

# ACCESS Reduces Burden of Child Care Costs for Georgia's Families

Jing Tang, Holly Keaton, Jackson Fojut, Analisa Pines, Amy Blasberg, Diane Early

## Introduction

In May 2021, Georgia's Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) launched a new temporary initiative—Awarding Child Care Education Scholarship Supplements (ACCESS)—to mitigate the negative financial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Georgia's child care industry and families. ACCESS aims to temporarily support families who receive Childcare and Parent Services (CAPS) scholarships, which assist families with low incomes<sup>1</sup> with the cost of child care while the adults work or go to school. Through ACCESS, CAPS pays child care providers their full published rate for the type of care provided, including the family fee, from May 2021 through at least October 2023.

Child Trends partnered with DECAL to administer an online survey to families who receive CAPS scholarships. The survey captured families' experiences with and opinions of ACCESS. The objective of the survey was to understand the extent to which families were aware of the change in their child care expenses and how the decrease in child care costs had affected their family's finances. This brief summarizes and discusses the implications of findings from the survey.

## Methodology and Data

In December 2021, DECAL sent an online survey link to 15,871 families who, according to DECAL's administrative records, were using a CAPS certificate both in April 2021 and when the survey opened and who should have been paying something for child care in April. DECAL distributed the survey links via email and followed the initial email with two reminder emails. The emails and the survey content were distributed in both English and Spanish. DECAL also sent one text message (if the family had previously agreed to receive texts from DECAL) and made one telephone call delivering a prerecorded message to each eligible family. Respondents who completed the survey had a chance to win a \$100 gift card. We randomly selected 10 families each week and distributed 30 gift cards in total.

Our analysis sample includes the 3,597 (23%) respondents who indicated that they had at least one child in child care in both April 2021 and when they took the survey in December 2021.<sup>2</sup> A larger group ( $n = 5,362$ ) took the survey, but we excluded 1,765 respondents who either did not answer the questions about using care in April and/or December ( $n = 1,408$ ) or who indicated that they either did not have a child in care or were not sure if they had a child in care in April and/or December ( $n = 357$ ). All valid respondents should have indicated that they were using care both in April and when the survey opened in December. However, the large group that did not answer the two questions about using care in April and December had significant missing data, so may have stopped responding early in the questionnaire. The smaller group that indicated that they were not using care or did not know if they were using care at one or both time points were either mistaken, were never eligible for the survey and had received the survey link from someone

other than DECAL, or stopped using care between the time the initial survey requests were distributed and when they took the survey. The main goal of the survey was to understand how the change in payments affected families, so we only included families who experienced the change.

Eighty percent ( $n = 2,851$ ) of respondents in the analysis sample answered the open-ended question that asked about their opinions of ACCESS. To analyze these comments, we first randomly selected 200 responses and used those to develop a high-level coding scheme. We then used the coding scheme to assign codes to 500 randomly selected responses, including the 200 that we first examined.

## Presentation of Findings

### Demographic information and child care usage

Out of the 3,597 respondents, one fourth (25%) reported having one child aged 12 years or younger living with them, 38 percent reported having two children, and 37 percent reported having three or more. The two predominant racial/ethnic groups were Black (not multi-racial, 70%) and White (not multi-racial, 14%).<sup>3</sup> These demographics are similar to the overall population of children who received CAPS scholarships in SFY 2018, of which 72 percent were Black and 17 percent were White.<sup>4</sup> The highest level of educational attainment varied widely: 34 percent had completed some college but had no degree, 27 percent had a high school diploma/GED, 17 percent had an associate degree, 15 percent had a bachelor's or graduate degree, and 5 percent had less than a high school diploma.

Families were overwhelmingly using the same child care provider in December 2021 that they were using in April 2021 (82%). The majority of families used a child care center (85% in April; 83% in December). Other common setting types included after-school programs (14% in April; 15% in December) and Georgia's Pre-K (12% in both April and December). Respondents could select multiple types of care in the survey.

### Changes in child care expenses

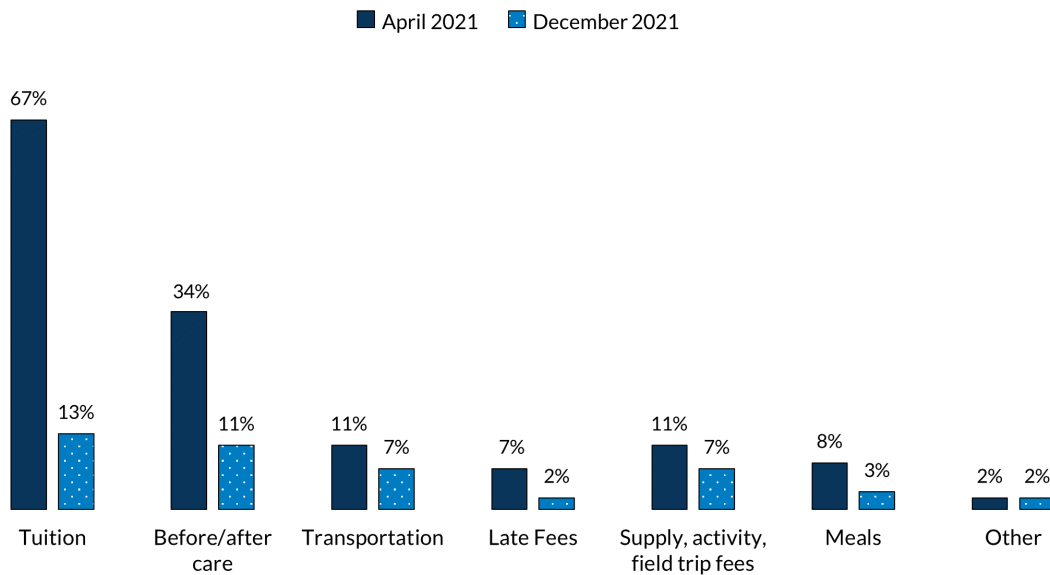
#### Child care costs

The survey asked respondents a variety of questions regarding their family's child care expenses. Respondents were asked how much they paid for child care for all of their children in April and December. For the month of April, 2,677 respondents reported their child care costs, and the average was \$1.23 per hour, per child. For December, 2,805 respondents reported their child care costs, and the average had dropped by almost one half to \$0.70 per hour, per child.<sup>5</sup>

We present these average hourly costs as a simple way to compare costs before and after ACCESS.<sup>6</sup> However, we urge caution in interpreting them because they are based on many assumptions, including that all children in the household were in full-time child care at both time points and that parents can accurately recall their costs. Furthermore, almost one fourth of respondents did not answer this question ( $n = 920$  in April;  $n = 792$  in December), decreasing the accuracy of these estimates.

The survey also asked respondents to compare their child care expenses in December 2021 to April 2021. Fifty-nine percent of respondents indicated that they were paying less in December, while 22 percent were paying the same, and only five percent indicated that they were paying more. As seen in Figure 1, at both time points the two most common child care expenses that families reported were tuition and before/after care. However, the percentages of respondents who paid for each category decreased markedly after ACCESS began.

**Figure 1.** Types of child care expenses in April and December 2021



**Source:** Child Trends analysis of ACCESS Family Survey data.

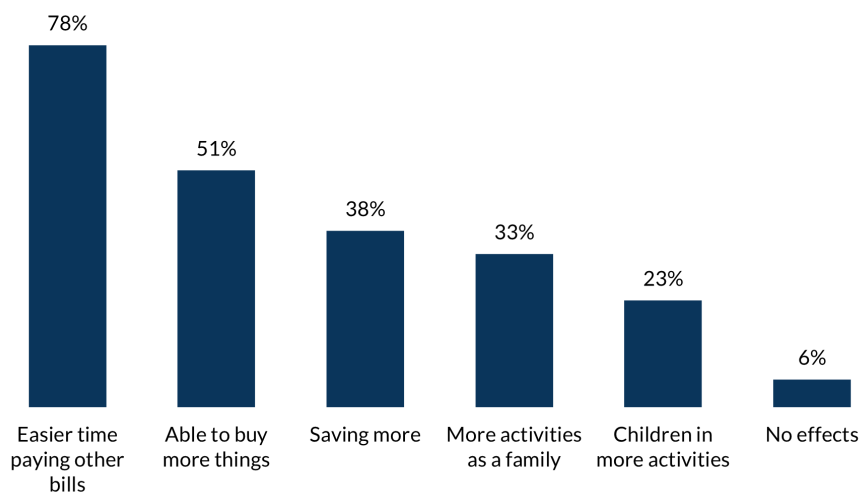
## Reasons for the change in child care expenses

Among the 2,099 families who reported that their child care expenses decreased from April to December, almost all (91%) attributed the change in expenses to the CAPS scholarship or the ACCESS program. Much smaller percentages of respondents indicated other reasons for the decrease, such as changes in child care arrangement (3%) or children moving to a different age group (3%). Respondents could select multiple reasons.

## Effects of change on families

The survey also asked families who indicated that they paid less for child care in December than they did in April, “How has this change affected your family?” and allowed families to select all that apply. As seen in Figure 2, most families reported that they had an easier time paying other bills (78%), and over half of families said that they were able to purchase more things for the family (51%).

**Figure 2.** Effects of change in child care expenses on families



Source: Child Trends analysis of ACCESS Family Survey data.

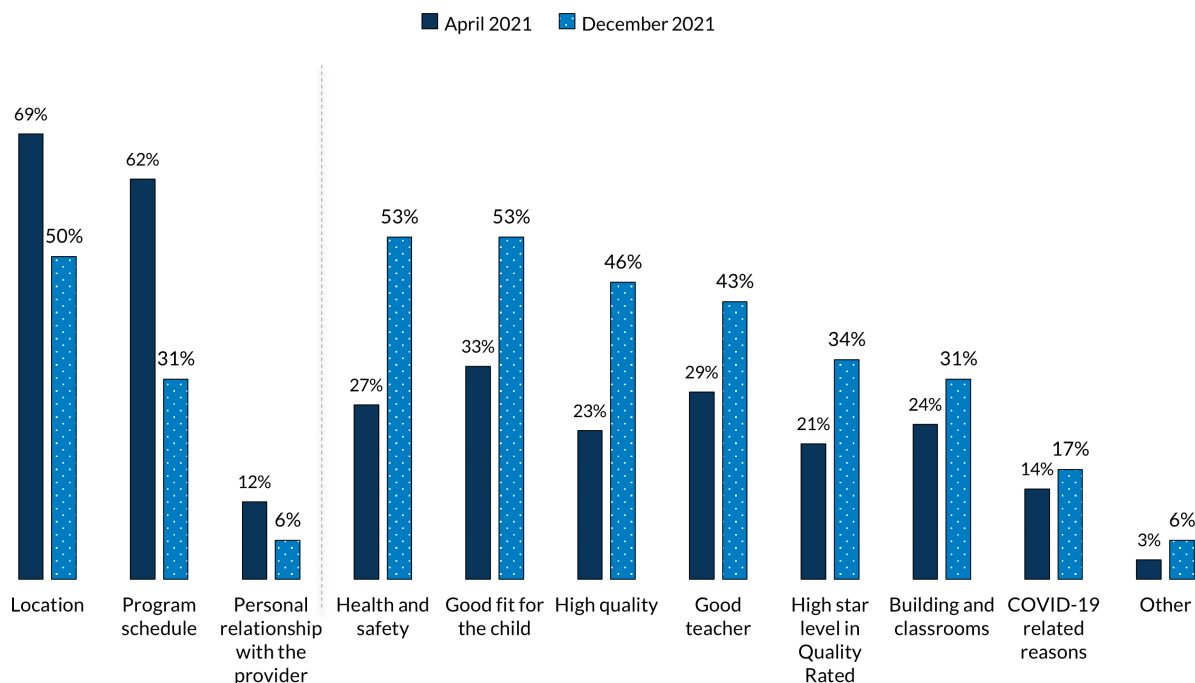
### Effects on child care priorities

The survey asked families whose child care expenses had decreased between April and December ( $n = 2,099$ ) how the change in cost affected which care arrangement they selected. Most families said that the change had not affected their choice of care (84%). Relatively few families reported that they had changed their provider (7%) or planned to change their provider (3%).

The survey asked parents who reported a decrease in child care expenses and who indicated that they either changed or were planning to change providers ( $n = 213$ ) about their reasons for selecting the child care they used in April 2021 as well as what they were looking for in a new child care provider as of December 2021. Respondents could select multiple response options.

As seen in Figure 3, more than half of respondents (53%) indicated that they were looking for a provider who was a good fit for their child in December 2021, compared to one third of respondents in April 2021 (33%). The percentages of respondents who selected a healthy and safe environment (27% in April; 53% in December) and high quality (23% in April; 46% in December) as the characteristics they were looking for in a new provider doubled. There was also an increase in respondents who prioritized a high star level in Quality Rated (21% in April; 34% in December). In contrast, the number of respondents who selected practicality factors, such as location (69% in April; 50% in December) or program schedule (62% in April; 31% in December), decreased.

**Figure 3. Families' child care priorities in April and December 2021**



Source: Child Trends analysis of ACCESS Family Survey data.

## Families' awareness and opinions of ACCESS

Most respondents (71%) indicated that they were aware of ACCESS prior to taking the survey. Among these respondents, nearly two thirds (65%) reported learning about ACCESS through an email, newsletter, or CAPS message, while 44 percent reported that they learned about ACCESS through a child care program/provider, and 26 percent learned about it through their child care expenses.

*"I think this has been wonderful to help low-income families. It has helped us tremendously and also allowed my son to learn and grow around others."*

The survey included an open-ended question about respondents' opinions of Georgia paying for more child care expenses for families. We randomly selected 500 of 2,851 responses to code.<sup>7</sup> The majority of respondents' comments were positive and fell into three general themes: general positive feelings (70%), support for finding and using child care (32%), and support of family finances (25%). Only nine responses (2%) mentioned challenges or made negative comments. The codes were not mutually exclusive, which means one response could have more than one code. We present additional details about these three general themes below.

Overwhelmingly, families expressed a **positive opinion of Georgia** paying for more child care expenses. Nearly 40 percent of responses were expressions of support and gratitude towards the program, while 18 percent mentioned that this program helped families. Respondents also noted that the assistance in child care expenses reduced stress (5%).

*"I can now afford to put food on the table and be able to pay my light bill and rent on time. I'm a single mom of three and times are difficult. Before I would choose to either pay for the daycare or buy groceries. So far this help has made my everyday life a bit easier."*

In terms of **finding and using child care**, some single and working parents reported that this support was especially helpful for them (21%). A small group of families said they could only afford child care with this assistance (9%), and a few noted that it allowed them to send their children to higher-quality facilities (2%).

A smaller group of respondents discussed how the assistance was **beneficial for their family's finances**. For some, the assistance helped with bills and other living costs (13%) and provided extra money for activities outside of bills and necessities (5%).

## Limitations

The data collected for this study included some limitations. Because all respondents received the same public survey link, it was possible for one person to take the survey multiple times. When a respondent completed the survey, we asked them to provide their email address for the gift card drawing; based on these email addresses, it appears that 392 individuals took the survey more than once. We could not exclude them because the email addresses were not tied to the survey responses to maintain anonymity.

In addition to duplicate responses, because the link was public, it is possible that families who were ineligible completed the survey. We intended to limit the sample to families who paid something for child care in April 2021 in order to learn about their experiences with ACCESS, and DECAL sent the link only to families who paid for child care in April. However, some families reported that they were paying nothing in April. Because we could not confirm families' actual child care costs in April or December, we decided to include them because they may have been thinking of other types of fees or may have been mistaken about the time frame.

Finally, a large portion of the targeted population did not take the survey. This could be an issue if there were differences between families who responded to the survey and those who did not. For example, families who are aware of ACCESS might be more likely to take the survey and these families might have different experiences with or opinions of ACCESS than families who did not participate.

## Discussion of Findings and Future Considerations

**Emailing the survey to families receiving CAPS scholarships was an effective way to gather their input and perspectives.** Given all the competing demands on parents of young children, our team was unsure what type of response rate to expect. The timing of the survey was particularly challenging as it fell right around the winter holidays and amidst ongoing challenges surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite these challenges, we have usable information from over 3,500 families. This indicates that family engagement with email is relatively high, and DECAL should consider email an effective outreach mechanism for gathering future input from families. This is particularly true if the survey is very short and participants receive an incentive.

**In general, families are aware of ACCESS, with 71 percent reporting they knew about ACCESS prior to taking the survey.** Given how complicated family finances can be, some parents might not have noticed the decrease in cost or might not have known the cause of the decrease. The fact that such a large proportion of

*"It has definitely lifted a burden off my shoulders. I am able to participate with the school for supplies, field trips, and holiday events. My children are able to get meals and snacks they wanted that I could[n't] afford before."*

families are aware of ACCESS indicates that the messaging through DECAL was effective, with about two thirds of those families learning about ACCESS through an email, newsletter, or CAPS message.

**Families reported that their child care costs went down between April and December 2021.** Although families receiving CAPS scholarships still reported some costs in December 2021, these costs were markedly lower than those they reported in April 2021. There are several possible explanations for families reporting any expenses in December. For example, it is possible that only a subset

of children in the family receives a CAPS scholarship and the family continued to pay for some child care in December. There also continue to be allowable child care costs under ACCESS, such as supplies and extra activities.

**Few families (10%) reported that they had changed or were planning to change their care arrangement as a result of ACCESS.** The hypothesis that removing cost as a barrier might have encouraged a large portion of families to select a different care arrangement was not supported by the survey results. This may indicate that families are generally content with their arrangement or that cost was not a driving factor in their initial choice.

**Among the small group of parents (10%) who said they had changed or planned to change their care arrangement, parents appear to be more focused on fit and quality for their new care arrangement.** The percentage indicating that *high quality* or *high star level in Quality Rated* were priorities in selecting care increased noticeably. This may indicate that for this subgroup, the reduced expense of child care allowed them to prioritize quality more than they had previously.

**Families reported that ACCESS is improving their finances and allowing for more activities.** In addition to having an easier time with bills and purchases, many families reported that they were doing more family activities and/or enrolling their children in more activities. Of the 500 open-ended responses that our team coded, almost all were positive, with only nine responses (2%) expressing challenges with or negative opinions of ACCESS. The most common responses were general positive feelings, including expressions of gratitude. Other common responses included that ACCESS helps families broadly, supports household finances such as bills and other living costs, and is beneficial for single and working parents. Based on these findings, it appears that continuing ACCESS might be a valuable way for Georgia to support working families.

### Suggested citation

Tang, J., Keaton, H., Fojut, J., Pines, A., Blasberg, A., & Early, D. (2022). ACCESS reduces burden of child care costs for Georgia's families. Child Trends.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Typically, the threshold for families with low income is 50% of the state median income (SMI); however, effective November 1, 2021, this threshold was set to 85% of the SMI due to funding from the ARP Act. This new threshold is time-limited.

<sup>2</sup> The analysis sample includes 3,576 responses to the English survey and 21 responses to the Spanish survey. We translated Spanish responses to English and then combined all the responses for analysis.

<sup>3</sup> The remaining respondents were Hispanic or Latino/Latinx/Latiné (not multi-racial, 3%), American Indian/Alaskan Native (not multi-racial, <1%), Asian (not multi-racial, <1%), other (not multi-racial, <1%), Native Hawaiian/other Pacific Islanders (not multi-racial, <1%), and multi-racial (5%). Five percent of respondents preferred not to answer the question about race/ethnicity.

---

<sup>4</sup> Aranda, R., & Ribar, D. C. (2021). Unmet Subsidized Child Care Demand in Georgia. *GPL Policy Briefs*. 27. [https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/gpl\\_policybriefs/27](https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/gpl_policybriefs/27)

<sup>5</sup> The standard deviation around these means was high. In April it was \$2.05; in December, it was \$1.53.

<sup>6</sup> Respondents were able to report the amount they paid for child care in terms of an hourly, daily, weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly cost. To simplify this cost information, Child Trends converted all reported costs to hourly. We assumed all children under 13 were in full-time care and that one day consisted of eight hours and one week consisted of five days. For example, the conversion of a respondent's weekly child care costs would divide the reported cost by 40 to create that respondent's reported hourly cost. The Child Trends team made the decision to drop any reported costs greater than \$50 per hour under the assumption that such values represented an error and to eliminate the influence of those extreme costs.

<sup>7</sup> The analysis included 20 open-ended responses in Spanish. These responses were translated into English for coding and reporting purposes.

This study was supported by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) of the United States (U.S.) Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) as part of a financial assistance award (Grant #90YE0202) totaling \$1,000,000 with 100 percent funded by ACF/HHS. The contents are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official views of, nor an endorsement, by ACF/HHS, or the U.S. Government. For more information, please visit the ACF website, Administrative and National Policy Requirements.