



Evaluation of Georgia's DECAL Scholars

Final Evaluation Report

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Executive Summary

Since 2002, Georgia's Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) has offered supports to early childhood educators through DECAL Scholars. Scholars was developed to minimize barriers to recruitment and retention of the early childhood workforce. Scholars is comprised of four components: a scholarship program (SCHOLARSHIPS), financial awards for advancing early childhood workers' education (AWARDS), a retention bonus program (INCENTIVES), and an advising service (Educational Counseling). These components provide a mixture of monetary and educational support intended to help recruit and retain early childhood educators. The creation of Scholars was spurred by the low wages and lack of professional development opportunities in the field of early childhood education.

In 2021, DECAL partnered with Child Trends to evaluate early childhood providers' experiences with the Scholars program. Three research questions guided the evaluation:

1. Who has applied for and received Scholars benefits? How have providers accessed the benefits?
2. Is Scholars participation linked to intended outcomes for providers?
3. How do applicants, recipients, and stakeholders perceive the Scholars program? What areas do they identify for improvement?

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To answer these questions, Child Trends engaged in three data collection and analysis activities: a review of administrative data, a survey sent to recipients/non-recipients of Scholars, and focus groups with different stakeholders of Scholars.

Methods

Administrative data analysis:

Child Trends examined the characteristics of applicants who did and didn't receive Scholars supports by linking data from Care Solutions and the Georgia Professional Development System.

Scholars survey:

Child Trends sought to understand the experiences of different groups with the Scholars program by surveying three groups: 1) providers who never applied nor received any Scholars supports, 2) providers who applied but have not yet received any Scholars supports, and 3) providers who received at least one Scholars support.

Stakeholder engagement:

Child Trends sought feedback from two groups: 1) staff and students from educational institutions offering early childhood education (ECE) credentials and 2) community partners. Listening sessions were conducted with these groups to understand how they perceived the functioning of Scholars' four components.

Glossary

Non-applicant: Provider who did not apply for any Scholars supports in the timeframe of the evaluation (since 2015).

Applicant/not received: Provider who applied at least once for Scholars support since 2015, but did not receive the benefit they applied for.

Applicant/received: Provider who applied for and received at least one Scholars support since 2015.

Key findings

Who has applied for and received Scholars benefits? How have providers accessed the benefits?

How many people applied for and how many received Scholars support from 2015 to 2021?

- From 2015 to 2021, 37,798 people applied for SCHOLARSHIPS, AWARDS, or INCENTIVES.
- Of these applicants, 28,771 (76%) received support.

Who applied for and who received each Scholars component?

- The majority of those who received SCHOLARSHIPS, AWARDS, and INCENTIVES support were in the Metro Atlanta area.^a The majority of recipients were Black.^b In addition, most recipients were currently lead teachers in a center-based early childhood education (ECE) program and had a high school diploma as their highest level of education.

Are there differences between applicants/received and applicants/not received in each Scholars component?

- Applicants of different race/ethnicities were equally likely to receive AWARDS funds, while a significantly higher percentage of White applicants received SCHOLARSHIPS funds compared to Black or Hispanic applicants.
- Applicants from outside the Metro Atlanta area were slightly more likely to receive SCHOLARSHIPS funds than applicants from the Metro Atlanta area.
- Applicants from centers and family child care homes were equally likely to receive SCHOLARSHIPS funds.

How did applicants hear about Scholars?

- The three most common ways applicants heard about Scholars were from: 1) a supervisor or director at their child care, 2) DECAL, and 3) another child care teacher or provider.
- We did not find any differences in how applicants heard of Scholars by race/ethnicity or by recipient status.

What help did applicants receive with their application?

- Twenty percent of survey respondents reported receiving help with their application.
- Most commonly this involved help in understanding the application, help uploading or mailing materials, and help accessing the internet.
- The most common source of help was a supervisor or director.

Is Scholars participation linked to intended outcomes for providers?

How does receiving Scholars supports relate to changing employers?

- Those who received Scholars support were slightly less likely to change employers than those who did not receive support.

What day-to-day changes did survey respondents report as a result of receiving AWARDS or INCENTIVES?

- The most common change reported by applicants who received AWARDS and INCENTIVES was that they could purchase necessary items for themselves or their family.

^a Counties included in the Metro Atlanta group are Fulton, Gwinnett, Cobb, DeKalb, Clayton, Cherokee, Forsyth, Henry, Douglas, Fayette, and Rockdale counties.

^b Providers listed their race (Black, White, Asian) and whether they identified as having Hispanic ethnicity. Throughout the report, we refer to providers race and ethnicity as they identified in their application, other administrative data, or in the Scholars survey. Any provider who identified as Hispanic is included in the Hispanic group. Providers who did not identify as Hispanic are reported by their self-identified racial group (e.g., Black providers = Non-Hispanic Black providers).

- Other changes reported by a majority of AWARDS or INCENTIVES recipients included purchasing materials needed for their classroom or program, receiving a raise, being able to spend money on a hobby or family activities, and feeling more respected.

Were Scholars recipients less likely to report planning to leave ECE?

- Those who received Scholars supports were less likely to report planning to leave the field than those who applied, but did not receive, Scholars support.
- Low compensation was the most common reason cited by those who indicated they were likely to leave the field.

How do applicants, recipients, and stakeholders perceive the Scholars program? What areas do they identify for improvement?

How do providers perceive their current job support and career growth?

- A majority of each category of survey respondents indicated that they had the support they need to do their job and that there were advancement opportunities in the career.

How do Scholars recipients perceive the benefits of Scholars?

- A majority of survey respondents said that receiving Scholars supports influenced their decision to stay in the field and that Scholars helped them reach a higher career level.

How can the Scholars program be improved?

- The most common suggestions involved increasing marketing efforts for the Scholars program and expanding eligibility criteria for Scholars supports.
 - An example of expanded eligibility criteria would be allowing supports for students attending online programs for schools that are not based in Georgia.
 - Another would be increasing the salary cap so those seeking an associate degree or higher are ensured of their eligibility to apply. Based on applicant data, ECE providers with a high school diploma make up the majority of applicants across the Scholars programs, indicating that those with higher levels of education may have already reached the salary cap.

Considerations for the future of Scholars

- **Marketing and outreach.** Currently, most applicants hear of Scholars through the director or supervisor of their program. To ensure that information about Scholars reaches those who are not as well connected to their program's leadership, DECAL could devise a system that allows users to opt-in to receiving updates about Scholars upon logging into their Georgia Professional Development System profile.
- **Reducing application barriers.** Survey respondents suggested simplifying the application process and offering assistance. DECAL should consider working with Care Solutions, Inc.^c to expand their current application assistance and include other helpful tips or short videos.

^c DECAL contracts with [Care Solutions, Inc.](#), a management consulting firm located in Georgia, to operate the Scholars program on the state's behalf. This includes managing the Scholars application process, disbursement of funds, and data about Scholars implementation.

- **Broadening eligibility.** DECAL should consider reviewing eligibility criteria, particularly the salary cap. Additionally, new federal student loan programs can help potential applicants who have student loans in default come back to “good standing” with their student loans and become eligible for Scholars.
- **Additional research into potential racial and geographic inequities.** DECAL should consider conducting additional research to reveal root causes in differences in Scholars acceptance rates based on factors such as race/ethnicity, level of education, and geographic location.
- **Engaging family child care providers.** Most Scholars applicants work in a child care center. To increase the number of applicants working in family child care settings, DECAL should engage in targeted recruitment efforts. For example, DECAL should work with family child care provider associations or create a stakeholder group of family child care providers to raise awareness of Scholars.

Introduction

Children have the best outcomes in early care and education (ECE) settings when they have caring and responsive caregivers.¹ Foundational research on child development outcomes indicates that to meet the needs of multiple children, educators need specific training.² Those hoping to enter, or advance, in the ECE field face barriers receiving that training.³ In recent years there has been a shortage of ECE providers, resulting in fewer children served, longer waitlists,⁴ and more women forgoing work because they cannot find child care.⁵ Research indicates that low wages and a lack of professional development (PD) opportunities are major causes of this workforce shortage.⁶

In addressing these problems, state ECE leaders are challenged by a complex set of issues. High demand for qualified staff is a driver of the increasing cost of child care.⁷ At the same time, the funding model for child care is inadequate to meet the needs of many families and ECE staff,⁸ with prices too high for families to afford yet too low to cover the full cost of care. As a result, the ECE field struggles to provide the compensation⁹ and benefits (e.g., subsidized health insurance)¹⁰ necessary to attract and retain a highly qualified workforce. While individual providers may have a desire to increase their qualifications, the increasing cost of higher education combined with the industry’s low wages^d means many ECE providers would need to take on high amounts of student debt.¹¹ Higher education programs are also challenging to access for educators whose native language is something other than English,¹² who live in rural areas or physically far from Institutes of Higher Education (IHEs),¹³ and who need to work while enrolled in a degree program.¹⁴ The modest wage increases associated with completing a degree program^{15,16} make seeking additional education a difficult choice for many ECE providers. As a result, states often create supports outside of the conventional wage, benefit, and professional development structure to fill the gaps created by the current funding model.¹⁷

History and context of Scholars

Georgia’s Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) launched Scholars in 2002, to provide early childhood educators with resources to increase retention in the field and support educational attainment. This model is similar to the models that other states began adopting or developing around this same time.

Currently, Scholars has four components to support providers along their career path: SCHOLARSHIPS, AWARDS, INCENTIVES, and Educational Counseling. The following sections describe each component in more detail.

^d In 2022 the national median hourly wage for child care workers was \$13.71*, while in Georgia the median hourly wage for childcare workers was \$11.71.** These hourly wages are below what is considered a living wage for a single adult in Georgia (\$17.72 per hour).***

SCHOLARSHIPS

The purpose of SCHOLARSHIPS is to increase the number of qualified ECE professionals across the state. SCHOLARSHIPS supports providers with financial means to pursue ECE related post-secondary degrees and credentials. These supports include tuition assistance for any ECE related degree or a Child Development Associate (CDA) and scholarships to support high school students with costs related to enrolling in the ECE pathway of Georgia's Career, Technical, and Agricultural Education (CTAE) program.

AWARDS

AWARDS is intended to improve retention and recruitment of ECE providers and other professionals in Georgia. AWARDS provides a one-time payment to those who have completed a certificate or degree related to ECE. The amount depends on the type of program completed and ranges from \$1,200 for a CDA to \$2,500 for a master's degree.

INCENTIVES

INCENTIVES aims to increase retention of ECE professionals in Georgia by providing an annual salary bonus (previously distributed twice per year) to ECE educators based on tenure with their current employer. The amount that ECE educators receive is either \$1,500 or \$2,500.

Educational counseling

Educational counseling provides on-demand support for ECE providers regarding educational pathways. ECE providers can call a program representative to receive information about degree or certificate programs and financial aid and to receive help with enrollment. The service is free to all ECE educators in Georgia, and as of 2021, it is available in English and Spanish.

National landscape of career pathway supports

Programs similar to Scholars have been created across the country to address ECE workforce needs. T.E.A.C.H. is one of the earliest models to support ECE providers through scholarships. T.E.A.C.H. "provides educational scholarships to early care professionals and those who perform specialized functions in the early care system."¹⁸ Its companion program, Child Care WAGE\$, "provides education-based salary supplements to low-paid teachers, directors and family childcare providers working with children between the ages of birth to five."¹⁹ Both programs serve as national models that states can adapt to provide extra support to their ECE workforce. For example, Minnesota adapted these programs to build the R.E.E.T.A.I.N (Retaining Early Educators Through Attaining Incentives Now) program. The program "offers financial bonuses, ranging from \$500 to \$3,500, to highly qualified providers who stay in the childcare field and continually participate in PD activities. Bonus recipients agree to remain in their current positions for at least one year after receiving the bonus."²⁰

Currently, 47 states have a scholarship program that supports ECE providers in furthering their education. Of the 47, 45 states have supports for achieving a CDA and 42 have supports to attain a bachelor's degree.²¹

The current evaluation

In 2021, DECAL partnered with Child Trends, a nonprofit research organization, to learn more about Scholars. The goals of this evaluation were to gather information about providers' experiences with Scholars programming and offer considerations for future improvements. Evaluation planning began in 2021 by developing a logic model of Scholars to understand the resources of the program and the goals of each component. Additionally, Child Trends completed a landscape scan of wage supplement or salary bonus

programs in other states and delivered a summary to DECAL in spring 2022. The logic model and landscape scan informed our evaluation questions and selected methods.

The current report shares findings from the three main evaluation activities conducted in 2022-2023: 1) a review of administrative data pertaining to Scholars applicants, 2) a survey sent to both recipients and non-recipients of Scholars programs and, 3) focus groups with stakeholders in the Scholars program.

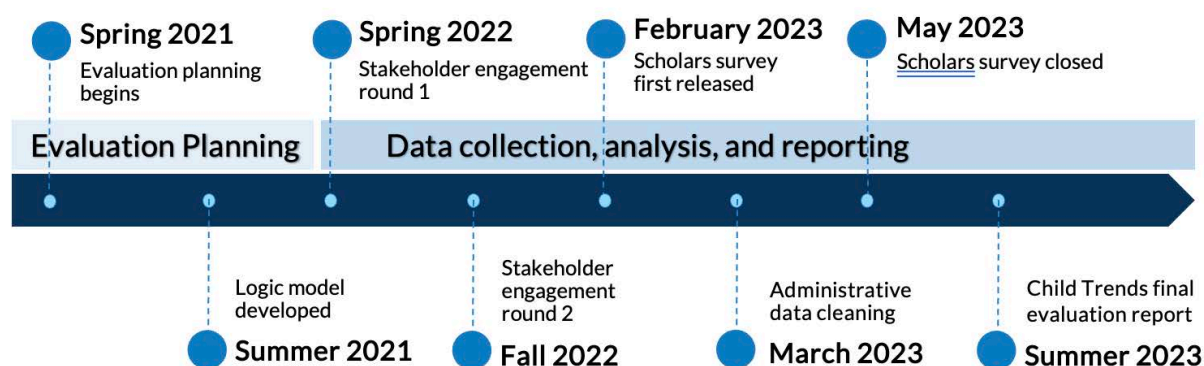
Our evaluation was guided by three research questions to help us 1) better understand who has applied for and received Scholars and how providers are accessing Scholars (or not), 2) to what extent Scholars participation is linked to intended outcomes for participants, and 3) perceptions of Scholars programs across different stakeholder groups, including providers. We used a mixed methods approach, including quantitative analysis of administrative data provided by DECAL and its implementation partner, Care Solutions, Inc., descriptive analysis of a provider survey about their experiences with Scholars, and qualitative thematic analysis of focus groups with various stakeholders. It is important to note that to promote easy access to Educational Counseling, Care Solutions, Inc. does not collect information on the callers to the hotline; therefore, we were not able to analyze data about this component of Scholars for this evaluation.

Table 1 summarizes the methods we used to answer each research question. **Figure 1** displays the timing of each evaluation activity from 2021-2023. Appendix A details each method in depth.

Table 1: Summary of research questions and evaluation methods

Research Questions	Methods Used
RQ1. Who has applied for and received Scholars benefits? How have providers accessed the benefits?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Administrative Data Analysis <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Scholars Survey <input type="checkbox"/> Stakeholder Engagement
RQ2. Is Scholars participation linked to intended outcomes for providers?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Administrative Data Analysis <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Scholars Survey <input type="checkbox"/> Stakeholder Engagement
RQ3. How do applicants, recipients, and stakeholders perceive the Scholars program? What areas do they identify for improvement?	<input type="checkbox"/> Administrative Data Analysis <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Scholars Survey <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Stakeholder Engagement

Figure 1. Timeline of evaluation activates



Findings

Who has applied for and received Scholars benefits? How have providers accessed the benefits?

How many applicants and recipients were there across Scholars programs from 2015 to 2021?

From 2015 to 2021, the Scholars program received a total of 37,798 applications for SCHOLARSHIPS, AWARDS, or INCENTIVES supports. Two thirds of these applications (76%, $n = 28,771$) were approved.^e Because one individual can submit multiple applications, we also examined the number of individual providers who submitted applications for each program. Overall, there was a decline in the number of individuals who applied to each component over the years, although the numbers occasionally spiked in certain years.

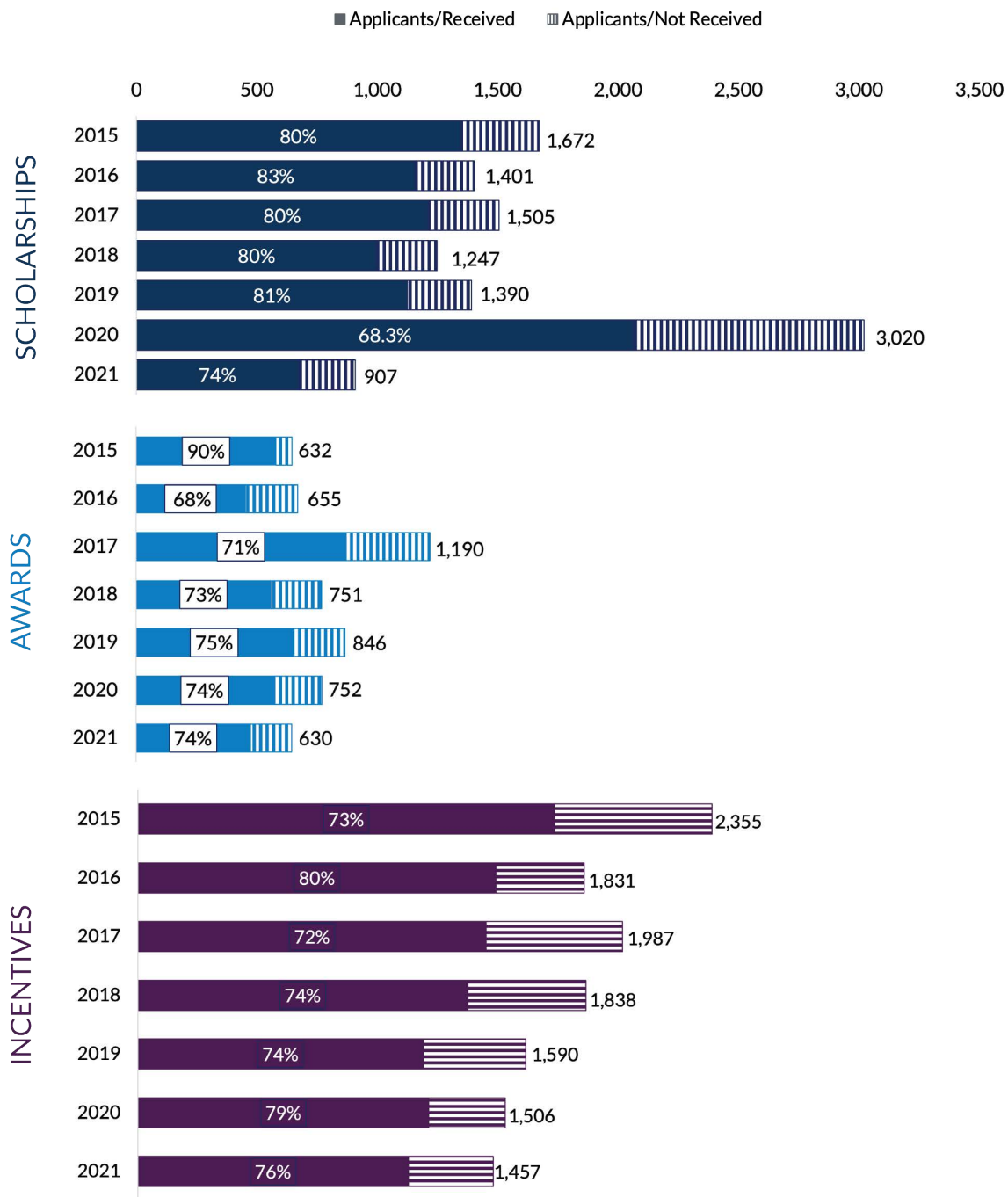
Figure 2 shows the number of total applicants, broken out by received and not received, each year. Between 2015 and 2021, 8,141 individuals submitted 14,904 SCHOLARSHIPS applications. In 2020, there was a marked increase in applicants in comparison to earlier years. In 2021, the number of applicants dropped to below 1,000. Throughout this period, the acceptance rates for SCHOLARSHIPS ranged from 68 percent to 83 percent. Specifically, 2020 had the lowest acceptance rate while having the highest number of applications.

AWARDS received 5,707 applications over the past seven years from 4,959 individuals. As seen in **Figure 2**, the number of AWARDS applicants experienced a spike in 2017, nearly doubling the number in 2015. However, since that 2017 spike, the overall number of applicants has declined back to the 2015 level. The acceptance rates for AWARDS ranged from 68 percent to 90 percent. There was a noticeable decrease in the acceptance rates from 2015 to 2016 and a slight increase in rates in 2017. Following 2017, the acceptance rates remained relatively stable.

INCENTIVES received 17,187 applications over the past seven years from 7,356 individuals. As seen in **Figure 2**, there was an overall decline in the number of INCENTIVES applications across this time frame. In 2021, the number of applicants was approximately two-thirds the number in 2015. The acceptance rates for INCENTIVES ranged from 72 percent to 80 percent.

^e Please note that a provider can submit multiple applications over time and apply for different supports.

Figure 2: Number of total applicants for each Scholars component, by acceptance status: 2015-2021



Source: Child Trends analysis of Scholars administrative data, 2015-2021.

Note: Percentages refer to the acceptance rates.

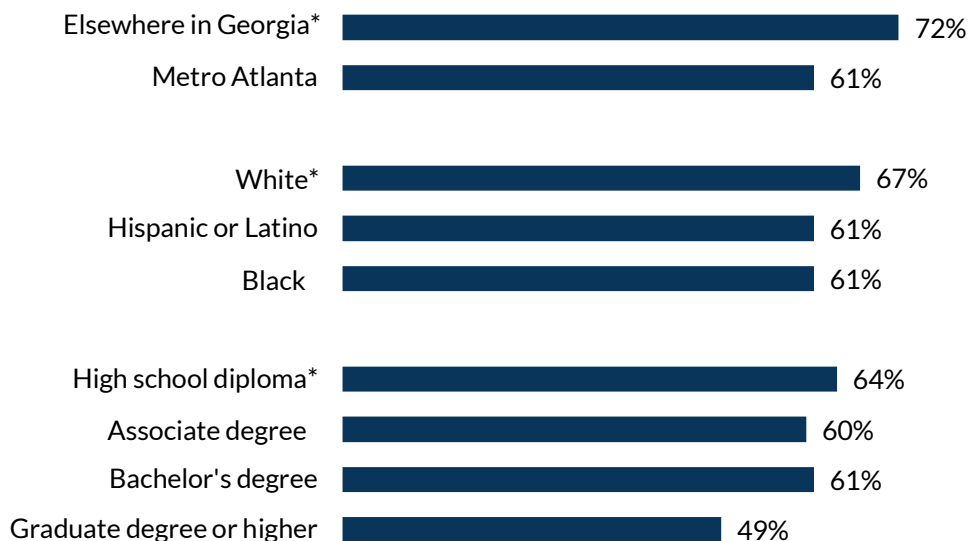
Who applied for and who received each Scholars component?

Across all three Scholars components, the majority of applicants, regardless of whether they received the support, were located in Metro Atlanta areas. Over half of applicants identified as Black while almost one quarter of applicants were White. Most applicants held positions as lead teachers in center-based programs and possessed a high school diploma as their highest qualification. Slightly more than one in ten held a bachelor's degree or higher. See Appendix B for a detailed table summarizing the characteristics of applicants and recipients for each component.

Are there differences between applicants who did and did not receive support for each Scholars component?

As seen in **Figure 3**, applicants working elsewhere in Georgia were more likely to receive SCHOLARSHIPS funds than applicants in Metro Atlanta areas. A significantly higher percentage of White applicants received SCHOLARSHIPS funds compared to Black or Hispanic applicants. Applicants whose highest level of education was a high school diploma were also more likely to receive SCHOLARSHIPS funds than applicants with higher degrees. Applicants with a graduate or higher degree were less likely than applicants with lower degrees to receive SCHOLARSHIPS funds. There were no differences in the percentage of applicants who received SCHOLARSHIPS based on employer type (centers vs. family child care learning homes [FCCLH]), provider's role, or whether the applicants work with infants/toddlers.

Figure 3: Percentage of applicants who received SCHOLARSHIPS funds

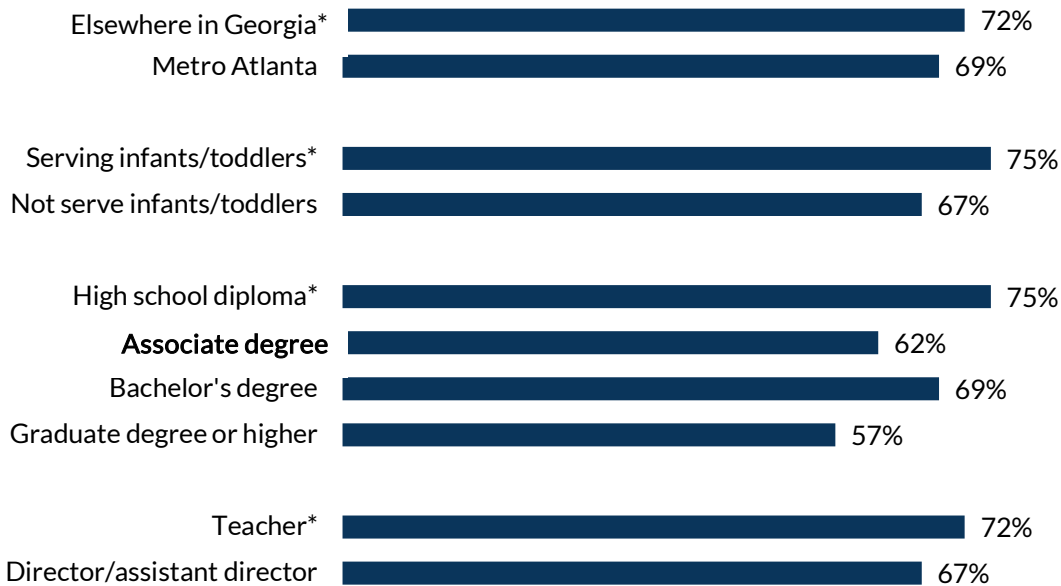


Source: Child Trends analysis of Scholars administrative data, 2015-2021.

Note: * indicates statistical significance at 0.05 level. Non-significant comparisons are not included in the figure.

Similarly, as seen in **Figure 4**, applicants working elsewhere in Georgia were more likely to receive AWARDS funds than applicants in Metro Atlanta areas. Applicants working as lead teachers in center-based programs were more likely to receive AWARDS funds than directors or assistant directors. Also, a significantly higher percentage of applicants whose highest level of education was a high school diploma received AWARDS funds compared to providers with higher degrees. Applicants with a bachelor's degree were also more likely to receive AWARDS funds than applicants with an associate or a graduate degree. However, applicants of different races/ethnicities were equally likely to receive AWARDS funds. Likewise, we did not identify significant differences between applicants working at centers and applicants working at FCCLH.

Figure 4: Percentage of applicants who received AWARDS funds



Source: Child Trends analysis of Scholars administrative data, 2015-2021.

Note: * indicates statistical significance at 0.05 level. Non-significant comparisons are not included in the figure.

As seen in **Figure 5**, being located elsewhere in Georgia outside of Metro Atlanta areas, having a high school diploma as their highest level of education, and being a family child care provider were significantly related to receiving INCENTIVES funds. Applicants with an associate degree were more likely to receive INCENTIVES funds than applicants with a graduate or higher degree. Family child care providers were more likely to receive INCENTIVES funds than center-based providers. In contrast, we did not identify any significant differences between center-based providers and family child care providers in terms of receiving SCHOLARSHIPS or AWARDS funds.

Figure 5: Percentage of applicants who received INCENTIVES funds



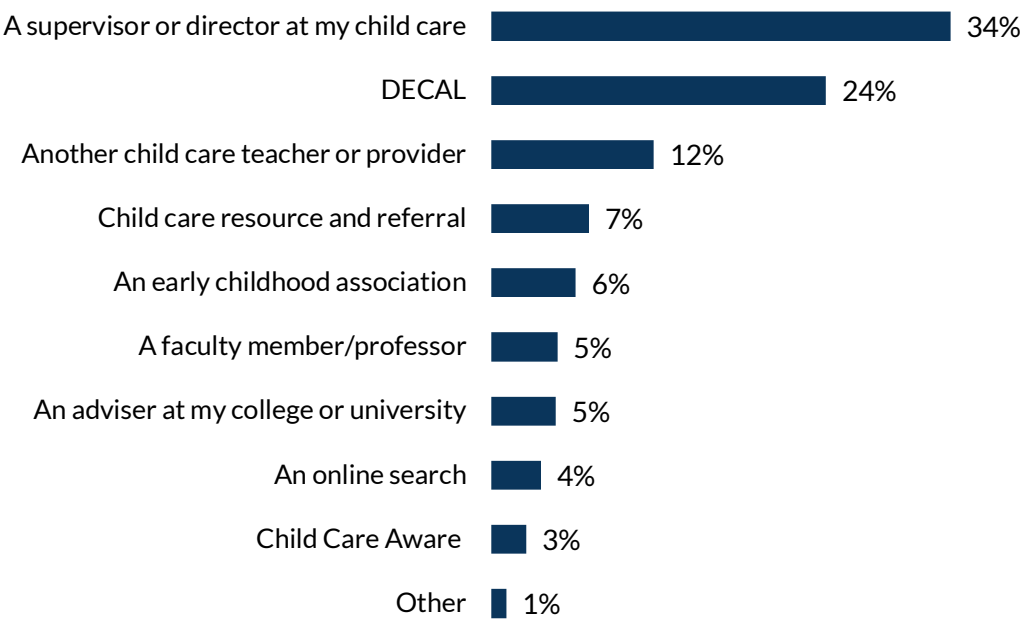
Source: Child Trends analysis of Scholars administrative data, 2015-2021.

Note: * indicates statistical significance at 0.05 level. Non-significant comparisons are not included in the figure.

How do applicants hear about Scholars?

As reported in the survey completed by a subset of Scholars applicants, respondents most commonly heard about the Scholars program through a supervisor or director, DECAL messaging, or another teacher or provider (see **Figure 6**). There were no differences in how survey participants heard about Scholars when looking at race/ethnicity or whether the applicant received the benefit (see **Appendix Tables B3** and **B4**).

Figure 6: How do applicants hear about Scholars? (*n*=826)



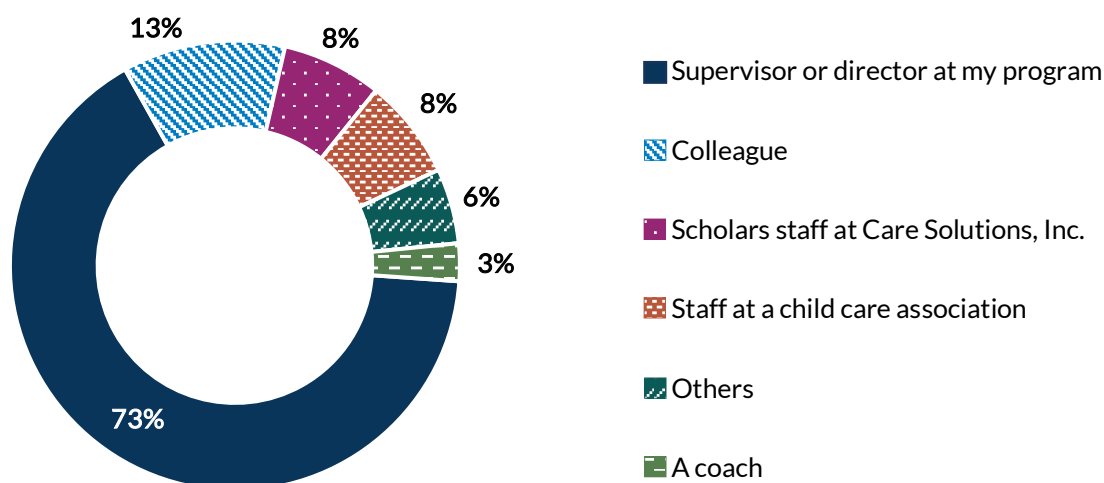
Source: Child Trends analysis of Scholars Survey, 2023.

How many applicants received help with their application?

Twenty percent of applicants who responded to the survey reported receiving some kind of assistance with their application. Among those that received help with their application (*n*=81), 43 percent (*n*=35) received help with understanding the application, 42 percent (*n*=34) received help with uploading or mailing application materials, and 14 percent (*n*=11) received help with accessing the internet.

Among the survey respondents who received help with their application, most received help from a supervisor or director at their program (see **Figure 7**).

Figure 7: Sources of assistance with applications among survey respondents (*n*=81)



Source: Child Trends analysis of Scholars Survey, 2023.

Why do providers not apply to Scholars?

We asked Non-applicants why they did not apply to the Scholars program (*n*=382), and a majority of those who responded (69%) indicated that they did not know if they were eligible for the program. We also described the various Scholars components and asked non-applicants which Scholars programs would be most useful for them. A majority of the respondents (51%) reported that the INCENTIVES salary bonus program would be useful, while about half (45%) indicated that SCHOLARSHIPS would be useful.

Is Scholars participation linked to intended outcomes for providers?

How does receiving Scholars supports relate to changing employers?

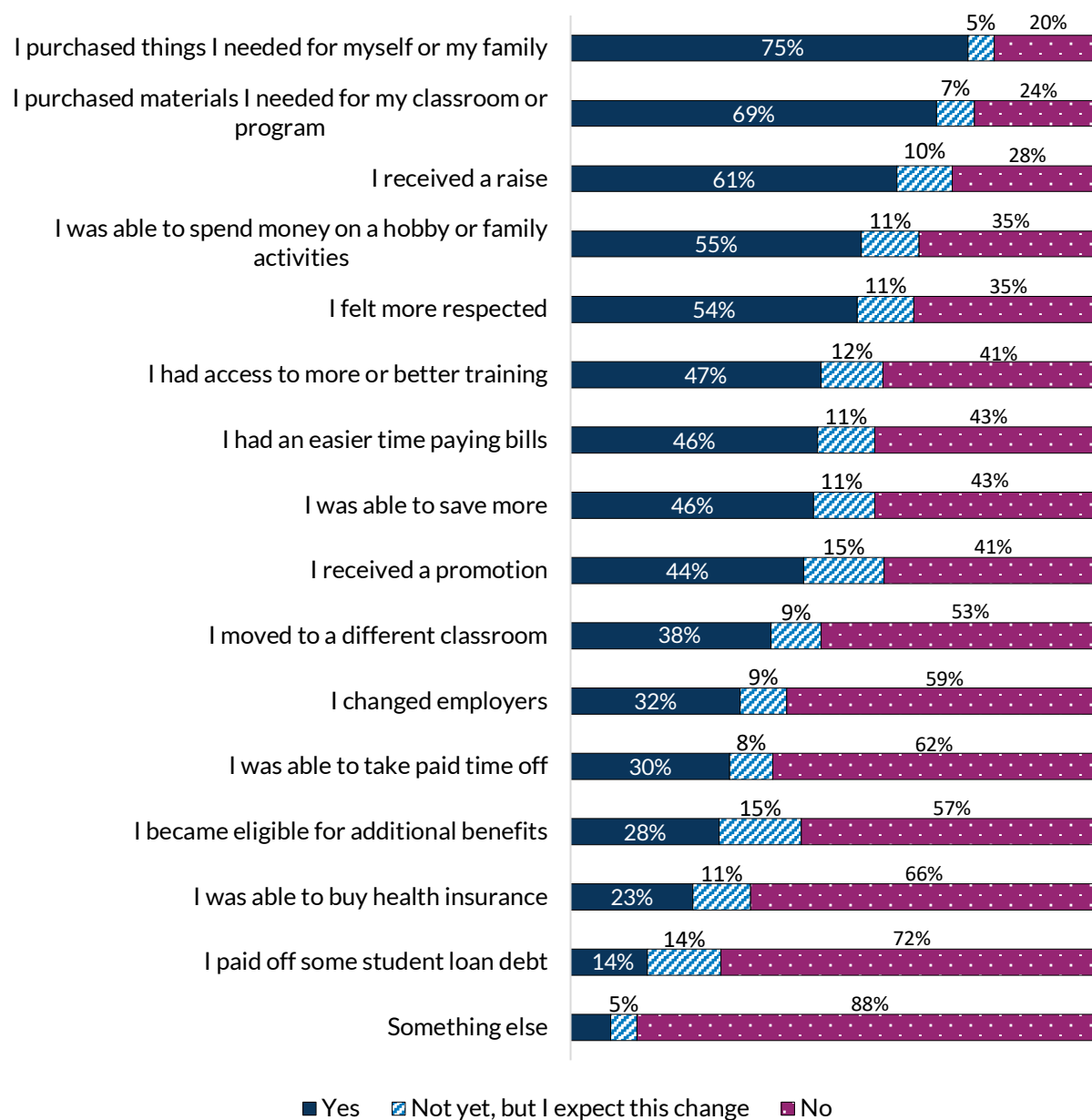
The findings of administrative data analysis showed that applicants who received SCHOLARSHIPS or AWARDS supports were slightly less likely to change their employer after applying compared to providers who applied for but did not receive the supports (i.e., applicants/not received). These differences were very small but were statistically significant. Among SCHOLARSHIP applicants, 23 percent of applicants/received changed jobs as compared to 25 percent of applicants/not received. Similarly, 27 percent of those who applied for but did not receive AWARDS changed their employer after applying compared to 24 percent of AWARDS recipients. Among INCENTIVES applicants, there was no difference in changing employers between applicants who did and did not receive the support (25% for both).

What day-to-day changes did survey respondents report as a result of receiving AWARDS or INCENTIVES?

Respondents who received Scholars program supports reported positive changes as a result of their participation in the program. The most common changes that applicants/received of AWARDS or INCENTIVES reported were being able to purchase things they needed for themselves or their families,

purchasing materials for their classroom or program, and receiving a raise. Among applicants/received who reported receiving a raise, they reported an average of \$2.91 increase in their hourly wage^f (see **Figure 8**).

Figure 8: Changes reported as a result of receiving AWARDS or INCENTIVES (*n*=120-146)



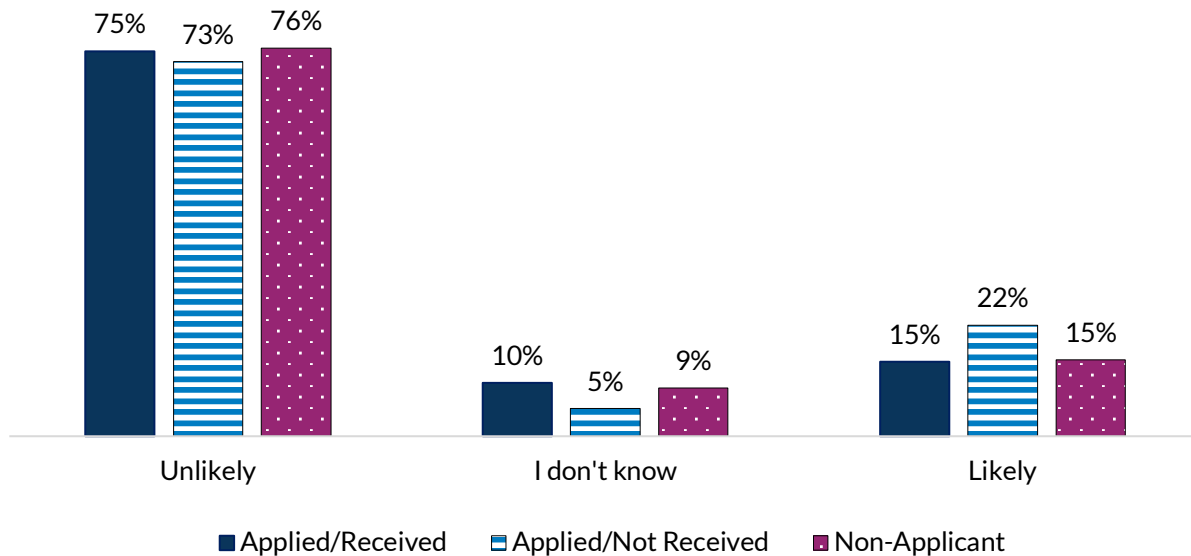
Source: Child Trends analysis of Scholars Survey, 2023.

^f This is equivalent to about a \$6,000 gross annual salary increase assuming a 40-hour work week for 52 weeks a year.

Were there differences in the likelihood of leaving the ECE field depending on Scholars program status?

Applicants/not received were more likely to report that it was somewhat or extremely likely that they would leave the ECE field compared to applicants/received and to Non-applicants of the Scholars programs (see **Figure 9**).

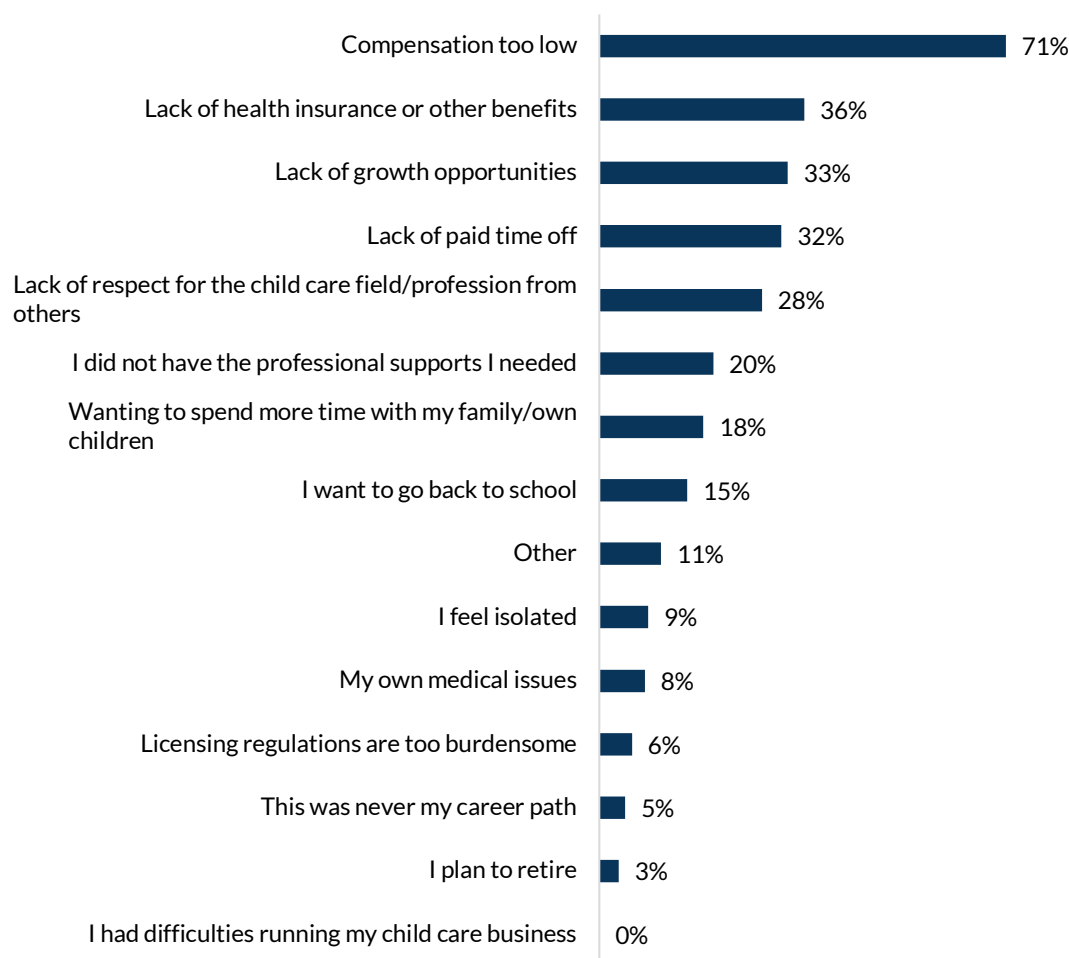
Figure 9: Survey participants' likelihood of leaving the ECE field by applicant type ($n = 532$)



Source: Child Trends analysis of Scholars Survey, 2023.

For those who indicated they were somewhat or extremely likely to leave the field of ECE, the most common reason reported was that the compensation was too low (see **Figure 10**). The next most common reasons were the lack of health insurance and other benefits and the lack of growth opportunities. We found no significant differences between applicants/not received, applicants/received, and Non-applicants in reporting why they are likely to leave the field.

Figure 10: Reported reasons why survey participants were somewhat or extremely likely to leave the field ($n = 139$)



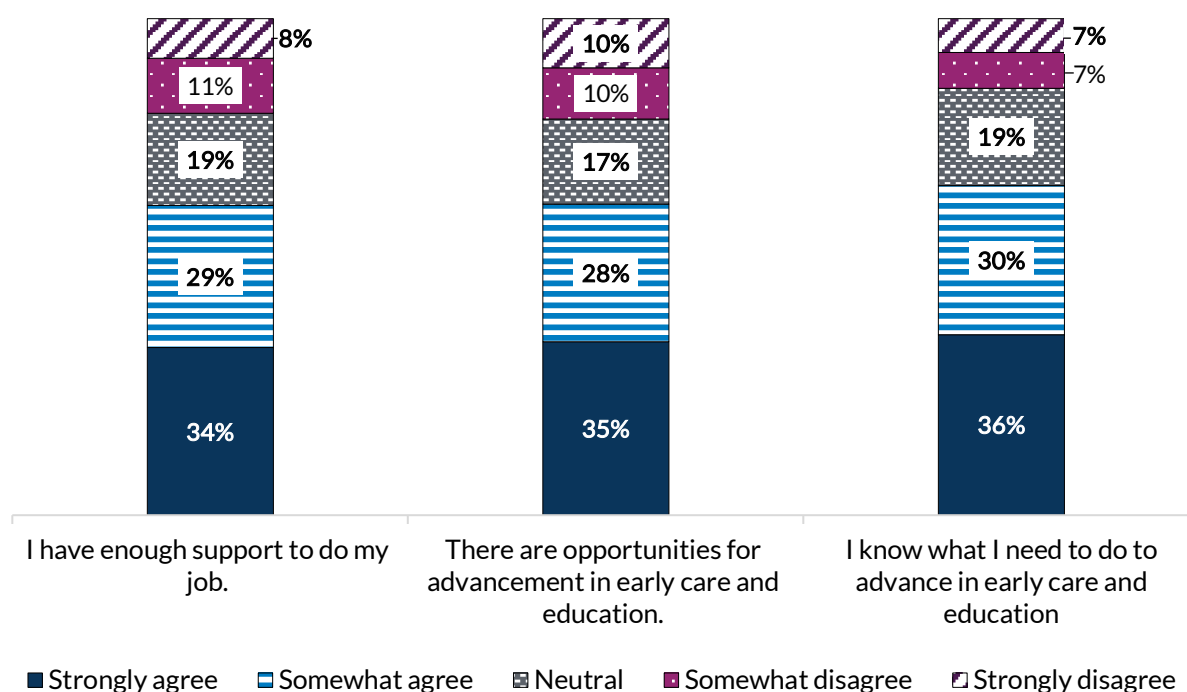
Source: Child Trends analysis of Scholars Survey, 2023.

How do applicants, recipients, and stakeholders perceive the Scholars program? What areas do they identify for improvement?

How do providers perceive the current job support and career growth?

A majority of survey respondents indicated that they had the support they need to do their job (62%, combined strongly and somewhat agree), and a similar percentage agreed that there were advancement opportunities (63%), and that they knew what to do to advance in the ECE field (66%). We did not find significant differences between applicants/received, applicants/not received, and Non-applicants.

Figure 11: Provider perceptions of current support for their jobs ($n=739-744$)

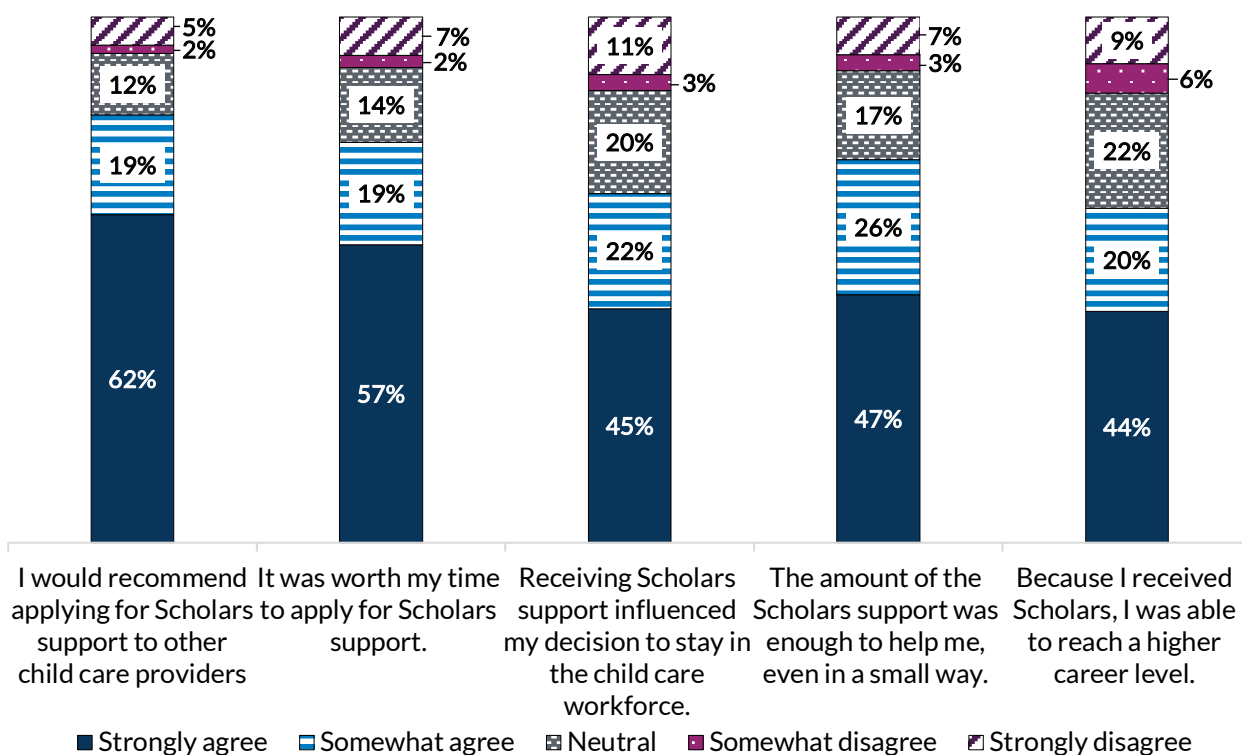


Source: Child Trends analysis of Scholars Survey, 2023.

How do Scholars recipients perceive the benefits of Scholars?

Results overall showed that applicants/received who participated in the survey had positive perceptions of Scholars. Over two-thirds responded that they strongly or somewhat agreed that they would recommend applying for Scholars to other child care providers and almost the same percent strongly or somewhat agreed that it was worth their time to apply. About 70 percent of recipients strongly or somewhat agreed that receiving Scholars influenced their decision to stay in the child care workforce, and that it had helped them even in a small way. Most agreed that Scholars support helped them reach a higher career level; 42 percent strongly or somewhat disagreed with this statement (see **Figure 12**).

Figure 12: How recipients perceive the benefits of Scholars (n=390-395)



Source: Child Trends analysis of Scholars Survey, 2023.

What are ways that applicants suggest the application process can be improved?

In an open-ended question, we asked survey respondents if they had any suggestions for improvement to the application process for Scholars. The team coded each response (n=87) into one of seven themes. The most common response (32%) was about increased outreach more generally, specifically suggesting increased marketing and information sharing about the program. The second most common area for improvement was eligibility and benefits (22%). While not directly about the application process itself, respondents shared that they were aware of the program but encountered barriers around eligibility. Suggestions for improvement about expanded eligibility were providing SCHOLARSHIPS to support students to

"[You could] send a personal email to each qualified person to let them know of their eligibility."
– Survey respondent

attend online programs outside of Georgia and to those who cannot work and attend college at the same time. A few respondents also suggested expanding the time limit eligibility for INCENTIVES past the current standard. The third most common theme among respondents focused on more direct outreach to providers to let them know about their potential eligibility (14%). Respondents shared that providers in classrooms do not hear directly from Scholars about the program but rather learn about it from their employers. By Scholars reaching out directly to providers, they may be able to reach more providers than relying on word of mouth through program directors.

"[You could] extend the incentive to child care providers no matter the time of the last credential."
– Survey respondent

How do stakeholders perceive Scholars? What areas do stakeholders suggest for improvement?

While the faculty, students, and community partners all have different experiences with DECAL Scholars and the ECE community, common themes arose across all three stakeholder groups. These themes included gratitude for Scholars programs as well as some suggestions for improvement.

Gratitude for Scholars programs

All three groups expressed appreciation for Scholars, but this was especially strong among students. For all of the students we spoke to, the financial cost of pursuing a degree was a major barrier and would be impossible to overcome if not for Scholars programs. Students were excited to gain education to better assist the children they worked with, as well as build relationships with their schools and programs. In terms of the goals of Scholars to support early care and education professionals, most of the students believed that DECAL was meeting or exceeding these goals; one student said that while the goals were not quite met, they still thought that DECAL was trying to meet them.

“Clearly [DECAL] wants to support the professionals who do want to go to school.” – Student

Faculty members and community partners also had positive views of the program. Faculty members thought that the program showed ECE educators that they are valued and motivated them to complete their education, while some community members discussed how Scholars promotes longevity in staffing. One community member particularly appreciated the educational counseling component, remarking that it took some of the burden off their program to provide counseling and was a great resource for students.

Suggestions for improvement

Stakeholders discussed challenges they encountered or observed and suggestions for improving programs to reach more of the ECE system in Georgia.

- **Increase awareness of Scholars programs among ECE educators through direct outreach to child care programs and community organizations, especially smaller programs or in rural communities.** Although DECAL Scholars is not a new initiative, stakeholders reflected that there are still many ECE educators who do not know about it. Because of the positive impact of these programs, stakeholders felt that it was important to increase public awareness and marketing efforts to spread the word about Scholars. Faculty members and community partners also felt that increasing awareness of DECAL Scholars would aid in the recruitment of new members to the ECE workforce. Stakeholders suggested DECAL share promotional materials with child care programs directly, especially small businesses, and encourage them to share information with their staff. One community partner also suggested that DECAL could provide some form of incentive or compensation to directors for their efforts. Additionally, all stakeholder groups suggested incorporating information about DECAL Scholars into high school ECE-related curriculum and sharing with community-based initiatives.
- **Review program requirements, especially tenure at child care program, working hours, and salary/wage limits. Incorporate flexibilities where possible to reduce burden on ECE educators and unintended consequences (e.g., loss of scholarship due to a bonus or making a livable wage).** Suggestions for increased flexibility included exceptions to the length of time a provider needed to work at a program in order to receive Scholars, increasing wage caps that disqualify students, and reducing

loan and degree requirements. When discussing loan requirements, one faculty member estimated that 60% of the students that the faculty member recruited for Scholars were ineligible because they had defaulted on their student loans, an issue that was echoed in the community partner focus group.

- **Review timing of SCHOLARSHIPS and INCENTIVES supports, especially tuition and stipend disbursement, to maximize impact and lessen burden on ECE educators.** This timing can be logistically and financially challenging because students do not receive their reimbursement from the scholarship until after the add/drop period has ended. Thus, after tuition is due, students must either pay out-of-pocket (which can be financially burdensome) or faculty must coordinate with the university to ensure that students are not dropped from the course. For faculty, this can be especially challenging when there are multiple students to keep track of and flag for the administration. SCHOLARSHIPS stipends and INCENTIVES are also challenging because these supports are distributed after the start of the semester, and students must either purchase books and other materials out-of-pocket or go without class materials until the supports are distributed.
- **Provide orientation and additional supports to Scholars participants, such as communities of practice or learning cohorts.** During focus groups and interviews, Child Trends noted a difference between community partners' and students' perceptions of the Scholars pathway. While the students we engaged with agree that the Scholars programs are useful to ECE educators, most students were not aware of all of the Scholars programs or how the programs build off of each other to form a pathway. Most often, students were not aware of Educational Counseling or AWARDS. One student recommended that DECAL incorporate an orientation session when an ECE educator is accepted into any Scholars program to make participants aware of the breadth of supports that Scholars offers. One student also expressed that it would be helpful to be connected with other supports after completing one of the DECAL Scholars' programs. Stakeholders also expressed a need for mental health supports or community building among ECE educators. One student asked for more guidance and emotional support, and another student suggested convening communities of practice for ECE educators participating in Scholars programs.

"Let's not set the cap at just above the poverty level. You should be rewarded because you stayed at your job, and not penalized [for a raise]."

– Student

"I think that flexibility, especially now as providers are competing with fields that are paying more competitive wages, is so important." – **Community partner**

"We go through a lot and some of us are stronger than others. Guidance and emotional support would be really helpful." – **Student**

Discussion and Future Considerations

For two decades, DECAL Scholars has supported thousands of Georgia's ECE providers to earn new credentials and degrees and has rewarded their commitment to staying at their employer. This Scholars evaluation has given us insights into how the Scholars program is working for providers in Georgia, the extent to which it is achieving its intended outcomes, and where there are opportunities for improvement. In this final section, we present some considerations for DECAL as they think about the future of Scholars.

- **Marketing and outreach.** Based on the survey findings and stakeholder listening sessions, providers are hearing about Scholars primarily through close personal contacts (director or supervisor at their program or another teacher or coworker). This may create inequities because providers who are not well connected are unlikely to learn about Scholars. DECAL could consider new marketing strategies that involve direct contact with providers who would benefit, possibly using contact information in the Georgia Professional Development System (GaPDS). For example, providers could opt-in to receiving

information about Scholars when they login to GaPDS, and Care Solutions, Inc. could tailor email marketing based on provider information in GaPDS. A provider who has been at their employer for 12 months and received their CDA credential in the past year is likely eligible for INCENTIVES and could automatically receive a message encouraging them to apply. Likewise, higher education faculty in ECE and financial aid advisors at IHEs may also be an untapped group for outreach. Since they have face-to-face contact with students, they may be able to share information about SCHOLARSHIPS specifically to providers who are potentially eligible.

- **Reducing application barriers.** Based on the administrative data analysis, survey findings, and stakeholder listening sessions, some providers are experiencing barriers to applying for Scholars beyond awareness. Survey respondents suggested simplifying the application process and offering assistance. Care Solutions, Inc. does offer assistance with the application process, including an FAQ about each program and the required materials, so further advertising of that support could be useful. Additionally, DECAL and Care Solutions, Inc. could review data about the types of inquiries received about the application process to produce additional resources such as short videos or built-in tips for each section of the online applications.
- **Broadening eligibility.** Stakeholders and survey respondents raised concerns around the eligibility criteria. DECAL could consider reviewing the salary cap for Scholars supports. Based on administrative data analysis, applicants whose highest degree is a high school diploma make up nearly 80 percent of applicants for SCHOLARSHIPS, two-thirds of applicants for AWARDS, and just over half of applicants for INCENTIVES. It may be that wages for providers who have an associate degree or above generally make them ineligible for Scholars supports. Thus, increasing the salary cap could encourage those working on their associate or bachelor's to take part in the program. Additionally, factors around eligibility raised by stakeholders and survey respondents—particularly defaulted student loans—may have broader solutions that DECAL could help applicants navigate. For example, the new “Fresh Start” initiative through the U.S. Department of Education⁸ is helping students rehabilitate student loans that are in default, restore credit history, re-instate eligibility for federal student loans, and other benefits. DECAL could work with other state agencies in Georgia to provide information to ECE providers about this program and to support providers to complete enrollment.
- **Additional research into potential racial and geographic inequities.** When looking at the administrative data analysis findings about the success rate of applications, there were a few demographic factors that were associated with whether an applicant received Scholars support. These factors included geographic location, race and ethnicity, and level of education.
 - Applicants in counties outside the Metro Atlanta area were more likely to have an accepted application for SCHOLARSHIPS and AWARDS but less likely to receive INCENTIVES than applicants in the Metro Atlanta area.
 - White applicants had higher acceptance rates for SCHOLARSHIPS than did Black and Hispanic applicants, but there were no differences by race for AWARDS or INCENTIVES.
 - Those with a high school diploma as their highest level of education had the highest rates of acceptance for all three programs.
- These differences warrant further study to uncover the root causes. For example, do Black and Hispanic providers face more barriers to eligibility or the application process than White applicants? It may be beneficial to examine the reasons for application denial, and how those reasons vary by geography, education, and race/ethnicity, to identify solutions.
- **Engaging family child care providers.** The overwhelming majority of applicants to Scholars programs work in centers and very few work in family child care homes. DECAL could consider working with family child care provider associations or have a stakeholder group of family child care providers to

⁸ <https://studentaid.gov/manage-loans/default/get-out>

learn more about their awareness and interest in Scholars. It is possible that family child care providers are not aware of the program or see barriers to applying.

Study Limitations

In the administrative data analysis, we used multiple approaches to determine the acceptance status of applicants for each program. AWARDS and INCENTIVES provided comprehensive records indicating the dates and statuses of each award. However, the SCHOLARSHIPS data did not include such information. In our analysis, we assumed that a SCHOLARSHIP applicant had been awarded if they received any form of reimbursements, such as tuition, books, or CDA fee. This approach may not have captured all the applicants who received the SCHOLARSHIP support.

While information such as degrees, credentials, training certificates, and transcripts are verified by the Georgia Professional Standards Commission, some information is collected through provider self-report. For example, employment history and demographics are self-reported data. Considering this process is voluntary, it is possible that applicants who received the support might be more likely to report their demographic information compared to those who did not receive the support. Also, applicants who have left the ECE field may have incomplete records that were not updated, especially for the information regarding their employer. Moreover, we linked the GaPDS data with the Scholars data using GaPDS code provided by DECAL. However, we couldn't identify 298 Scholars' applicants in the GaPDS data due to missing GaPDS codes.

Our ability to generalize findings from the Scholars Survey is limited by the fact that it was not designed to be statistically representative of all of Georgia's providers and a relatively low response rate (11%). Despite multiple approaches to increase the response rate for the survey (i.e., guaranteed gift cards of \$10 per respondent plus an additional incentives of \$250 during a weekly raffle for respondents), the response rates were lower than the desired 20 percent. We cannot know definitively why providers chose not to participate in the survey; however, there is some evidence that providers may be experiencing "survey fatigue" due to increased demands for surveys and other administrative data reporting due to COVID-19.^h While the survey findings provide valuable insights and provider perspectives, the survey findings cannot be generalized to all Scholars applicants nor the overall population of providers in Georgia.

Finally, our evaluation had limited information about the Educational Counseling component of Scholars. As mentioned earlier in the report, Care Solutions, Inc. does not collect administrative data that would allow us to connect users of the Educational Counseling component to other administrative data. We did ask survey respondents about their use of Educational Counseling, but only 2 percent of survey respondents (n=26) indicated they had used the service in the past. Future evaluations could use additional methods to better understand Educational Counseling, such as automated customer service surveys after phone calls, or human-centered design methods that incorporate potential users (in this case Scholars applicants) in developing Educational Counseling materials.

^h A survey of Minnesota child care providers in 2020 yielded a 36 percent response rate ([Understanding the Impact of the Peacetime Emergency Child Care Grants](#), 2020), and in a 2021 study in Minnesota, 14 percent of child care providers responded to the survey ([Assessing Minnesota Child Care Providers' Resilience Throughout COVID-19](#), 2023). Researchers conducted a survey of providers in Washington state in 2021, and had a 9 percent response rate ([Early Care and Education Workers' Experience and Stress during the COVID-19 Pandemic](#), 2022).

Appendix A: Methodology and Data

Administrative data analysis

This evaluation analyzed 2015-2021 data from Care Solutions, Inc, the organization that implements the DECAL Scholars program. We linked the Care Solutions data with the data from GaPDS, Georgia's registry for its ECE workforce, to examine the characteristics of child care providers who applied to SCHOLARSHIPS, AWARDS, and/or INCENTIVES. (Note that Care Solutions does not maintain data regarding the characteristics of Education Counseling recipients).

Our primary goal in analyzing administrative data was to describe the applicants to each Scholars component in terms of provider type, race/ethnicity, education, current role in ECE, age of children served, and provider's location. Further, we sought to compare applicants who did not receive the support (called *applicants/not received* in this report) to those who did receive the support (called *applicants/received* in this report) on these same characteristics in order to better understand who is and isn't successful in receiving the support. Because several Scholars' components aim to increase retention, we also examined the relationship between receiving the Scholars supports and changing employers.

For these analyses we categorized providers' locations into two groups: Metro Atlanta areas (Fulton, Gwinnett, Cobb, DeKalb, Clayton, Cherokee, Forsyth, Henry, Douglas, Fayette, and Rockdale counties) and elsewhere in Georgia, which includes all other counties in Georgia. Provider type was defined as the type of ECE program where applicant works. To determine if there is an association between receiving the Scholars supports and changing employers, we analyzed whether providers switched employers after applying for the Scholars programs.

The final sample included 8,141 SCHOLARSHIPS applicants, 4,959 AWARDS applicants, and 7,356 INCENTIVES applicants.ⁱ After linking the Care Solutions data with GaPDS data, we were able to analyze the characteristics of 12,626 applicants.^j

Scholars survey

Through the Scholars Survey, we wanted to learn about the experiences of both ECE providers who had applied and those who had not applied to a Scholars program. Therefore, individuals were invited to participate in the survey if they fit into one of three categories:

- Providers who never applied for nor received any Scholars supports (called *Non-applicants* in this report.).
- Providers who applied but have not yet received any Scholars supports (*applicants/not received*).
- Providers who received at least one Scholars support (*applicants/received*).

The sample

Child Trends used a sampling approach for the Scholars survey that would allow us to reach the three types of providers described above. Child Trends received data from the GaPDS. To ensure that we were able to ask providers about their experiences from the relatively recent past, we sought to include individuals who were current providers or had only recently left the field. The criteria for inclusion/exclusion were: 1) people who logged in to the GaPDS within the last five years, 2) had either no end date for their most recent

ⁱ These numbers are different from the total number of applications because individual can submit multiple applications over time and apply for different supports. For example, 2,469 individuals applied for three Scholars programs and 2,594 individuals applied for two programs.

^j We couldn't identify 298 applicants in the GaPDS data due to missing PDS codes.

employment or had an end date within the last 2 years, and 3) had a job title (e.g., Assistant Director, Director, Lead Teacher, Assistant Teacher, Floater, Family Child Care Provider, and Family Child Care Aide).

Once we had narrowed our list to the population of interest, our pool of providers to sample from consisted of 79,373 individuals. Of those individuals 72,672 were non-applicants, 1,707 were applicant non-recipients, and 4,994 were recipients of Scholars support. Each group was equally split among those who lived in Metro Atlanta counties and those who lived in other all other counties in Georgia. We randomly selected providers from each applicant group and geographic subgroup to invite to complete the survey.

Outreach, recruitment, and incentives

Child Trends contacted potential respondents via email. The invitation, which was in both English and Spanish, included information about the purpose of the survey and the incentive, as well as a personalized link to the survey. We reached out to each respondent five times over the course of five weeks. The invitations were sent in two batches – one group received the invitation in the first five weeks, and another group received the invitations in the second five weeks.

In order to encourage participation, each respondent received a \$10 Amazon gift card. In addition, the first 100 people to complete the survey each week were entered into a drawing for one \$250 Amazon gift card. This drawing occurred each week the survey was open.

Timing of the survey and response rate

The survey was open from late February to early May 2023. We tried to engage 9,710 individuals and 1,108 responded for a response rate of 11 percent. Twenty-four of the 1,108 respondents took the Spanish language version of the survey. (See **Appendix Table B2** for respondent characteristics).

Stakeholder engagement^k

Child Trends proposed conducting stakeholder listening sessions as a “pulse check” for the Scholars programs and to provide an opportunity for stakeholders to give feedback. In the spring and fall of 2022, Child Trends conducted listening sessions with two key groups of stakeholders: 1) staff and students from educational institutions offering ECE credentials and 2) community partners. The purpose of these listening sessions was to gather feedback about Scholars, better understand how well the four components work separately and together and identify aspects of the programs that could be improved.

Child Trends developed a protocol to guide the listening session and interview discussions. The protocol included the following discussion topics:

- Success of Scholars in meeting its goals
- How Scholars programs work together
- Access to and awareness of Scholars
- Balancing student and work responsibilities (students only)
- Suggestions for improvement
- Additional workforce supports needed (e.g., mental health)

A total of 12 stakeholders (3 students, 4 staff, and 5 community partners) participated in a combination of listening sessions and interviews. Session recordings and transcripts were then reviewed to identify main themes and any similarities or differences between groups.

^k The stakeholder engagement content of this report was originally shared with DECAL in the *DECAL Scholars Stakeholder Engagement Memo* (Feb. 2023).

Appendix B: Supplementary Tables

Table B1: Characteristics of Scholars applicants and recipients: 2015-2021

	Scholarships		Awards		Incentives	
	Applicants/ Not received	Applicants/ Received	Applicants/ Not received	Applicants/ Received	Applicants/ Not received	Applicants/ Received
	n	n (%)	n	n (%)	n	n (%)
Type of ECE program where applicant works						
Center	2,429	4,259 (64%)	1,122	2,934 (72%)	1,044	4,852 (82%)
FCCH	80	107 (57%)	27	105 (80%)	11	168 (94%)
Provider's race/ethnicity						
Hispanic or Latino	215	333 (61%)	82	228 (74%)	82	334 (80%)
White	561	1,161 (67%)	311	769 (71%)	251	1,155 (82%)
Black	1,582	2,437 (61%)	933	1,857 (69%)	751	3,220 (81%)
Role						
Director or assistant director	277	390 (59%)	156	314 (67%)	125	591 (83%)
Teacher	2,357	4,089 (63%)	1,126	2,839 (72%)	1,079	4,755 (82%)
FCCH provider or aid	60	98 (62%)	27	89 (77%)	16	157 (91%)
Highest level of education						
High School	2,129	3,772 (64%)	773	2,293 (75%)	581	3,471 (86%)
Associate degree	343	511 (60%)	329	534 (62%)	302	1,107 (79%)
Bachelor's degree	288	423 (61%)	209	467 (69%)	330	953 (74%)
Graduate degree or higher	99	96 (49%)	111	144 (57%)	116	352 (75%)
Works with infants/toddlers	1,123	1,866 (62%)	637	1,865 (75%)	675	2,746 (80%)
Metro Atlanta	1,230	1,946 (61%)	605	1,351 (69%)	580	2,426 (81%)

Source: Child Trends analysis of Scholars administrative data, 2015-2021.

Table B2. Characteristics of Scholars Survey respondents (*n*=1,108)

Characteristics of survey respondents	<i>n</i>	%
Level of education		
Associate degree	229	24%
Bachelors degree	215	22%
Graduate degree (M.S./M.A./Ed.D/Ph.D, etc.)	94	10%
High school diploma, GED, or high school equivalent	411	43%
Less than high school education	12	1%
Career level		
Level 1	17	2%
Level 2	17	2%
Level 3	49	5%
Level 4	143	15%
Level 5	89	9%
Level 6	41	4%
Level 7	58	6%
Level 8	67	7%
Level 9	24	3%
Level 10	40	4%
Level 11	5	1%
Level 12	46	5%
I don't know	291	30%
I have left the field	69	7%
Position		
Lead Teacher/Teacher	458	41%
Assistant Teacher/Teacher	202	18%
Family Child Care Provider	31	3%
Family Child Care Aide	11	1%
Director	60	5%
Assistant Director	51	5%
Substitute	22	2%
Floater	29	3%
Other	66	6%
Race/Ethnicity		
Asian	23	2%
Black	583	61%
Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	1	<1%
Hispanic	82	9%
Middle Eastern	3	<1%
Native American	1	<1%
Prefer not to respond	44	5%
Two or more	21	2%
White	198	21%
Primary language		
English	906	94%
Other	19	2%
Spanish	40	4%
Geographic location (from PDS)		

Characteristics of survey respondents	<i>n</i>	%
Metro Atlanta	604	55%
Counties elsewhere in Georgia	504	45%
Program applied to (respondents selected all that apply)		
SCHOLARSHIPS	214	19%
AWARDS	387	35%
INCENTIVES	88	8%
Did not apply to any components	569	51%
Currently working in ECE field		
Yes	857	77%
No, I am in school to further my ECE career	54	4%
No, I have left the ECE field	188	17%
Did not answer	9	<1%
Respondent type		
Non-applicant	341	31%
Applied/not received	184	17%
Applied/received	583	53%

Source: Child Trends analysis of Scholars Survey, 2023.

Table B3: How do applicants hear about Scholars by race/ethnicity

Sources for Scholars information	Race/Ethnicity							
	Black <i>n</i> =494		White <i>n</i> =116		Hispanic <i>n</i> =76		Too few to report <i>n</i> =54	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
A supervisor or director at my child care	156	32%	47	41%	31	41%	6	8%
DECAL	118	24%	35	30%	11	14%	18	24%
Another child care teacher or provider	60	12%	10	9%	11	14%	7	9%
Child care resource and referral	39	8%	5	4%	4	5%	6	8%
An early childhood association	34	7%	4	3%	5	7%	3	4%
An adviser at my college or university	26	5%	5	4%	3	4%	5	7%
A faculty member/professor	25	5%	4	3%	4	5%	4	5%
An online search	18	4%	4	3%	4	5%	1	1%
Child Care Aware	15	3%	1	1%	2	3%	2	3%
Other	3	1%	1	1%	1	1%	2	3%

Source: Child Trends analysis of Scholars survey, 2023.

Table B4: How applicants heard about Scholars by recipient status

Sources for Scholars information	Received support <i>n</i> =448		Did not receive support <i>n</i> =70	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
A supervisor or director at my child care	145	32%	26	37%
DECAL	116	26%	13	19%
Another child care teacher or provider	48	11%	10	14%
An early childhood association	30	7%	6	9%
Child care resource and referral	30	7%	5	7%
A faculty member/professor	27	6%	2	3%
An adviser at my college or university	24	5%	2	3%
An online search	16	4%	2	3%
Child Care Aware	6	1%	3	4%
Other	6	1%	1	1%

Source: Child Trends analysis of Scholars Survey, 2023

Table B5: Who helped applicants fill out their Scholars application? (select all that apply) (n = 71)

Who helped applicants fill out their Scholars application? (Select all that apply)	<i>n</i>	%
A supervisor or director	52	73%
A colleague	9	13%
Scholars staff at Care Solutions	6	8%
Someone from a child care association	6	8%
Other	4	6%
A coach	2	3%

Source: Child Trends analysis of Scholars survey, 2023.

Table B6: Types of application assistance received by applicants (n=81)

Application assistance received	<i>n</i>	%
Understanding the application	35	43%
Mailing or uploading the application	34	42%
Accessing the internet	11	14%
Translation to my preferred language	1	1%
Total	81	100%

Source: Child Trends analysis of Scholars survey, 2023.

Table B7: Scholars survey response rates by respondent type and location ($n = 1105$)

Characteristics of survey respondents	<i>n</i>	%
Respondent type		
Non-applicant	341	8.5%
Applied/not received	181	10.6%
Applied/received	583	14.6%
Geographic location (from PDS)		
Metro Atlanta	601	12.1%
Counties elsewhere in Georgia	504	10.6%
Geographic location (from PDS) by respondent type		
Metro Atlanta/Non-applicant	189	9.5%
Metro Atlanta/Applied/not received	105	10.6%
Metro Atlanta/ Applied/received	307	15.4%
Counties elsewhere in Georgia / Non-applicant	152	7.6%
Counties elsewhere in Georgia / Applied/not received	76	10.0%
Counties elsewhere in Georgia / Applied/received	276	13.8%

Source: Child Trends analysis of Scholars Survey, 2023.

Contributions

The study team would like to thank DECAL staff, including Christi Moore, Rob O'Callaghan, Shayna Funke, and Bentley Ponder, and former DECAL staff Barbara McWethy, Susan Maude, Randy Hudgins, Alexandra Young, and Jesse Bruno for their support and insights throughout the project. We would also like to thank Care Solutions, Inc. staff member Charlotte Pelz, and former Care Solutions, Inc. Staff member Brandi Swain. for their time and sharing Scholars information with the project team.

We would like to share appreciation to Child Trends staff including: Meghan McDoniel and Diana Gal-Szabo for project director support, Sara Shaw for her early support in stakeholder engagement, Kylee Novak for production assistance with this report, and Hannah Woodrich for assistance with survey fielding. We also thank the Child Trends Communications staff for editing and report production.

Finally, we would like to sincerely thank all the providers and stakeholders in Georgia who participated in surveys and listening sessions for the study. We are grateful for their time, and insights they shared about their experiences. This study would not have been possible without their contributions.

Suggested citation

Warner, M., Fojut, J., Tang, J., Franchett, A., McDoniel, M., Keaton, H., Fuller, J., & Early, D. M. (2023). Evaluation of Georgia's DECAL Scholars. Child Trends.

This publication was made possible by Grant Number 90TP0070 from the Office of Child Care, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the Office of Child Care, the Administration for Children and Families, or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

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