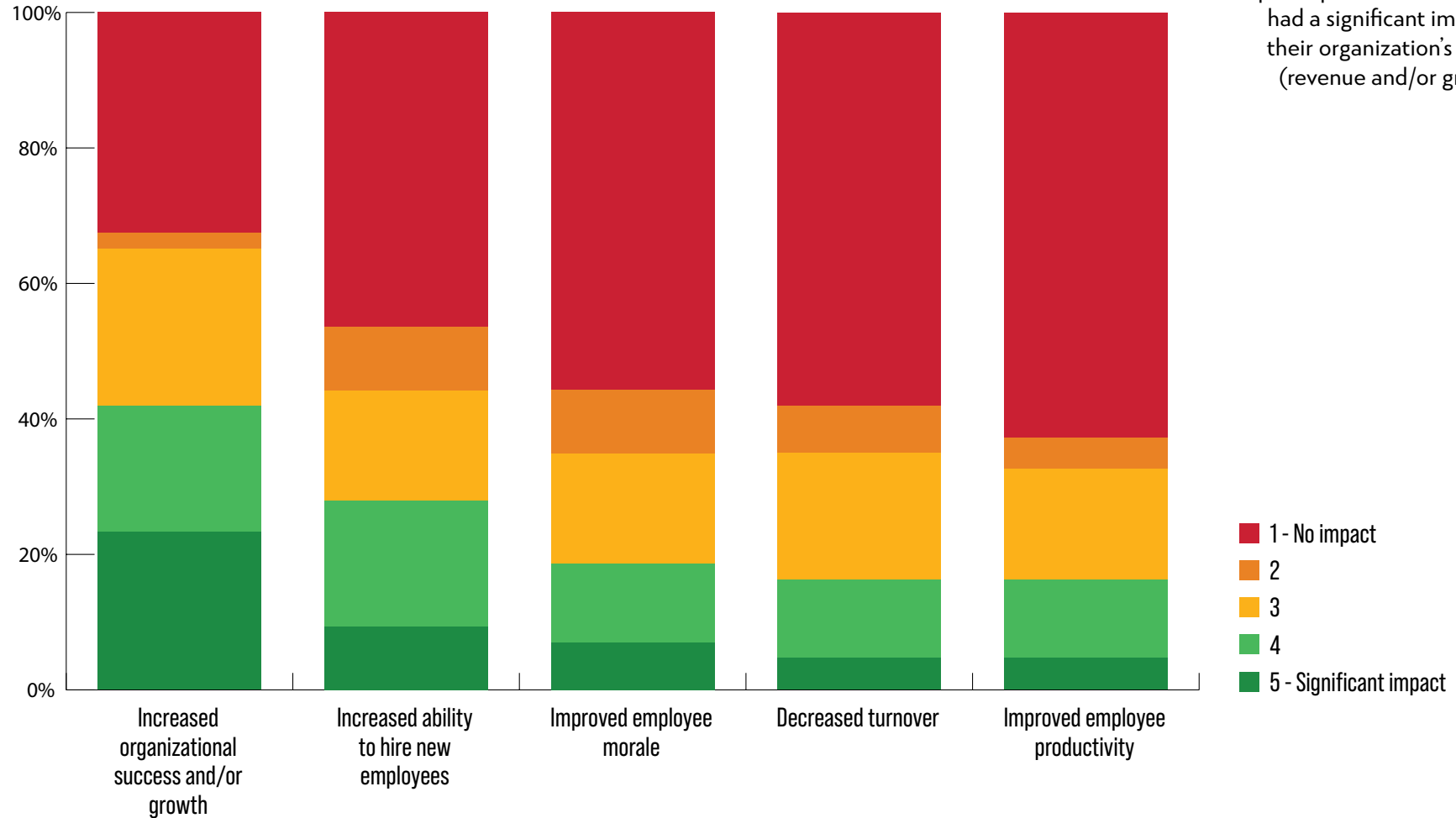
- Provider

Quantifying the Impact of Partner Up!

Providers were also asked to quantify the impact of the program across several key business metrics. The most significant impacts reported by providers include increased organizational success, the increased ability to hire new employees, and improved employee morale.

42%

of child care provider participants said Partner Up! had a significant impact on their organization's success (revenue and/or growth)



EMPLOYEE IMPACTS

Employees from across the state, in differing economic strata, and employed in a variety of industries said that their participation in Partner Up! improved their families' financial security and overall well-being significantly.

Top impacts included:

Ability to save money and freedom from the financial stress of child care

The ability to finally save money and/or invest in home-related expenses or retirement planning were the most common benefits reported by employee participants. In some cases, employees noted that they could finally afford much-needed health care or to have another child because the burden of child care expenses was removed. Participating employees also noted that the stress relief from the worries of how to pay for child care also improved their mental health significantly.

"The Partner Up! grant has been such a blessing for our family. My husband and I were shocked when we realized how expensive having a child truly is. Medical bills, child care, formula, etc. It all adds up. We were a little stunned after a couple of months of having our beautiful baby girl. We were both working full time jobs to provide for our family, yet we were still watching our bank accounts drop. This grant has meant the world to us. It is so relieving to have one of our many expenses taken off our plate for the time being."

- An employee in the health services industry in northeastern Wisconsin

"The Partner Up! program has impacted my family so much financially. We are a family of five who have to live paycheck to paycheck. This program has been amazing in allowing us to not have to worry about how we are going to pay for child care in a certain month. My family will forever be grateful for the Partner Up! program and the peace of mind that it has given us month after month."

- An employee in the child care and education industry in northern Wisconsin

"It has taken a big amount of stress off our plates as we have a lot of bills (medical)."

- An employee in the child care and education industry in northeastern Wisconsin

"We have been able to save those child care funds for emergency expenses. Our funds will be used for getting new hearing aids for one of our children."

- An employee in the retail trade industry in northeastern Wisconsin

Ability to enter or remain in the workforce

Employees participating in the program also said that the funding provided an opportunity for both adults in the home to work full-time, rather than having one adult stay home to care for children because they could not afford child care. This was particularly true for employees working in the child care and education industry, with some child care industry participants saying they would have been forced to leave the profession if not for the grant funding.

“It allowed me to go back to the job I love as it made it financially feasible.”
- An employee in the child care and education industry in northeastern Wisconsin

“Participating in Partner Up! has allowed me to continue working as a teacher at the child care center I work at after I had my twin girls. My weekly wage is lower or the same as tuition which means I would have to leave my profession and stay home.”
- An employee in the child care and education industry in southeastern Wisconsin

“It has allowed us to feel better about the ability to pay for child care and allowing me to still work. Otherwise, there was a time when I, as the mom, thought that I might have to give up working or reduce the number of hours I was working.”
- An employee in the manufacturing industry in northeastern Wisconsin

“As I’m sure you know, child care educators don’t make enough/a lot for what we do. This has helped me be able to keep a job I love and save money on child care to offset some other costs of living! It has been a huge blessing.”
- An employee in the child care and education industry in southeastern Wisconsin

Access to quality child care

Employees also reported feeling relief that their children were being cared for by quality, licensed facilities that provided consistent care, rather than depending on family members and/or unlicensed providers who were at times unable to provide stable care.

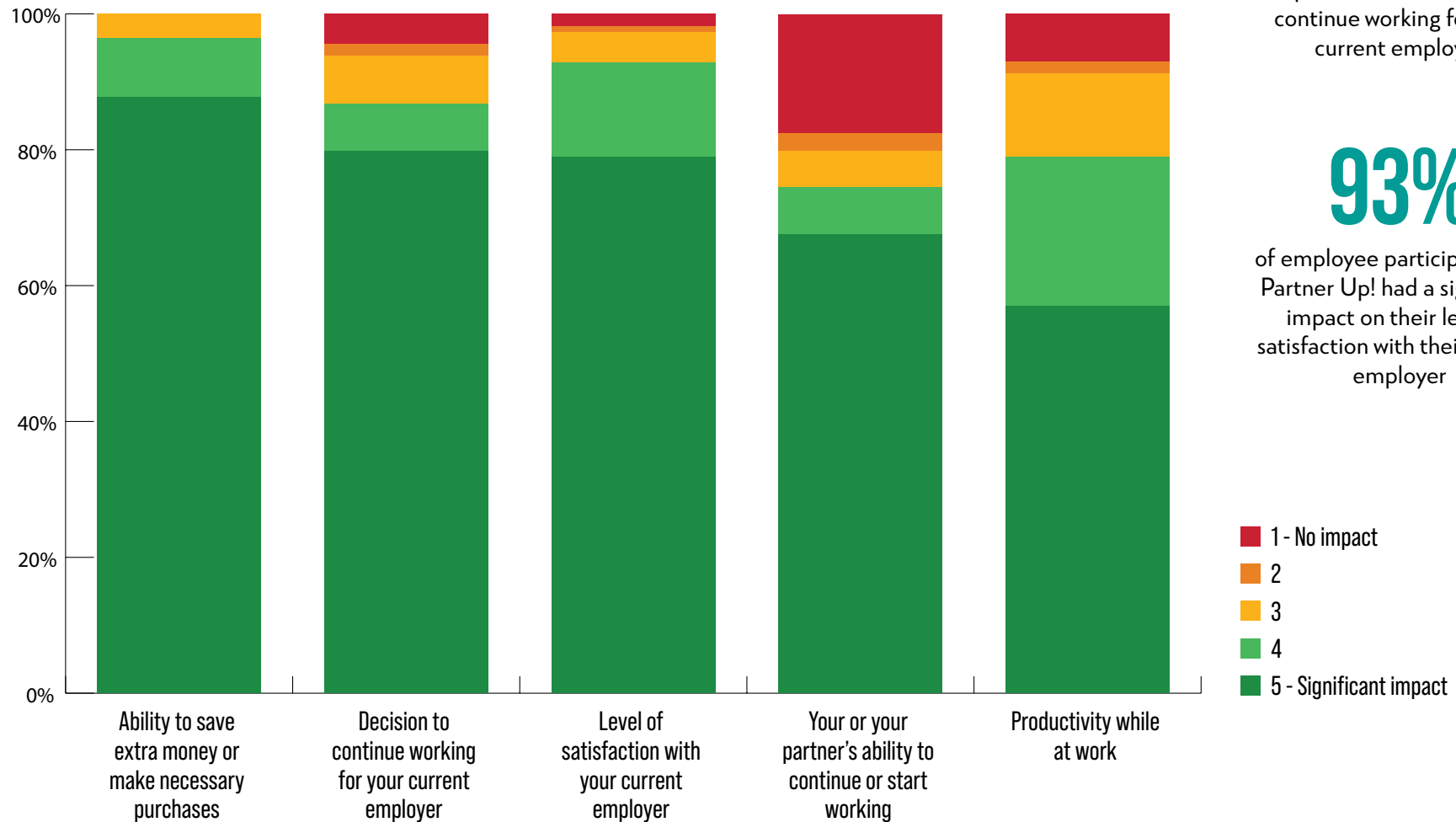
“Have been able to continue to work as I was struggling to find reliable child care.”
- An employee in the health services industry in northern Wisconsin

“It has provided us with the peace of mind knowing we can send our children to the provider we feel is the best for our children and not having to stress about how we can afford to send them to that provider.”
- An employee in the financial activities and services industry in western Wisconsin

“Our daycare had taken a double digit rate increase for the past 2 years. Due to the cost of daycare, it is starting to force me to cut back on care. Which creates a conflict between quality care for my kids and work.”
- An employee in the construction and landscaping industry in northeastern Wisconsin

Quantifying the Impact of Partner Up!

Employees were also asked to quantify the impact of the program across several metrics related to their job satisfaction and ability to continue working. The most significant impacts reported by employees included the ability to save extra money or make necessary purchases, their decision to continue working for their current employer, and their level of satisfaction with their current employer.



87%

of employee participants said Partner Up! had a significant impact on their decision to continue working for their current employer

93%

of employee participants said Partner Up! had a significant impact on their level of satisfaction with their current employer

PERCEPTIONS



PERCEPTIONS OF THE BUSINESS IMPACT OF CHILD CARE ACCESSIBILITY

In the statewide research conducted in 2021 by KW2 and DCF, we learned that employers see the importance of child care to Wisconsin as a whole, but aren't as likely to connect it to the success of their business or increase their investment in it. Despite 93% of participants in the 2021 study facing serious impacts to either revenue or operating hours, difficulty retaining or attracting employees, or other business disruptions due to employees' lack of access to quality child care, many employers still struggled to connect supporting quality, stable child care access for their employees to organizational success.

In addition to capturing overall satisfaction with the Partner Up! program and suggested operational grant improvements, the Partner Up! evaluation research was designed to hear from participating employers, child care providers, and families on how access to quality, licensed child care directly impacts our state's businesses and economy, and compare their perceptions to those of a sample of all Wisconsin employers as captured in 2021. Overall, participants stated that not only does an individual or family's ability to access child care directly impact local businesses, they also believe that it is in the best interest of an employer to proactively identify ways to support their employees' child care needs.

26%

of employers surveyed in 2021 experienced a child care-related impact to their businesses' finances or operations

34%

of employers surveyed in 2021 had difficulty retaining employees due to child care access

42%

of employers surveyed in 2021 had difficulty attracting new employees due to child care access



Participating employers understand the importance of access to child care

Employers said they believe it is important for organizations to support child care access for their employees because doing so not only provides a competitive advantage for attracting and hiring quality talent, it also increases employee retention and strengthens organizational productivity. In addition to benefiting an individual business or organization, participants also shared that the ripple effects of supporting child care access can impact a local or regional economy and bolster core industries.

“Because the cost of child care is a big factor that hinders people with young children from WORKING in child care, which is already not a lucrative career. As an employer, it’s difficult to get high-quality staff as is, and even more difficult when you find a good fit but they can’t afford to take daycare costs out of each paycheck and we, as the employer, can’t afford to offer free daycare to every staff member with kids either.”

- An employer in the child care and education industry in northern Wisconsin

“We know that child care is a necessity for our employees and we know that cost is a major burden on our employees. Although we can offer some discounts as employee benefits, the increasing cost of child care and business costs exceed the discounts we are able to offer. We were losing high-quality and long-term staff due to costs of child care.”

- An employer in the child care and education industry in southern Wisconsin

“Most bosses know how expensive daycare can be. You might lose an employee because they can’t afford to work and need to stay home. Especially a mom that has three kids, whose bills have to be \$3,000 a month; she’s going to end up quitting because being a stay-at-home mom is cheaper than sending them to daycare.”

- An employer in the transportation and warehousing industry in southern Wisconsin

“In my industry, as with many, it’s hard to keep good employees right now. So, if I can do anything to help alleviate some of their expenses, and daycare is obviously a big one for my employees, I’m going to try.”

- An employer in the construction and landscaping industry in northeastern Wisconsin

“Employees’ child care is a priority because we’re a 24/7 facility, so we have people working at all times of the day. Unfortunately, if our employees don’t have solid daycare, then they have to call in and that’s a loss of our production ability.”

- An employer in the manufacturing industry in southern Wisconsin

“The only way we’re going to increase productivity in this country is through family-friendly policies. There’s no other way to do it. We want people to work. We expect people to work. Employers everywhere are complaining they’re not finding workers. But, if you don’t have access to quality child care, you can’t work.”

- An employer in the government and non-profit sector in northern Wisconsin

Participating employers are still unsure how to support child care access

Although many employers saw the importance and business benefits of supporting employees' access to child care, respondents said they were unsure of how to do so. In some cases, participants shared they did not know enough about the topic and/or their employees' needs to be able to identify possible tactics to address the issue. Others were concerned about the cost to the company, be it through paying for the child care directly, opening their own facility, or reimbursing employees for a portion of costs. Finally, employers who had multiple locations and/or many employees, said they were unsure how to manage "fairness" when some employees may receive a benefit like this, but not all.

"This is a great program, but I believe there must be more education with employers to 'buy in' to participation. Too many businesses declined to participate because they felt the 25% match was too expensive as child care is not used by all employees."

- An employer in the child care and education industry in northern Wisconsin

"[I would like] more flexibility in what is paid by the business. If we could pay part of the costs instead of all of them, or even if Partner Up! could pay less and then we could pay less and still offer a great benefit to the employee."

- An employer in the personal services and salons industry in western Wisconsin

"We pay competitive wages, and great benefits, and give family flexibility, but still people are not getting wealthy here because we are a non-profit. Child care is very expensive, so we wanted to offer something, but we didn't know what to do."

- An employer in the government and non-profit industry in southern Wisconsin

"I actually talked to a couple of people in a business group. I think everyone's kind of shy to pay money for stuff for employees that obviously nobody wants to pay for."

- An employer in the construction and landscaping industry in northeastern Wisconsin

Quality, licensed facilities are important

It was not just access to general child care that employers saw as an important strategy to addressing workforce challenges. Many, particularly those in the child care and education industry, stated that access to **quality, licensed** facilities ensured employees had consistent child care coverage and thus did not need to miss work as often or need to worry about the care children were receiving. From an economic development perspective, some employers also noted that the skills and socialization children receive at quality, licensed child care providers increased the likelihood of those children's successes throughout K-12, and ultimately their employability as adults.

"[I applied] to offer employees a child care option at a quality center."

- An employer in the child care and education industry in southeastern Wisconsin

"It has helped us and our community partner up to offer quality child care so many parents can stay in the workforce. Without this grant, we would have lost teachers and would have had to close classrooms. Another parent who we partnered with stated she would have not been able to pay for child care without this grant."

- An employer in the child care and education industry in western Wisconsin

"As an employer, you're helping your employees have peace of mind with quality child care. Employee work quality is going to go up because they're not going to be as worried about consistent child care. Licensed child care centers are consistent. You don't have to worry about auntie not showing up, or being sick, and then wondering where are you going to take your child that day. Child care centers are there. If our staff is out sick, we have enough staff to take up the slack."

- An employer in the child care and education industry in northern Wisconsin

"We've had employees that have to call into work because their daycare's been closed and their alternative care didn't work out. That causes frustration."

- An employer in the government and non-profit industry in southern Wisconsin

"Schools expect so much more out of littles than they did back when I went to kindergarten. You went to play. And now they expect kids to start reading in kindergarten. They expect kids to start doing more math in kindergarten. So we can start them off to get them prepared for school and that is beneficial for them."

- An employer in the child care and education industry in northern Wisconsin

Participants requested more resources and communications about the need to support access to quality care

Respondents encouraged more communications to businesses, communities, economic development organizations, and elected leaders about the connection between the workforce and access to quality, licensed child care. Participants requested general information on why the issue is important to the economy and workforce, tailored resources on the different ways businesses can address their employees' child care needs, and recommendations for developing local connections between employers and child care providers.

"[I would like] literature explaining the tax benefits of employers helping to provide or pay for child care, with or without the Partner Up! program."

- An employer in the health services industry in southern Wisconsin

"[We need] better promotional packages to give to businesses and parents so the program can reach a wider range of places."

- An employer in the child care and education industry in western Wisconsin

"I'm going to get the benefits from the grant. I can see that. You have just got to put the grant benefits on paper for employers to actually look at it."

- An employer in the construction and landscaping industry in northeastern Wisconsin

"Child care is just as important as health insurance. It's just as important as 401k plans. There's a shortage of employees everywhere. And a lot of that is either parents can't find good quality child care because centers are full, or centers don't have enough teachers. If companies could start working better with child care centers, it would improve them getting more employees hired too."

- An employer in the child care and education industry in northern Wisconsin

"If employers can step up and offer that kind of benefit to their employees, they're going to keep them longer. Employees are going to be happier because they're children are in a place that is regulated and higher quality, versus finding alternate, lower quality child care options. I think this issue critical to the success of every business and our economy as a whole."

- An employer in the child care and education industry in northeastern Wisconsin

Clearly communicate the benefits of licensed child care

Partner Up! participants noted that in some areas of the state, access to licensed child care providers is extremely limited. They said that some unlicensed providers do not see how being regulated, licensed facilities benefits their business or the families they are serving. There is a perception that the paperwork and regulations associated with being licensed overshadows any “small” benefit. Respondents suggested sending more communications to currently unregulated providers on the benefits of becoming licensed. They also said it is important to communicate the advantages of licensed providers to employers and families.

“My sister-in-law has two kids in [Redacted Location], and her daycare’s like, ‘Nope, not doing it [getting licensed].’ They are a well known daycare in their area.”

- An employer in transportation and warehousing industry in southern Wisconsin

“The need for child care is so great right now, I’ve got such a long waiting list that it’s unbelievable. People can’t find child care right now.”

- A child care provider in northeastern Wisconsin

“My employer tried to help some of the other little local daycares in the area to become certified. Unfortunately, some of the daycares didn’t want to go through all that.”

- An employee in the child care and education industry in western Wisconsin

“In order for people to continue to work, they’re going to need child care for their kids. I am very worried about the next year plus because there’s so many teachers that are exiting the child care field, and there’s also child care centers that are closing. We’re not going to have enough people working if we don’t take care of the child care field.”

- An employer in the retail trade industry in southeastern Wisconsin

“It’s crazy. I talk to all the other child care directors, and they’re in the same boat. We can’t take these new kids. We have over a hundred families on our waiting list right now for our center.”

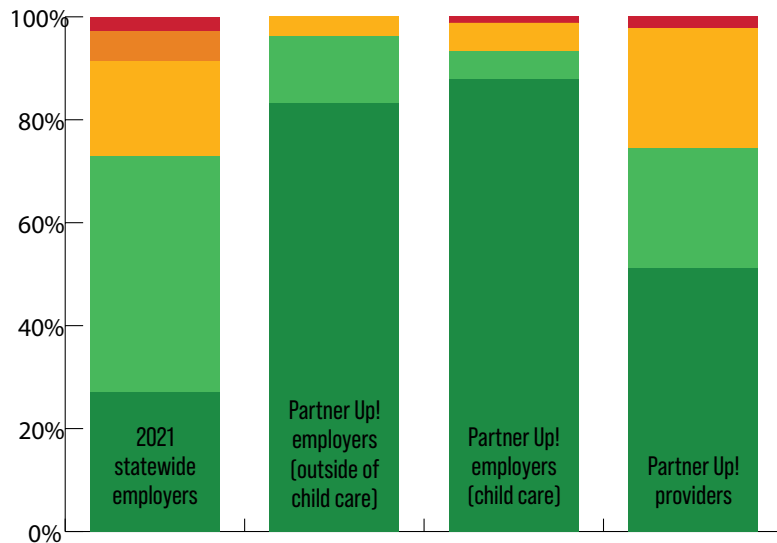
- An employer in child care and education in northeastern Wisconsin

Perceptions of Child Care Impact on the Economy and Individual Business Success

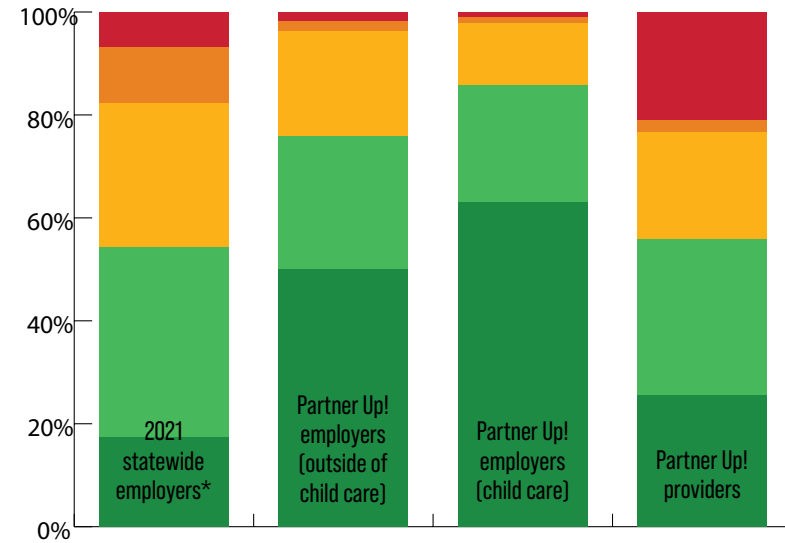
In the 2021 statewide employer research, most employers agreed or completely agreed that it's important for Wisconsin businesses to support child care access for their employees and that providing employees with resources to support their child care needs is a strategy that all employers should consider to address labor shortages. However, employers were less likely to agree that there was a direct connection between the success of their own organization and employees' access to care.

Partner Up! employer participants (outside of the child care industry) were much more likely to completely agree or agree with both statements about the impact of child care access on Wisconsin businesses and the economy, and were also more likely to see a direct impact on the success of their business from adding structured support through Partner Up!

Providing employees with resources to support their child care needs is a strategy that all employers should consider to address workforce/labor shortages.

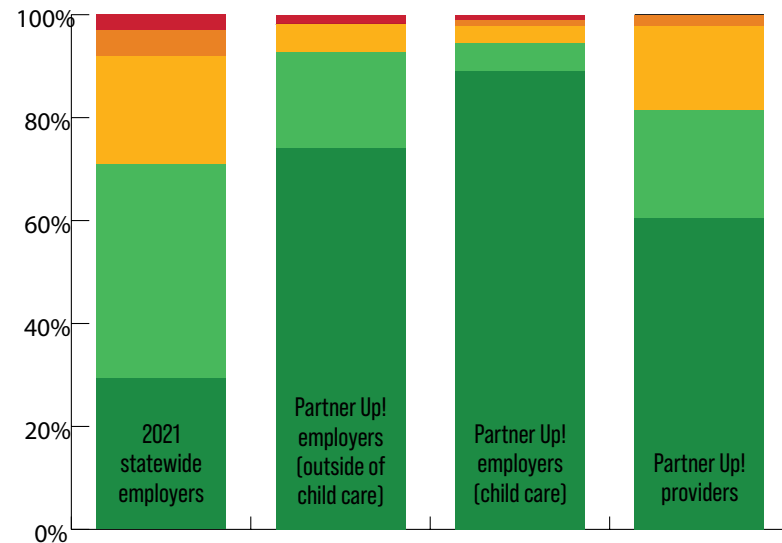


Partner Up! has directly impacted the success of our organization.



*2021 employers reacted to the statement "The success of my business is directly impacted by my employees' access to child care."

It is important for Wisconsin businesses to support child care access for their employees.



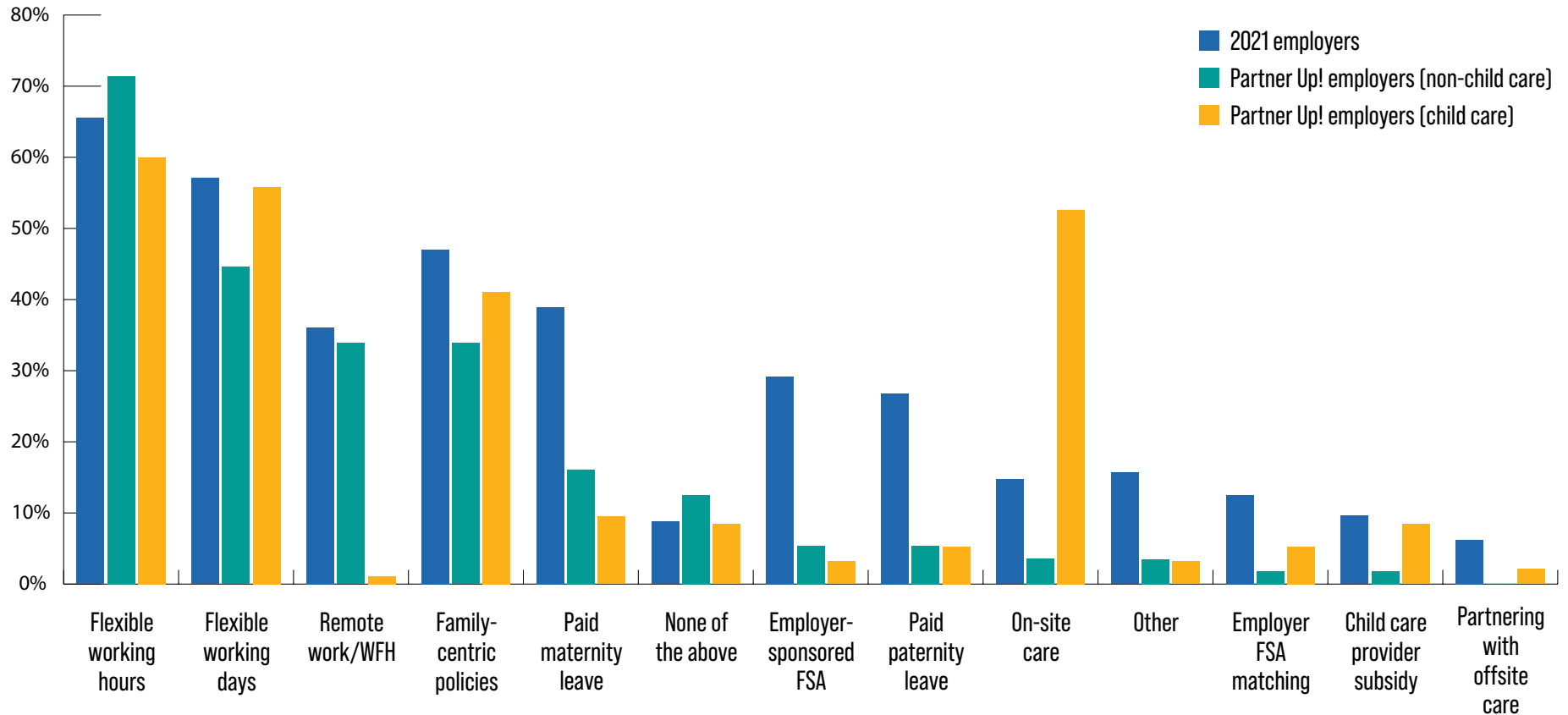
1 - Completely disagree 2 - Disagree 3 - Neither agree nor disagree 4 - Agree 5 - Completely agree

Supports Provided to Working Parents

In the 2021 statewide employer research, nearly all (91%) employers reported offering at least one support for employees with children. Most of the supports offered were not tangible financial benefits, but rather policy-driven benefits, such as the ability to work from home, flexible working hours or days, and family-centric policies. All Partner Up! employers are currently providing employer-sponsored child care subsidization through Partner Up!, but the other benefits they are currently offering are not substantially different, in most cases, from other Wisconsin employers. Partner Up! employers are also much less likely to offer paid parental leave and FSA matching than the statewide sample from 2021, possibly indicating that they believe Partner Up! alone is sufficient to meet their employees' needs. This may also suggest that the Partner Up! Cohort 1 and 2 employers, particularly those outside of the child care and education industry, are not substantially different from other Wisconsin employers in terms of supports offered, indicating the program could be extended to reach a larger group of Wisconsin businesses.

87%

of employee participants said Partner Up! had a significant impact on their decision to continue working for their current employer



Child Care Partnerships Prior to Partner Up!

Child care providers were asked if they had partnered with area businesses in the past, or engaged with them in other ways prior to partnering with them through Partner Up! 70% of child care provider survey participants said no, and an additional 11% were unsure if their organization had previous business partnerships. Of the 19% that said yes, the most common ways providers partnered with area businesses before Partner Up! were through community networking and events, creating business partnerships, and purchasing food or supplies from local businesses.

19%

of provider participants partnered or engaged with businesses in their community in other ways prior to Partner Up!

“We are part of Progress Lakeshore to help solve the child care desert concern in our area.”

- A child care provider in northeastern Wisconsin

“[We partner with businesses through] special guests coming to talk with kids, purchasing meals and gifts for employees from local businesses, partnering with local businesses for services at our center, etc.”

- A child care provider in western Wisconsin

“I always try and be involved in the local businesses and support them. We live in a small community.”

- A child care provider in northeastern Wisconsin

“We partner with the district. We have a partnership with local stores to provide window decor, we partner with the local high school for child development clinicals, and we partner with the college for student teachers.”

- A child care provider in western Wisconsin

“[We have] community partnerships for field trips, dental visits, library visits, etc.”

- A child care provider in northeastern Wisconsin



PERCEPTIONS OF THE PARTNER UP! PROGRAM

Current Partner Up! participants generally hold positive perceptions of the program and consider it to be a significant driver that is helping them achieve their organizational and/or family goals. Many also said they perceive Partner Up! as helping to address some of the barriers to accessing quality child care in their region. Nearly all employers and employees and most child care providers would participate in the program again, and the overall Net Promoter Score for Partner Up! is high, indicating a high level of overall satisfaction with the program.

93%

of employers would participate in Partner Up! again

84%

of providers would participate in Partner Up! again

99%

of employees would participate in Partner Up! again

Net Promoter Score

Employers and child care providers participating in Partner Up! were asked whether or not they were likely to recommend the program to other organizations like their own (a Net Promoter Score question). A Net Promoter Score (NPS) is calculated by taking the percentage of promoters (those who choose a 9 or a 10, indicating they are very or extremely likely to recommend an organization or program) and subtracting the percentage of detractors (those who choose 0-6). The resulting NPS is a number between -100 to +100, and scores above zero indicate a higher level of satisfaction with the program. The NPS for all participants for the Partner Up! program is +68.

Employers within the child care and education industry had the highest NPS at +77, followed by other employers at +61. Providers had the lowest NPS at +53; however, all three NPS numbers indicate high levels of satisfaction with the program.

75%

of employer and provider participants were extremely likely to recommend Partner Up! to other organizations like their own



EMPLOYERS (OUTSIDE OF CHILD CARE)



EMPLOYERS (CHILD CARE)



CHILD CARE PROVIDERS



Promoters praise the impact Partner Up! has on businesses and families

Partner Up! promoters cited the significant impact Partner Up! has had on their businesses and families as the primary reasons they would promote the program to other organizations like their own. Employers and providers also said the process was easy, and they received a lot of good communication and support from DCF and SFTA.

*"I think the program is very important to families in our state and fills a desperate need."
- An employer in the agriculture, forestry, fishing, and hunting industry in southern Wisconsin*

*"For our employees who are participating, it's like winning the lottery."
- An employer in the government and non-profit industry in western Wisconsin*

*"It's a great program on all ends. This is what we need to bridge the gap between business and child care to help everyone."
- A child care provider in southeastern Wisconsin*

*"The whole process has been extremely effortless."
- A child care provider in southeastern Wisconsin*

*"It's a great program. Just needs patience to set it up."
- An employer in the manufacturing industry in southern Wisconsin*

Detractors cited frustrations with the process

Partner Up! detractors said that the process was not organized well, and had specific criticisms regarding the payment process, including late or missing payments. Detractors also cited poor communication, delayed response times when asking questions, and a lack of understanding of how the program benefits their organization.

*"Good program for employees, but [I'm] not sure how it benefits employers or have a good understanding."
- An employer in the leisure, hospitality, food service, and recreation industry in northern Wisconsin*

*"Unsure of the benefit. Added steps to manage."
- A child care provider in western Wisconsin*

*"Entire thing was a hassle and bureaucratic nightmare. Paid weeks late, repeatedly. Contract violated, broken, and dishonored by SFTA, the employer, and the state. We don't need 'support' and hand-holding, we need timely payment and for the state to honor their word."
- A child care provider in western Wisconsin*

*"I feel like this program is very unorganized."
- An employer in the child care and education industry in northeastern Wisconsin*

Employees would consider not participating in the program again if there were major changes to the program or a need to leave their provider

Employees were not asked a NPS question, but were asked what, if anything, might prevent them from participating in the Partner Up! program again. 85% of employees said there was nothing that would prevent them from participating again. For the 15% who said there was something that could potentially prevent them from participating again, the most common reasons were changes to the program, uncertainty if the program will continue (and the related fear of how they would pay for care), or the need to change providers.

“I would possibly not participate in the Partner Up! program if I had to change the child care center my children attend. It would depend on the options available and if I felt the available options were safe.”

- An employee in the child care and education industry in southeastern Wisconsin

“The only thing that would discourage me would be fear that the program could end abruptly, leading to a huge change in our household budget. This is a pilot program, so I also currently worry that we could get dropped without warning.”

- An employee in the personal services and salons industry in northeastern Wisconsin

“Not knowing if the funding was secure or not—it’s hard to budget when you don’t know if you will have secure child care and the ability to pay for it if the funding doesn’t go through (or it’s unclear as to when it will).”

- An employee in the child care and education industry in southern Wisconsin

“If they changed teachers and staff.”

- An employee in the leisure, hospitality, food service, and recreation industry in southeastern Wisconsin

“If something were to change that affects taxes or credit score to me or my family.”

- An employee in the child care and education industry in southern Wisconsin

“The need to change child care providers would definitely discourage my participation.”

- An employee in the child care and education industry in southern Wisconsin

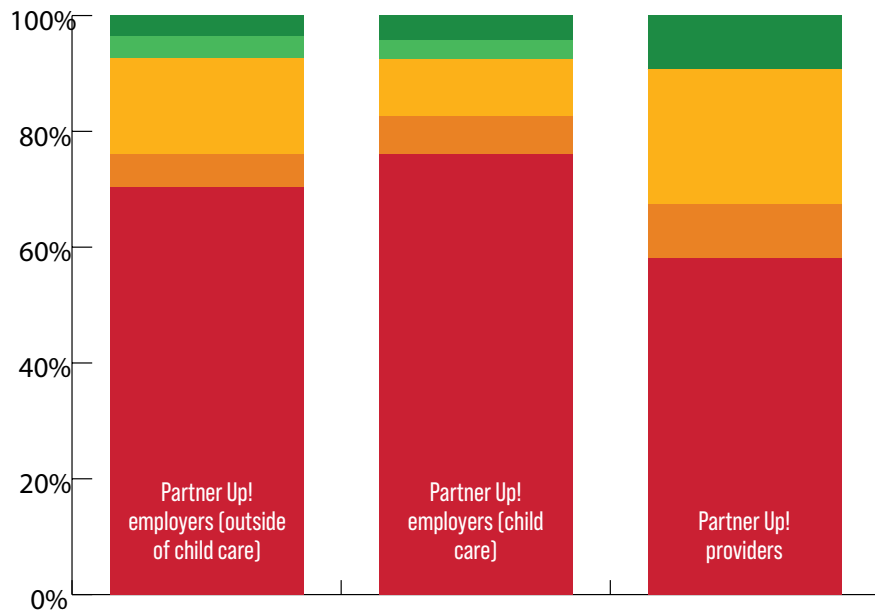
Participating Partner Up! employers and providers were also asked to react to two negatively-framed statements to determine whether they believed the ROI of Partner Up! exceeds the effort and cost to participate, and whether or not the program had helped remove barriers to accessing quality child care. Most employers and providers completely disagreed that Partner Up! is too much effort for the benefits to their organization. However, providers not participating in the program as employers were significantly less likely to completely disagree with the statement, indicating that without the ability to enroll employees, participants see slightly less value in participating.

Participants were less likely to completely disagree or disagree that Partner Up! has not removed the barriers to accessing quality child care in their area. Some participants noted that it's still very challenging to access child care in their area, and child care providers mentioned additional staffing support and direct funding for providers as crucial needs to continue to stabilize their organizations and expand access to care.

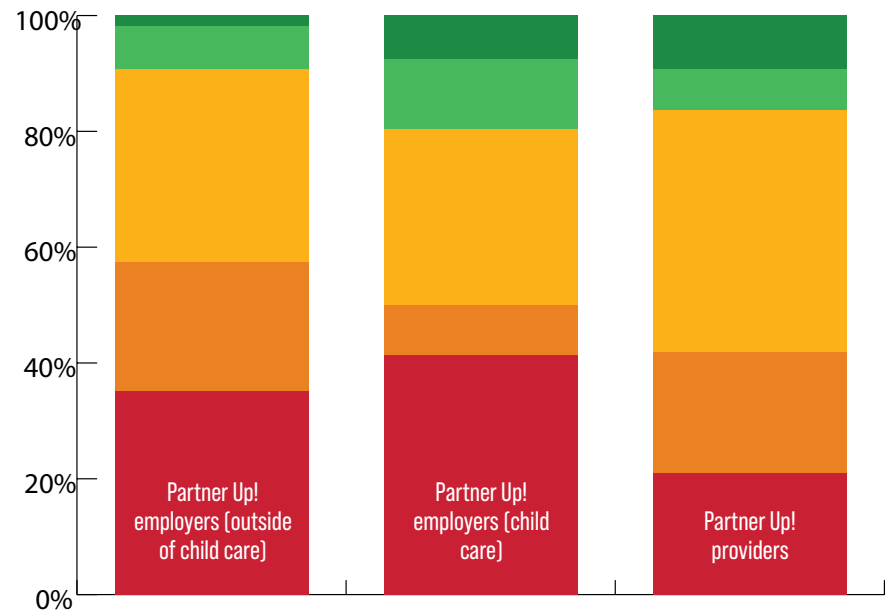
16%

of employer and provider participants agree that Partner Up! has not removed the barriers to accessing quality child care in their area

Partner Up! is too much effort for the benefits it's provided to our organization.



Partner Up! has not removed the barriers to accessing quality child care in our area.



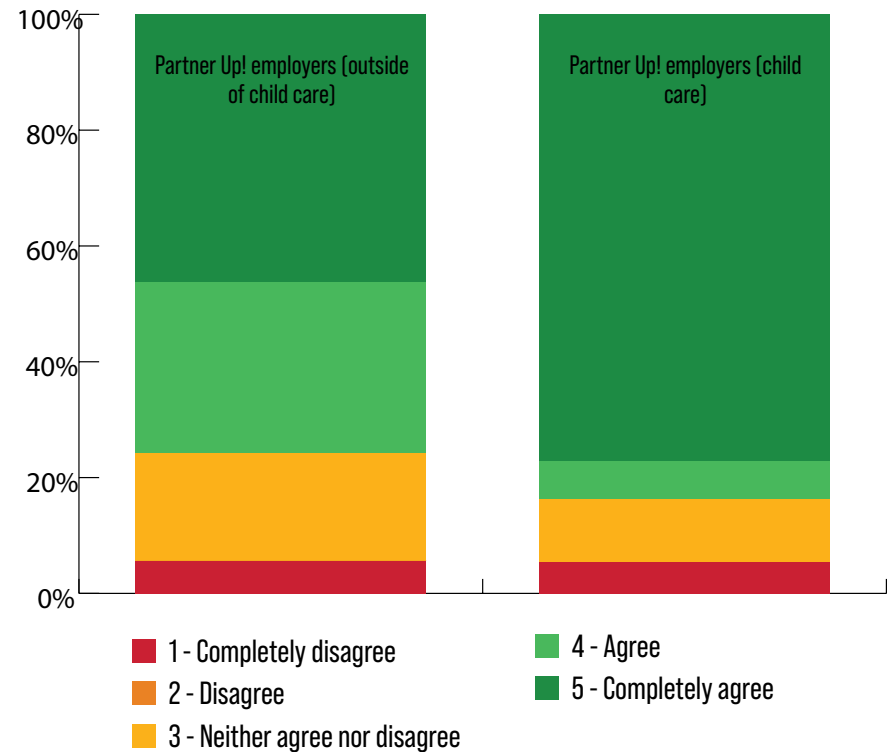
1 - Completely disagree 2 - Disagree 3 - Neither agree nor disagree 4 - Agree 5 - Completely agree

Program Continuation

Participating employers, providers, and employees shared that they hope Partner Up! will continue and that they will remain part of the program. Many also said they were concerned about the impacts on providers, families, and children if the program was discontinued without a similar program put in its place. Most (81%) of participating employers surveyed agree that they are concerned about how they will support their employees' child care needs when Partner Up! funding expires. They encourage state leaders to continue and expand the program, in addition to expanding other support programs like Child Care Counts. Even in instances where some participants experienced frustrations with grant logistics, respondents noted that the benefit to the organization and families outweighed any challenges and they would participate again.

Despite hoping the program will continue, the vast majority of employer participants are unsure or do not plan to continue funding their employees' child care if/when Partner Up! ends. For those that were unsure (58%) or said they plan to continue funding care (12%), the greatest number (41%) were also unsure about what percentage they might be willing to contribute after Partner Up! ends. An additional 21% said they would contribute half after Partner Up! ends. Employers in the child care and education industry (14%) are slightly more likely than other employers (7%) to say they plan to fund their employees' child care after Partner Up!, though the difference is directional rather than statistically significant.

I am concerned about how we will support our employees' child care needs when Partner Up! funding expires.



“ Please continue to use this program to help low income families make daycare more affordable.”

- Employee

“ We love it. It enables me to keep working and being able to save money. If this program goes away, I'll need to quit my job and stay home with my kids because it wouldn't make sense to pay for daycare with what I earn.”

- Employee

“ I feel this program could be successful after the grant is up. This is a great way for child care centers to continue to see collaborations with their communities and maybe even help businesses with spots in our child care.”

- Provider

Partner Up! employers and providers need more funding, programs, and staffing support to increase access to child care

Most (78%) participating employers and providers said they did not need any additional support. Most of those that did request additional support were in the child care and education industry, where the most common needs mentioned included additional state and federal funding, the support and funding of other programs like Child Care Counts or Wisconsin Shares, and assistance with staffing child care centers with qualified staff. A few participants also requested more resources and communications materials for showing the value of supporting child care access to area businesses and employers.

"I'm not completely sure, but our biggest challenge is hiring high quality staff. No one is signing up for this job at the wages we can afford to pay them. We all deserve to make more money for what we do."

- An employer in the child care and education industry in northeastern Wisconsin

"Continue with Child Care Counts, and having the state in general kick back money to the early care and education field. We can't do this alone and the true cost of care is way too much for a family to take on themselves."

- An employer in the child care and education industry in southern Wisconsin

"Continuation of grants with more options in regards to how to be able to use them on the child, families, staff, and the physical surroundings of the child care centers."

- An employer in the child care and education industry in southeastern Wisconsin

"Easier ability to initially qualify for Wisconsin Shares."

- An employer in the manufacturing industry in southeastern Wisconsin

"The Child Care Counts funding has made a huge and significant impact on us being able to retain and hire new employees to keep our door open."

- An employer in the child care and education industry in western Wisconsin

"We need to recruit high quality staff and have more funds to draw them in."

- An employer in the child care and education industry in northeastern Wisconsin

"Continuing the grant would help us, in addition to continuing the Child Care Counts. We would not be in business without these two programs."

- An employer in the child care and education industry in western Wisconsin

"This funding is so important to the providers, I am not sure what the impact will be when it ends."

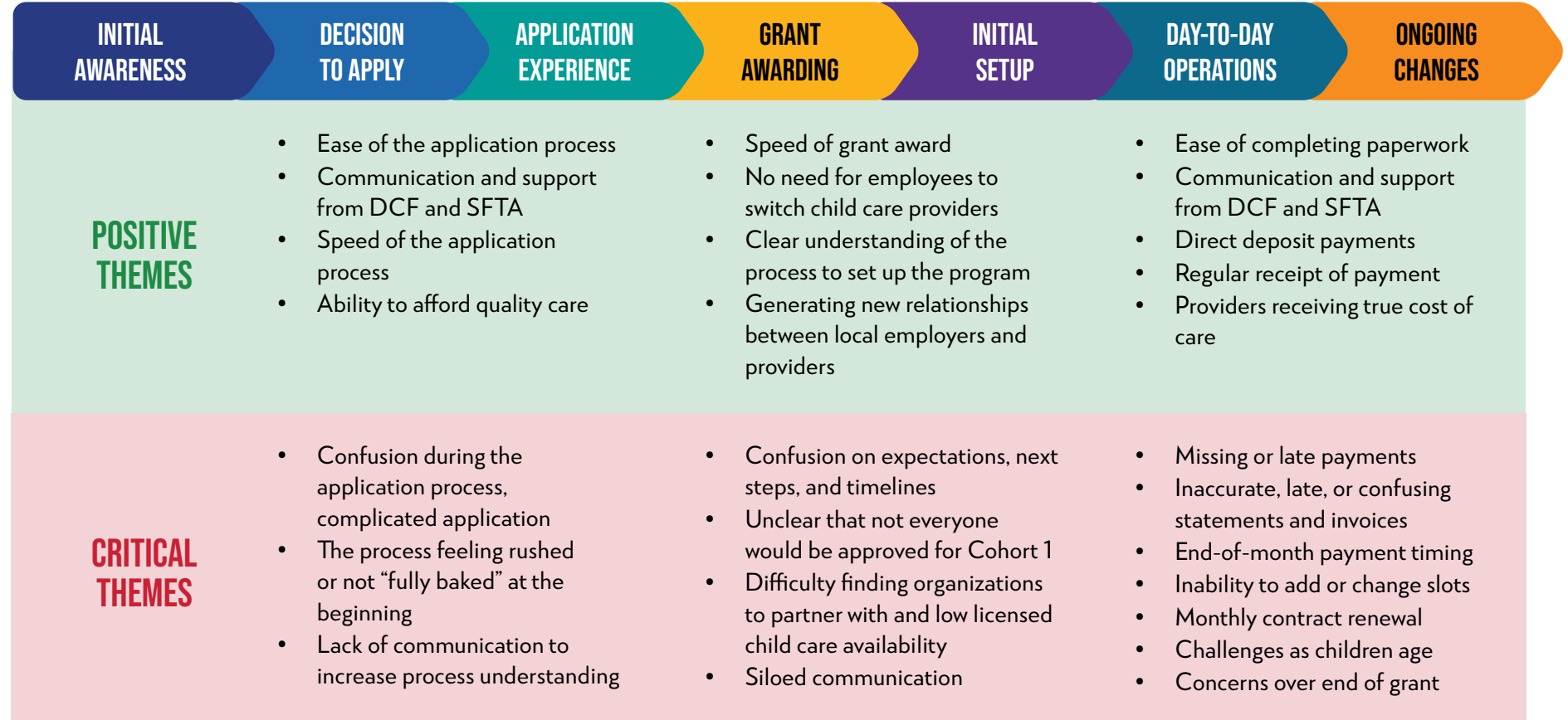
- An employer in the health services industry in southern Wisconsin

GRANT AND PROGRAM ADMINISTRATION



GRANT AND PROGRAM ADMINISTRATION EXPERIENCES

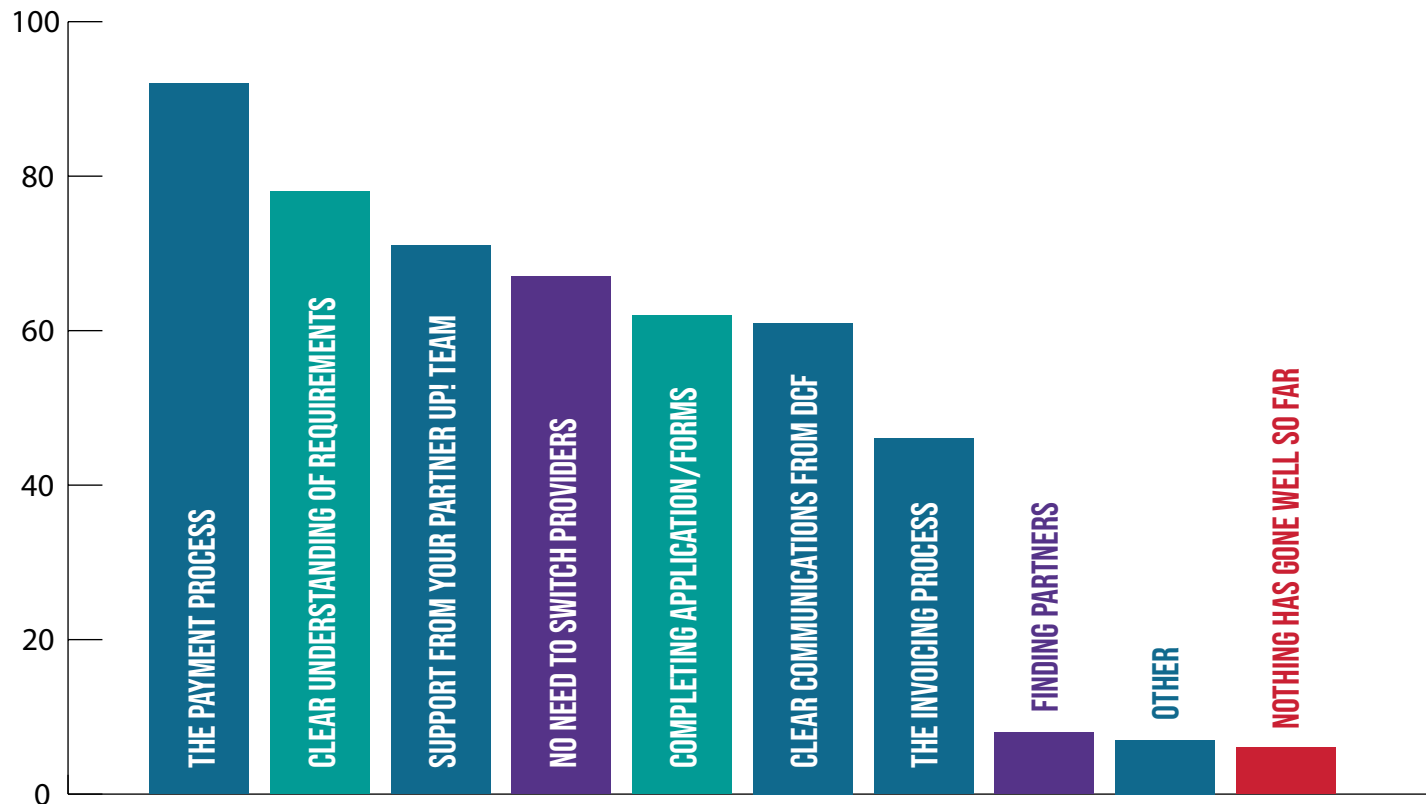
Overall, employer, provider, and employee grant participants were generally positive about program administration processes and felt supported by DCF and its partners. When operational and process challenges were raised, most participants were also quick to note that they understood these were the first grant cycles and that the few challenges they experienced would not impact their strong desire to participate in the program moving forward. Most also reported that they would still encourage their peers to participate in future Partner Up! opportunities.



What Has Gone Well for Employers and Providers

Employers and providers were asked to choose the three things that have gone well during the time they've participated in Partner Up! About two-thirds chose the payment process, and half mentioned the support they've received from their Partner Up! team. A clear understanding of the program requirements, the ability for employees to stay with their providers, and the ease of completing application and intake forms rounded out the top aspects of the program that have gone well.

Only 3% of participants said nothing has gone well so far.



“ I have no complaints or concerns. I hear nothing, everyone is happy.”
- Employer

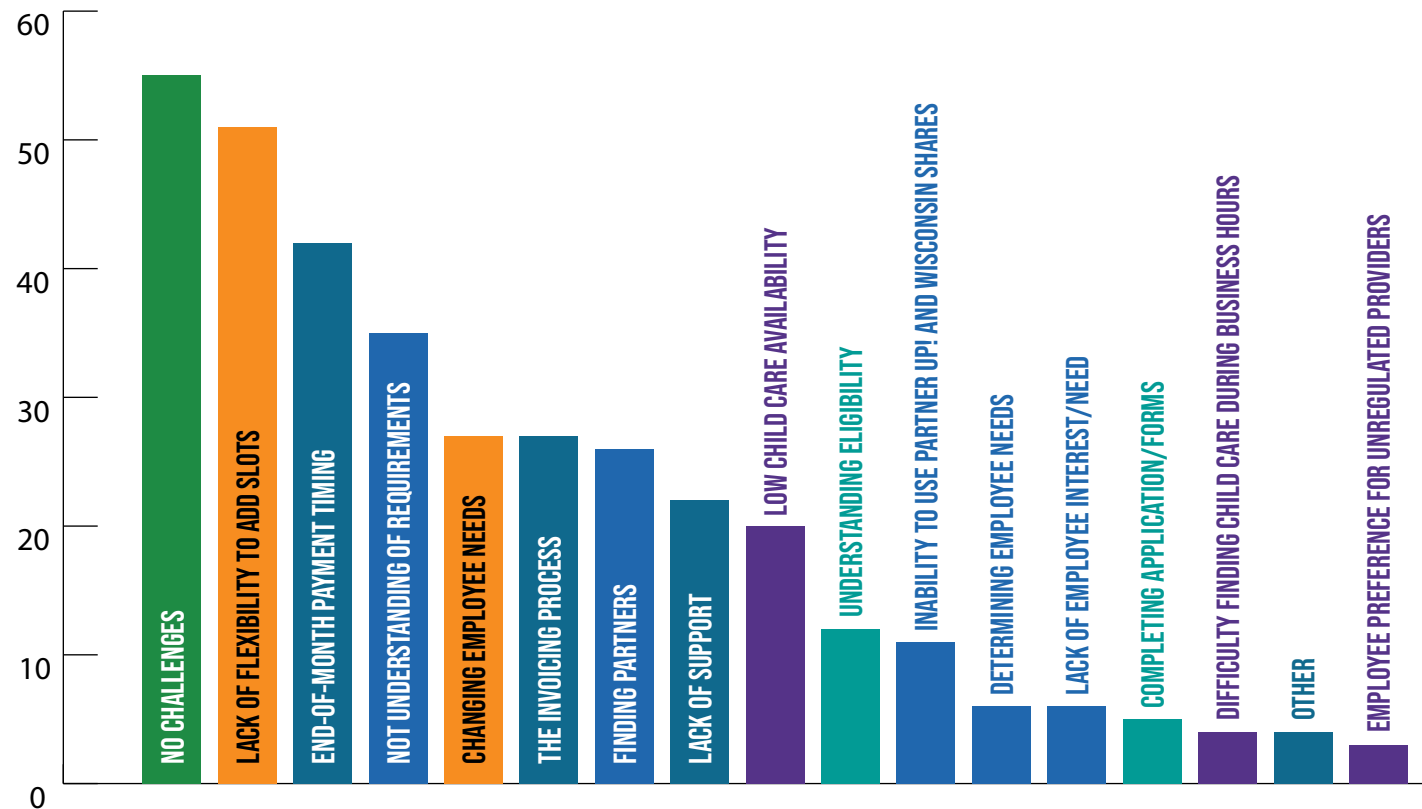
“ We love this program and find this benefit to be amazing. Partner Up! staff are knowledgeable and friendly.”
- Employer

“ It has been going great, truly seamless!”
- Provider

What Has Been Challenging or Surprising for Employers and Providers

Employers and providers were also asked to choose up to three things that have been challenging or surprising during the time they've participated in Partner Up! A little over one-quarter (28%) of participants have experienced no challenges. For those that have, top challenges or surprises include the lack of flexibility to add employees or slots to the program, the end-of-month payment timing for providers, a lack of understanding of the program expectations and process, changing employee child care needs, and the invoicing process.

Further detail on top challenges by grant cycle phase can be found on the following pages.



“ The fear of not being able to work and the impact it will have on my family if the program is not renewed.”

- Employee

“ Getting clear answers or things fixed in a timely manner. It is frustrating that the payments have been incorrect.”

- Provider

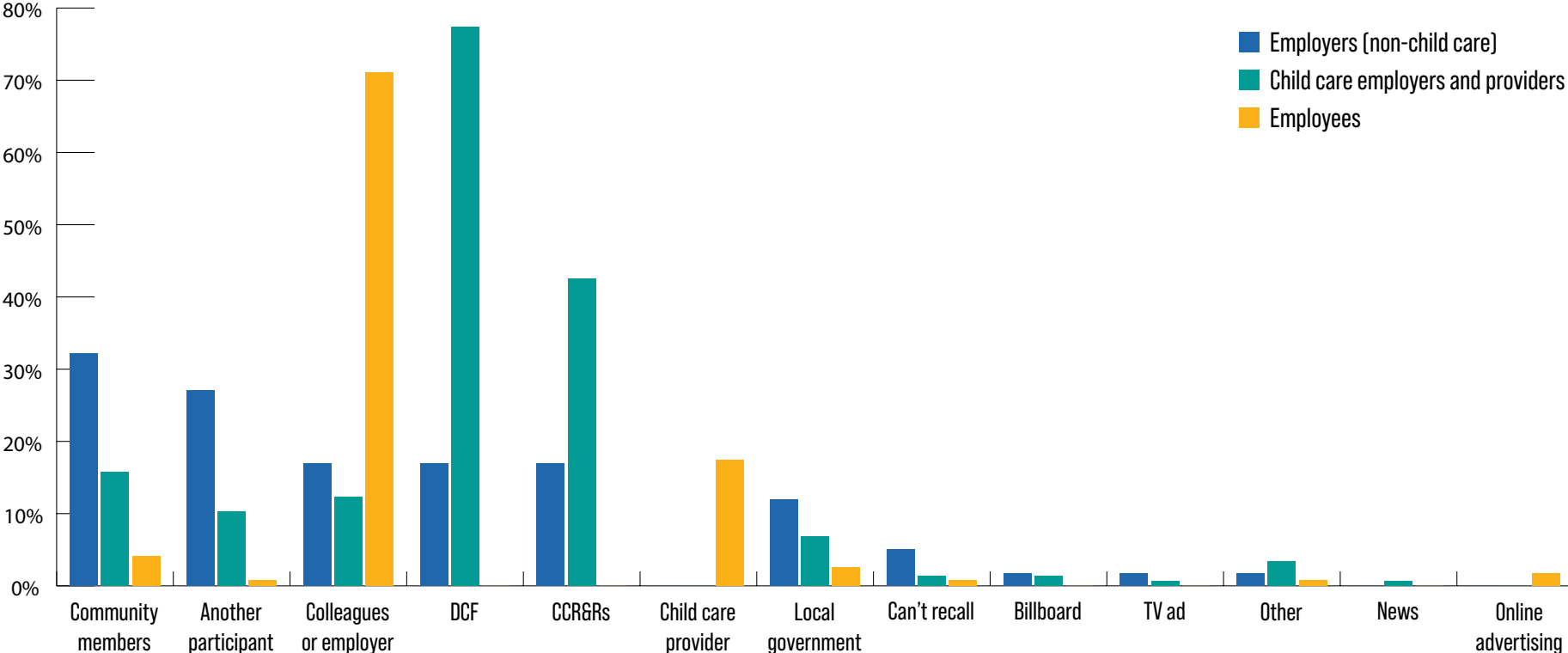
“ If a parent moves and we don't fill the spot within 30 days, we lose it. That can be cumbersome as hiring is difficult at the moment.”

- Employer



Word of mouth and official communications led most participants to the grant opportunity

Providers and employers within the child care and education industry said they learned about Partner Up! primarily through DCF newsletters, local YoungStar consultants, and Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (CCR&Rs) communications. Providers often then notified their current families and local employers about the grant opportunity. Employers outside of the child care and education industry also reported that they often heard about the grant through a local provider and/or employees. In some cases, employers also had received communications from DCF and their CCR&R. Employees primarily became aware of the program through their current provider or their employer.



INITIAL
AWARENESS

DECISION
TO APPLY

APPLICATION
EXPERIENCE

GRANT
AWARDING

INITIAL
SETUP

DAY-TO-DAY
OPERATIONS

ONGOING
CHANGES

Employers applied to support and retain staff, and to increase the benefits they could offer

Employers said their decision to apply to Partner Up! was driven primarily by their desires to retain key staff or attract new team members, increase the financial benefits they could offer to support staff, and support business operations and productivity.

Employees said that their decision to participate in the program was motivated by the positive financial impacts on their family, as well as a desire to work full-time outside of the home. However, individuals who were already receiving child care assistance, such as Wisconsin Shares, were on the fence about giving up those benefits to participate in Partner Up! In a few cases, eligible employees decided not to participate because they were concerned about losing their current assistance after the grant ended.

"[I applied] to help our staff and to offer a more competitive package to potential and current staff."

- An employer in the agriculture, forestry, fishing, and hunting industry in southern Wisconsin

"[I applied] to help the staff pay for child care. It's a HUGE benefit to employees when they can bring their child to daycare for free, especially considering their salaries are minimal. It has helped retain staff and even onboard new staff members."

- An employer in the child care and education industry in northeastern Wisconsin

"We wanted to pilot the program to see if it was a value-add for our employees and to see if it would help attract and retain talent."

- An employer in the manufacturing industry in southern Wisconsin

"[I applied] to let our employees be able to be at work consistently and not have the stress of worrying about the cost of child care."

- An employer in the professional business services industry in southeastern Wisconsin

"Staffing has been really hard the past couple years, especially because of COVID. So, we are trying to do everything that we can to retain staff. This seemed like a good opportunity for us."

- An employer in the retail trade industry in southeastern Wisconsin

"We can't afford to pay our teachers what they deserve to be paid, so having them helped out through the grant is important. I just feel like it's a really big part of retaining my staff, my current good quality staff."

- An employer in the child care and education industry in northeastern Wisconsin

Some employers chose not to apply for equity, financial, or logistical reasons

The most common anecdotal reasons employers in interviewees' areas decided to not participate in the program were:

- They could not rationalize providing child care support for some employees and not all
- The financial match was seen as too great for mid to large-sized employers
- The employer had employees at multiple locations in different regions, which complicated/hindered matching with licensed providers

"Some businesses see that cost of helping with child care, and it's a lot, and they pay other benefits to employees. To quantify that cost and to also know that, 'Well, not every employee is going to get this benefit,' I think that's been the hard sell I think for some businesses."

- An employer in the child care and education industry in northeastern Wisconsin

"One of our biggest concerns was that because we have associates throughout the whole country, we really try to treat everyone the same."

- An employer in the retail trade industry in southeastern Wisconsin

"A couple of the bigger businesses in town, especially your banks and your medical clinics, they have so many employees. They really struggle with how do we do this for everybody?"

- An employer in the child care and education industry in northern Wisconsin

"I did approach several other businesses in our area about partnering with us for Partner Up! grants but they did not want to participate, as the businesses felt the 25% match was too much as a child care benefit was not a benefit to all employees."

- A child care provider in northern Wisconsin

"I would offer partial slots for employers. What if the employer (and DCF) could pay for 25 to 50% of child care costs? That way we could serve many more employees with the \$30,000 budget that we have. Currently, it's all or nothing."

- An employer in the government and non-profit industry in western Wisconsin

"Funding is not available for new hires which means that I have some staff able to benefit from the dollars and others not. I am not used to having a benefit that is not available to all."

- An employer in the child care and education industry in southern Wisconsin

INITIAL
AWARENESS

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Though the process was a little rushed, most employers had a positive application experience

Generally, respondents did not see the Partner Up! application as overly challenging, and they appreciated the resources provided to them to complete it. If more complicated questions did arise, many said their questions were answered by DCF or local grant partners in a reasonable amount of time.

However, many interviewees also stated they felt rushed to complete the application. In some cases, respondents said they submitted the application with guesstimate information to get it in on time. Some participants also found the application to be confusing, and noted that because of the nature of the pilot program, the process did not feel “fully baked” at the beginning of the first cohort’s application period.

“The application process was very easy after talking with our local office about it.”
- An employer in the manufacturing industry in northeastern Wisconsin

“The instructions were clear and thorough, and if we had questions, someone quickly returned our calls and emails.”
- An employer in the child care and education industry in southern Wisconsin

“Initially, I had misread the question as to how many slots we would need. I counted the number of staff that would need a slot, not the number of children. At that time, it was stated that these numbers would just be an estimate and the application was not binding. However, when we received acceptance into the program we were binded to that number. Our Partner Up! business advocate worked with us to find a solution and everything worked out great in the end.”
- An employer in the child care and education industry in western Wisconsin

“Paperwork was easy, but the process was not fleshed out. There were a number of questions that the individuals facilitating the grant were unable to answer and needed time to get back to us. Some of the process was not clear and much of it has been, ‘lets figure it out as we go.’”
- An employer in the agriculture, forestry, fishing, and hunting industry in northeastern Wisconsin

“It seemed very rushed. A lot of the questions that we had, people didn’t really seem to know the answers for... I think they’re doing the best that they can, but I don’t feel like the grant was super well organized for execution when it rolled out.”
- An employer in the retail trade industry in southeastern Wisconsin

“It’s just a pilot program, and they’re trying to figure out things as they go. So, I get that. But, I think there was very unclear information from the get-go.”
- A child care provider in southern Wisconsin



Employees' experiences varied

Employees had inconsistent experiences in how they were identified by employers, what the application process entailed, and how the program expectations/details were communicated to them. The administrative office or position that was their primary employer contact for the program also differed (HR, benefits office, COO, CEO).

"[I would change the application process so] our Child Care Provider could fill out the registration forms to submit on behalf of the parent/family since they have all our information anyway including license/provider numbers (there are multiple locations that my children attend so tracking down all numbers was annoying)."

- An employee in the government and non-profit industry in southeastern Wisconsin

"We filled out the grant application, but I didn't realize that then our staff would be notified right away via email. Staff were like, 'What is this all about?' We didn't know that we even had the grant. Then the associates thought the email was more of a spam thing because they didn't know about the grant. We didn't realize that Partner Up would be sending our associates the contract right away."

- An employer in the retail trade industry in southeastern Wisconsin

Large employers faced additional challenges

Larger employers reported having more difficulty with the application and the quick deadline. The difficulty primarily was due to the fact that they were unsure how to ensure equity across employees, determine how many child care slots employees required for the duration of the grant, and where their employees' existing child care providers were located.

"It was a seamless process and easy. It would have been helpful to know if there was a way to edit our numbers as they were fluid."

- An employer in the government and non-profit industry in northern Wisconsin

"There's no way they could make things equal up for all their employees. If you have a hundred employees, how can you get enough slots in daycares? How can you get enough this time?"

- A child care provider in northeastern Wisconsin

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Grants were awarded quickly, but communication was siloed

Once the applications were submitted, participants appreciated the speed at which they were approved. However, once notified, there was often confusion on what the next steps were, what was required of them, what the expectations were from the other grant participants, or what the overall timelines were. Several described moving through the process “blindly.” The materials and resources provided by DCF were described as helpful; but participants found it challenging to identify details for their specific questions or needs, find an overview of expectations, or find the time to sit through webinars. Because the grant is an “ecosystem,” in which actions by providers, employers, and employees depend on one another, the lack of overall understanding became exacerbated by siloed communications to participants. For example, in some cases, employees went to an employer with questions about the grant when the employer had not yet received notice of approval.

“The process to apply was easy, but as always, difficult to find the time to attend the webinars, read all the rules, and then get everyone to fill out their paperwork. I understand these weren’t really things that could have been avoided though.”

- An employer in the child care and education industry in northern Wisconsin

“At the beginning, there wasn’t a lot of people who knew what they were doing or what to expect. When you would ask for information, no one knew how to answer the questions. It has become easier now.”

- An employer in the child care and education industry in northeastern Wisconsin

“Maybe having a document with details or contract of the program available for the participating families. For a while I didn’t know how long my child was covered in the program and didn’t know where that information could be found.”

- An employee in the child care and education industry in southeastern Wisconsin

“It was a bit of a challenge at the beginning of the program as employees waited to see when their benefits would start as there was little communication about a timeline.”

- An employer in the child care and education industry in southern Wisconsin

“Communication, in the beginning, was nonexistent. If it wasn’t for the company I was partnered with, I would not have even known I was in the program. I had to call the Partner Up! program several times to ask how to get the application done because I hadn’t been contacted at all. Rough start, but [I] gave it a higher rating because since then it has gone well.”

- A child care provider in southern Wisconsin

“There wasn’t a whole lot of communication. I found out a month after the plan had started for us. I found out that they were paying from daycare.”

- An employee in northeastern Wisconsin



Child care availability was a limiting factor for some, but the grant provided the opportunity for new partnerships for several participants

While most participants did not need to change providers to participate, low availability of child care in some regions caused challenges for some participants. Only a few employers said their employees prefer unlicensed providers, but for those that experienced that challenge, it became a major barrier to getting started with Partner Up!

Generally, child care providers said the partnership aspects of Partner Up! are going well and the grant has enabled some to build new partnerships, but some participants noted that they haven't always been able to connect meaningfully with area employers or find other businesses to partner with.

“Probably the number one challenge was overcoming the perception that group day care ‘is not as good’ as a babysitter plus overall suspicion of day care providers; language barrier among Hispanic employees with day care providers. One provider has gone out of her way to hire Spanish-speaking staff.”

- An employer in the manufacturing industry in southeastern Wisconsin

“I wish we could have gotten more info out to other companies to get them on board. Kind of came up fast and when you’re trying to run a child care business, there is not always extra time to get things done..”

- A child care provider in northeastern Wisconsin

“We were worried that the employee would not be able to secure a child care spot because the child care center wasn’t sure there would be an opening. It worked out at the last minute but it was stressful.”

- An employer in the health services industry in northeastern Wisconsin

“The grant money is helping the program and it is allowing the staff to not pay for child care as well as helping the families, but I haven’t felt the ‘partnership’ bond with Partner Up!”

- An employer in the child care and education industry in northeastern Wisconsin

“It was too rushed so many businesses heard about it too late. Also, with the time limit it couldn’t be explained well enough to make child cares feel safe to try it.”

- A child care provider in western Wisconsin

“We actually have a few open spots because staff aren’t willing to leave their unregulated provider and the provider does not want to get certified/licensed.”

- An employer in the health services industry in southern Wisconsin

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The end-of-month payment timing is disruptive to providers

Overwhelmingly, providers noted that it was disruptive to their standard business practices to receive funding for services at the end of the month. Interviewees said they did not realize the payments would be at the end of the month, which resulted in some financial stressors for their business. Initially, providers have had to problem-solve how to “float” a child until payments kick-in or full-payment is remedied. Employees and employers were uncertain if they should pay the payments and then get a credit or reimbursed later because they did not want providers to shoulder the financial strain. In most cases, after a few months of the grant cycle, participants reported they were able to adjust their business processes to accommodate the grant’s payment structure and are now comfortable with it, but nearly all would prefer payments at the beginning of the month.

“It is an easy process to get the payment checks in the mail. The only downfall is that they are delayed compared to the actual dates of the services provided.”

- A child care provider in southeastern Wisconsin

“We are happy to receive checks, although it was difficult to wait one month to receive the first one. We went without payments from parents for that time.”

- A child care provider in western Wisconsin

“The delayed payments for services created a lot of issues with our billing timelines. We could not let the families’ accounts go past-due which meant the family needed to pay upfront. The family was reimbursed for their payments; however, it creates a lot of tension, which reflected poorly on myself and my business. The family was told in advance that their accounts could not go past due, even with the program, yet was quick to blame me/my organization when they were told they needed to make a payment.”

- A child care provider in southern Wisconsin

“The payments arrive weeks after the care is received which would have been more problematic if not for the Child Care Counts stabilization funds.”

- A child care provider in southern Wisconsin

“Basically, I’m watching the children for free for a month.”

- An employer in the child care and education industry in southern Wisconsin

“At the start of the program, we weren’t sure when the first payment was coming. So, we had the families paying that should have been being paid by their employer, and my teachers paying because we didn’t know when the check was coming. There was no communication around that. The cash flow was difficult upfront. I actually didn’t get my first payment until the end of the second month. And, then I got three payments all within three days. It was messed up, but we got it figured out.”

- A child care provider in northern Wisconsin

Discrepancies between invoices, statements, and payments create confusion

In addition to payments arriving later than desired by providers, some participants noted discrepancies between invoices and the amount of payment received, or confusing documentation that was difficult to trace back to the correct child or family, to the point that a few providers were worried about the implications for their business. Some providers also requested different payment methods, as well as an electronic portal, to help keep better track of who the funding applies to and make the process easier.

Employers also faced similar challenges with paperwork, saying that sometimes invoices arrived late or not at all, or arrived in larger batches that were difficult to align to a month's funding. Employer participants were also interested in the option to pay online for both ease and the purposes of tracking payments.

"Payment statements are a bit confusing. They also don't look accurate with the information I submitted (when someone leaves the program and I fill with another child, the dates are not always correct, the child care location is not accurate, or there are errors in payments). I have a fear when I get audited that information is not going to be 100% accurate based on changes made throughout the year. I do, however, have all of the email backups to show that I did submit requests to make the changes."

- A child care provider in southeastern Wisconsin

"This should be offered as an electronic system and an invoice should be sent monthly to provide who the funds should be allocated to."

- A child care provider in southeastern Wisconsin

"I wish there was more detail available on the statement. It would help to have payments listed and broken down by child. There has been an inconsistency with the amount sent for our staff."

- A child care provider in southern Wisconsin

"Payment was delayed for the first few months. We get random statements and everything doesn't always line up for changes so it can be hard to figure out at time."

- A child care provider in southeastern Wisconsin

"I think the invoice would be much easier if we could sign up for direct deposit or have a way to pay online. I've also had invoices not come through for a month and then had two invoices for the month of January."

- An employer in the real estate, rental, and leasing industry in northeastern Wisconsin

"The process itself is easy but invoices seem to be delayed and it often makes me wonder if I'm missing something."

- An employer in the professional business services industry in western Wisconsin

Participants would like more flexibility as their needs change

Both employers and providers described amendments to contracts as cumbersome and confusing. Common amendments that were mentioned were children aging-up, employee changes (switching providers or leaving employer), pregnancies, and births. While amendments are in flux, some payments to providers were disrupted or overpayments were made for months. In some cases, the changes requested were not accurately translated to new contracts, which further disrupted payments or delayed contracts.

Participants also requested more flexibility in adding or changing slots. Some participants did not understand how slots were allocated when they initially applied, creating a shortfall, while others would like to offer the benefit to new employees or current employees to improve retention and attraction of staff.

“The contracts are difficult to change when children switch from full-time to part-time (during the summer months when school is out).”

- An employer in the child care and education industry in northeastern Wisconsin

“[I would like] both of my children enrolled. Due to the number of slots my employer received for the program, only one of my children was able to participate to allow for other employees to participate as well.”

- An employee in the manufacturing industry in southern Wisconsin

“The only downfall is that if an employee leaves and their child is no longer using the Partner Up! program, then we have to find a replacement or the spot is no longer available.”

- An employer in the child care and education industry in northeastern Wisconsin

“With a flux of staff, the system doesn’t accommodate changes well. Initial intake to staff through their personal email wasn’t always acted upon, leaving these staff out of the contract. Some staff on W2 only found out later they couldn’t participate.”

- An employer in the government and non-profit industry in southeastern Wisconsin

“We have a lot of changes within our organization, so when someone leaves the program, wants to be added to the program, or changes are needed (example: someone needs to switch child care providers), that tends to cause an issue.”

- An employer in the manufacturing industry in southern Wisconsin

“The fact that we cannot add children to the program throughout the year, and if an employee leaves that has a spot in the Partner Up! program, we only have 30 days to fill the spot or we lose it. I have been fortunate to fill the two spots we have, but that may not always be the case. Flexibility of adding more children to the program throughout year and having the option to get the spot back if we have an employee that needs it would be great.”

- An employer in the child care and education industry in western Wisconsin

RECOMMENDATIONS



Increase Awareness of the Core Issue

- Use Partner Up! participants and other DCF partners to bring awareness of the labor market and economic impacts of child care accessibility through earned media and hyper-local presentations to local organizations such as Rotaries, Lions Clubs, and chambers of commerce.
- Develop and disseminate a tool kit that encourages local organizations and businesses to bring community awareness to the issues related to child care accessibility and provides simple tools on how to facilitate stakeholder engagement to move towards sustainable local solutions. The tool kit could include a basic FAQ with standardized data proof points, a boiler plate letter to the editor, a “how to” facilitation guide for community conversations, social media graphics, and examples of how other communities and employers have begun to tackle the issue.
- Develop a simple, standardized media/general stakeholder explainer on the issue, the economic impacts, key data points to be aware of, how DCF is leading the way on solutions, and how some communities and employers are addressing the issue locally.

“ When an employer supports a family instead of just the person, it shows that you really do care about them and their family, not just what they’re going to do for your business. I think a lot of people nowadays are not very loyal to their employers because they don’t feel like their employers are trying to help them live.”

- Employer

Expand Awareness of the Partner Up! Program and the Benefits of Participating

- To increase awareness of future Partner Up! grant opportunities, especially to local employers, consider developing promotional materials specific to employers in Wisconsin's largest industries. The materials may include acknowledgment of how access to child care may specifically impact the employees of that industry, and how participating in the grant may positively impact their business, backed by industry-specific data, where available. These materials could then be promoted through industry groups and associations, as well as local chambers of commerce and regional economic development organizations.
- In the grant application and/or promotional materials, include suggestions for how an employer may consider operationalizing the grant in fair and equitable ways. Including these suggestions proactively responds to some employers' concerns about providing the resource to some employees and not all, and thus may alleviate some employers' hesitancy to apply.
- Develop boilerplate social media graphics and/or language for participating child care providers and employers so that they can share their excitement about participating in Partner Up! across their social media networks. These tools would be optional for participants but would support local pride for participants, encourage promotion of the program, and may organically stir hyper-local conversations about the importance of access to high-quality child care.
- More broadly communicate the impacts of Partner Up! on Wisconsin as a whole, but also specific regions and industries. Promotion of the program impacts can be through earned media, as well as direct outreach to local chambers of commerce, economic development organizations, industry groups and associations, and local community organizations.

“ Child care is really a deciding factor on whether or not your employees actually want to work for you. As far as employers go, Partner Up! is a huge advantage. We were looking at having myself stay home and watch the kids before this grant came out, just because it wasn't hardly making any financial sense to work.”

- Employee

Where Possible, Address Participants' Operational and Programmatic Challenges

- Providers consistently noted in the survey and in interviews that payment at the end of the month was not ideal for their business model. If it is not possible to shift provider payments, increase communication about payments and standardize payment schedules. Proactive acknowledgement of the issue, as well as clear communications about payment details, could improve providers' perceptions of and experiences with the payment process.
- Where possible and when appropriate, provide Partner Up! employers more flexibility in child care slots. The types of flexibility most often requested in surveys and interviews were the ability to change the number of slots once approved as a grantee, and the ability to keep a child care slot as a recruitment tool should a Partner Up! employee no longer need the slot.
- Develop a big picture overview of Partner Up! processes, expectations for categories of grantees, and timelines for specific activities. In addition to the high-level overview, develop overviews for each category of participant. To ensure intersectional understanding and awareness amongst participants, ensure the category-specific overviews are available to all.
- Once grantees are identified, communicate to the grantees which local providers and employers have also been named Partner Up! participants. Encourage connections between local participants so that Partner Up! providers and employers are aware of who may need child care slots and where there are current child care openings.
- To standardize the Partner Up! employee experience, develop process recommendations and boilerplate communications to participating employers. These may include, but are not limited to, suggestions for identifying employees, how to onboard employees into the program, and ideas for proactively checking in on participating employees to hear directly the impacts of the program on their families.
- Facilitate a more formal, robust conversation between local grantees to discuss the state of child care access in their area and encourage the brainstorming of sustainable, local solutions.
- Identify and communicate more funding opportunities and/or resources providers and employers may consider leveraging to sustain child care for employees after the grant ends.

“ This program is amazing and needs to continue! The hiccups with the paperwork and processes are minor in comparison to the HUGE impact this program has. We will apply every single time this is available and will continue to encourage other businesses to do so as well!”

- Employer