

# ARPA SLFRF IMPACT REPORT: EARLY CHILDHOOD

Boston's \$17.8 million investment in early childhood care and education



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City of Boston  
Early Childhood



City of Boston  
Finance

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# INTRODUCTION

To recover from the pandemic, the City of Boston invested \$17.8 million of American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) [State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds \(SLFRF\)](#)<sup>1</sup> into the early childhood sector. These allocations grew the City's investment in early childhood significantly, expanding Boston's overall budget for early childhood initiatives by **16%** between FY22 and FY25. This investment followed a robust community engagement process consisting of listening sessions, an online survey, and targeted stakeholder meetings, where early education and care (EEC) emerged as a top priority for Boston families. The City worked to address early childcare and education challenges through pandemic stimulus and retention, expansion, enhancement, and accessibility.

This report puts these investments into context and summarizes their impacts. As of the time of writing, the City has spent over \$13.6 million (77%) of this allocation. The impacts of this investment, while ongoing, helped stabilize small childcare businesses in 2021, lower barriers to entry into the early education workforce, expand care options, improve quality, and make programs more accessible to families. The City has until the end of 2026 to expend remaining funds.

To learn more about how Boston used community input to inform ARPA SLFRF project development, read the [General ARPA SLFRF History Report](#).

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<sup>1</sup> NOTE: All references to ARPA in this report refer to ARPA SLFRF investments. While the federal ARPA package invested in various COVID efforts, use of "ARPA" in this report refers only to "SLFRF."

# SUMMARY OF ARPA SLFRF IMPACTS

- **59 CENTER-BASED AND 457 FAMILY CHILD CARE PROVIDERS RECEIVED EMERGENCY FUNDING, ACCOUNTING FOR THE CARE OF OVER 8,700 CHILDREN**
- **27 PROVIDERS EXPANDED SERVICE TO SUPPORT NON-STANDARD WORK HOURS**
- **734 EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION ADVANCED DEGREES AND CERTIFICATIONS SUBSIDIZED,<sup>2</sup> BOOSTING THE QUALITY OF CARE AMONGST EXISTING WORKERS AND IMPROVING THE QUALIFICATIONS OF NEW EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS**
- **160 PROVIDERS COMPLETED AGES AND STAGES SCREENING WORKSHOPS, WHICH HELP CATCH DEVELOPMENTAL CHALLENGES EARLY AND IMPROVE INSTRUCTION QUALITY**
- **SUCCESSFUL LAUNCH AND EXPANSION OF THE CITY'S CENTRALIZED 'GREAT STARTS' ENROLLMENT PLATFORM, WHERE FAMILIES HAVE REGISTERED 6,910 THREE- AND FOUR YEAR-OLDS FOR BOSTON PRE-K TO DATE<sup>3</sup>**

<sup>2</sup> Some workers may have completed multiple certifications and degrees, although the vast majority did not.

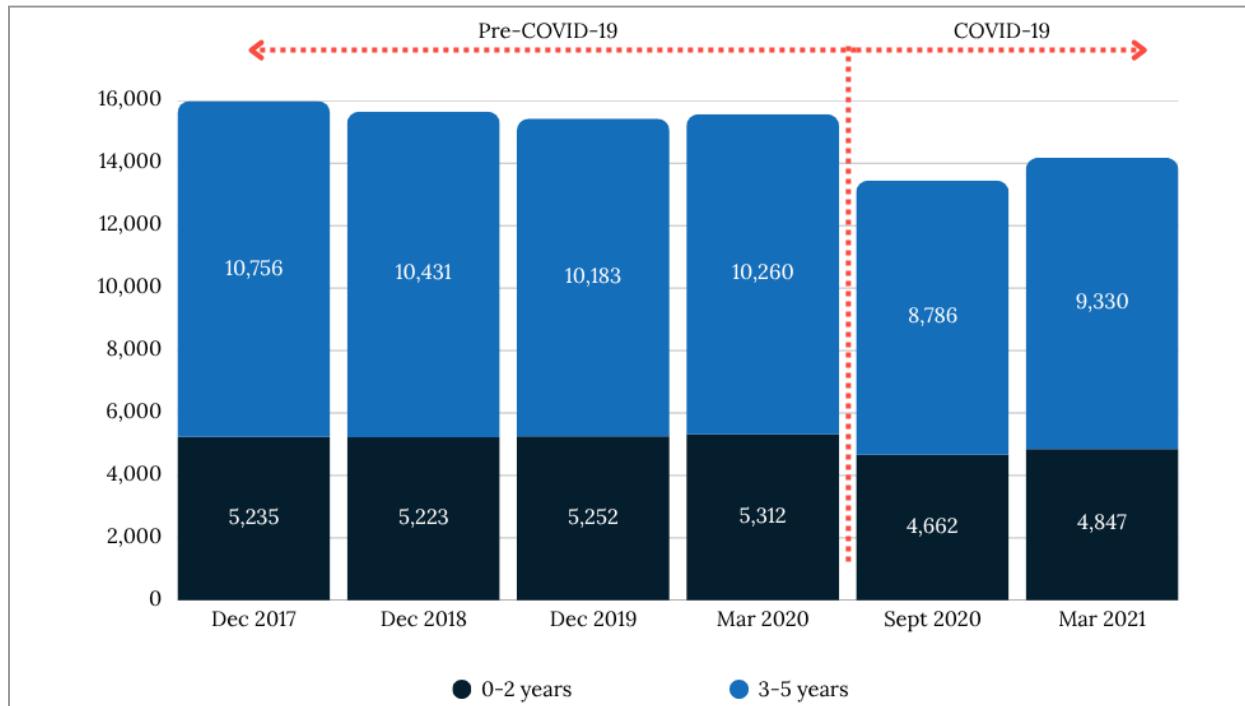
<sup>3</sup> Registration data from School Years 2024-2025 and 2025-2026.

# CONTEXT

The early education and care system was already under strain before COVID-19, facing affordability, supply, and quality challenges. In 2019, the average cost of childcare across the country [exceeded \\$9,000](#) per year, and a [citywide childcare survey](#) found that 86% of Boston families considered it unaffordable. Nearly half of respondents reported that care was too far away or hard to find. The sector was also marked by low pay and high turnover; early educators earned less than nearly all other occupations nationwide, with [over 13% living below the poverty level in 2018](#).

COVID-19 exacerbated these challenges. Nationally, childcare employment fell by one-third in early 2020. In Boston, [13% of licensed early education and care programs closed by March 2021](#). The number of available seats for children [dropped by over 11%](#), and the City saw a [21% decline in its early education and care workforce](#) between 2017 and 2021. [Developmental screenings fell 15% in Boston during the pandemic](#), impacting early identification of children in need of intervention services.

**Figure 1:** Number of licensed seats in Boston, by age group. MA Department of Early Education and Care, December 2017 to March 2021 data. [Boston Opportunity Agenda Analysis](#), 2021.



Outside of ARPA SLFRF, other federal funds invested in children and early childhood in Boston. Starting in 2021, the City received emergency relief from The Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund. \$431 million was provided to support K through 12 education adapt to the pandemic in Boston. The state oversaw the expanded Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG-ARPA) program and the new Childcare Stabilization grant program, both funded by the [American Rescue Plan Act](#). The latter provided direct emergency assistance to licensed childcare providers, [reaching 80% of providers by the program's end in 2023](#).

The [Office of Early Childhood](#) was established in 2022. The Office focuses on expanding access to care, supporting the workforce, serving as a central hub for early education services, and manages the ARPA SLFRF early childhood projects.

# ARPA SFLRF INVESTMENTS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

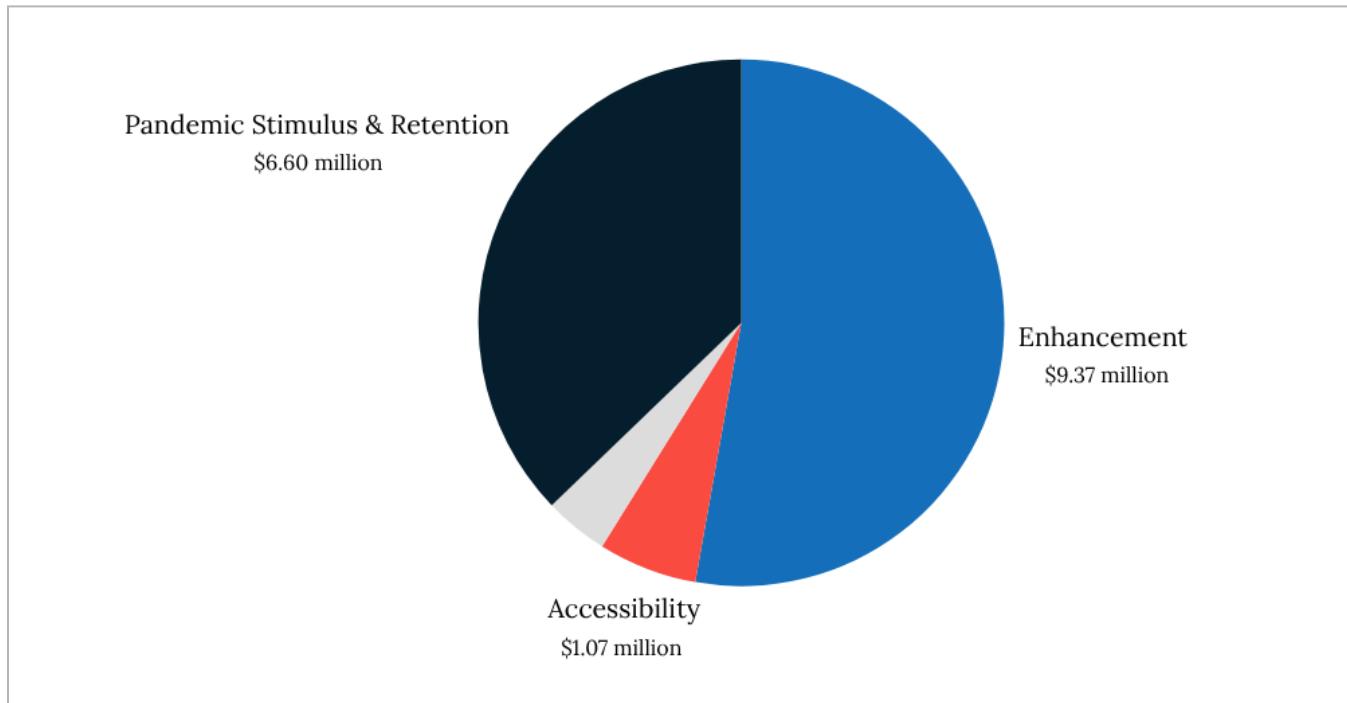
Boston's \$17.8 million investment addresses these challenges through four key strategies: **Pandemic Stimulus & Retention**, which provides emergency funding and support to stabilize the sector and retain the existing workforce; **Expansion**, by increasing availability of early childhood seats to serve more families; **Enhancement**, which improves the quality of the sector; and **Accessibility**, by removing barriers and streamlining enrollment processes.

Boston's ARPA SLFRF allocation toward early childhood is significant relative to other major cities that received ARPA, totaling an investment of over \$479 per child age five and under. This is the largest childhood ARPA SLFRF allocation toward "Healthy Childhood Environments" among major cities nationwide, both in raw number and per child under 6, as of the January 2025 report.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> There are an estimated 37,002 children under 6 years of age in Boston, according to 2022 5-year ACS estimates. The ARPA investment of \$17,758,700.00 divided by 37,002 is equivalent to \$479.70 per child. Data analyzed provided by National League of Cities from: National League of Cities Local Government ARPA Investment Tracker: <https://www.nlc.org/resource/local-government-arpa-investment-tracker/>

**Figure 2.** Visual representation of the dollar amount allocated to each strategy area



# PANDEMIC STIMULUS AND WORKFORCE RETENTION

To help providers survive the pandemic and rebuild staffing levels, the City offered direct grants to childcare businesses. These incentives helped with the hiring and retention of early educators, including bonuses and reimbursement support, as well as preventing closures of Family Child Care (FCC) programs. ARPA SLFRF **supported over 1,300 childcare workers, enabled childcare providers to hire 380 new staff members, and provided operational grants to 457 FCC providers.** Twenty-two childcare providers also benefited from sustainability plans and technical assistance in order to continue fairly compensating EEC workers.

IMPACTS BY STIMULUS/RETENTION PROJECT	
Project Name	Impacts
Stimulus Funds for Childcare Centers	<b>1,317</b> early education and care professionals compensated
	<b>382</b> new staff hired
	<b>22</b> sustainability and compensation plans developed
	<b>5,000</b> children served by providers that received ARPA funds

Workforce Hiring and Retention for Childcare Sector	<b>457</b> Family Childcare Centers (FCCs) that received grants
	<b>3,720</b> children served by providers that received ARPA funds
<b>Total Impact:</b>	<b>59 center-based and 457 family child care providers supported with emergency funding, and over 8,700 children benefited</b>

# EXPANSION: MEETING FAMILIES WHERE THEY ARE

The City utilized ARPA SLFRF to provide grants to applicants in order to increase the number of childcare providers who offer non-traditional hours. Non-traditional hours are considered those before 7 a.m. and after 6 p.m. Monday through Friday, or any weekend hour. Forty three percent of children have parents working non-traditional hours. Considering the importance of essential workers in the recovery of the pandemic, this program was an innovative new model for serving a population with an acute need. **Twenty seven additional childcare providers were able to expand their hours** to date. This program is ongoing.

IMPACTS BY EXPANSION PROJECT	
Project Name	Impact to Date
Non-standard Work Hours Childcare Pilot  [Project Ongoing]	27 EEC providers offering expanded hours
	24 families receiving scholarships to fund childcare beyond standard work hours
	28 children enrolled in non-standard work hour childcare

# ENHANCEMENT: INVESTING IN EEC PROFESSIONALS

In order to boost the quality of early education and care options, the City sought to use ARPA SLFRF to enhance the skills of providers and expand professional opportunities. Through licensing support programs, the City provided certification and licensing support, as well as marketing and business assistance. This funding allowed **68 childcare providers to earn their licenses**, growing Boston's supply of licensed early childhood education and care options. Fifty providers also benefited from marketing and outreach training and support to improve enrollment and visibility. As of 2022, [over a third of FCC providers \(39%\) held a high school diploma or less](#), calling attention to the need for more educational opportunities for early childhood workers.

The high cost of education can often be a major barrier for workers looking to advance their careers. To help address this, ARPA SLFRF investments allowed **363 workers to complete an associates degree, bachelors degree, masters degree, or other certifications** meant to bolster the quality of options in the sector. These investments are designed to expand access to education and continue to support efforts to improve the quality and availability of skilled professionals in the sector.

The City used ARPA SLFRF to address the [sharp drop in Ages and Stages](#) assessments (ASQ) provided to young children during the pandemic. Developmental screenings are used to identify developmental delays, learning disorders, and behavioral and social-emotional problems, which are estimated

to affect [one in every six children](#). Interventions before kindergarten have academic, social, and economic benefits, with studies showing that early treatment for developmental delays mean children are more likely to graduate from high school, hold jobs, live independently, and avoid teen pregnancy, delinquency, and violent crime. [This results in a savings to society of about \\$30,000 to \\$100,000 per child](#). Utilizing ARPA SLFRF, the City sought to train business owners to conduct developmental screenings and follow up with families if additional intervention is needed. This program **trained 160 FCC providers in Boston to administer ASQ developmental screenings**.

IMPACTS BY ENHANCEMENT PROJECT				
Project Name	Impact Metric	Count	Projected Remaining	Projected Total
Growing the Early Education and Care Workforce [Project Ongoing]	Childcare Development Associate Credential	166	82	248
	Director's Certification	32	23	55
	Teacher Lead Certification	113	146	259
	Associate's Degree	15	65	80
	Bachelor's Degree	32	53	85
	Master's Degree	5	2	7
	<b>Total Credentials</b>	<b>363</b>	<b>404</b>	<b>734</b>
Childcare Business Development	Early childhood educators completed marketing and technology workshops	48		

[Project Complete]	Early childhood educators licensed	68	
	Early childhood educators completed developmental screenings workshops	160	
	Early childhood educators in Boston conducting developmental screenings	90	
	Number of children screened by providers trained	375	
<b>Total Impact:</b>	<b>Projected 734 credentials earned</b>		

# ACCESSIBILITY: SIMPLIFYING ENROLLMENT

To improve and centralize access and enrollment in early education and care, the City utilized ARPA SLFRF funds to **develop and expand the [Great Starts platform](#)**. Great Starts, first launched in March 2024, is the City's streamlined enrollment platform, with 807 licensed EEC institutions serving children aged 0-5. This included Boston Public Schools that offer K0 and K1 classrooms (ages 3 and 4 years old). In October 2024, the platform expanded to serve students up to grade 12, which includes all Boston Public Schools, bringing the total of searchable options to date to 846.

Families are able to use the multi-lingual portal to explore a variety of options based on the criteria that are important to them. This platform reduces barriers to finding child care options by offering enrollment in a centralized location.

**Great Starts was used to register 6,910 3 and 4 years olds between 2024 and 2026.**

**IMPACTS BY ACCESSIBILITY PROJECT**

Project Name	Impact to Date
Streamlining Access and Enrollment  [Project Ongoing]	2,100,000 visits to the Great Starts platform since March 2024
	748,000 Active users in the Great Starts platform since March 2024
	6,910 Boston Pre K registrations through the Great Starts platform for the 24-25 & 25-26 academic year

# CONCLUSION

Boston's ARPA SLFRF funds not only helped the sector weather the pandemic, but also laid the groundwork for a stronger future for children, families, and educators.

While the early education and care sector faces challenges nationwide, [the City of Boston is nationally recognized for its high quality, accessible childcare](#). The City will continue to prioritize early education and care through the Office of Early Childhood and other strategic initiatives. While the City's ARPA SLFRF funding will be fully spent by the end of 2026, Bostonians will continue to see the long-term benefits: more seats, higher-quality care, and better support for the professionals who care for our youngest residents.