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NATIONAL CHILD CARE FINDER SCALE

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I. THE NATIONAL CHILD CARE FINDER SCALE

Objective

Parents of children aged five and under experience many [challenges to finding affordable, reliable child care](#) near them. Child care is [essential](#) for parents to go to work to support their families, for workforce productivity, and broader economic growth. The [Child Care and Development Fund](#) (CCDF) is a federal program that provides funding for child care subsidies and other critical early childhood programs in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. As part of this program, [states are required](#) to have authenticated consumer education websites including child care finders to facilitate connections between child care seekers and providers. States have developed consumer education platforms with a variety of filters that allow families to search by distance, type of center, quality rating, and other [required and recommended](#) criteria. However, there is currently little research on state platforms to extract strengths, best practices, and common shortcomings and challenges, to support their refinement.

The National Child Care Finder Scale seeks to address this gap by developing a framework for assessing state consumer education sites, specifically their child care finder platforms. The purpose of this work is to provide a clear roadmap for continuous improvement of state child care finders. By applying this framework, state agencies and legislators will be able to:

- Identify best practices from states that are leading in particular areas.
- Address gaps that prevent families from accessing reliable information.
- Streamline access to varied early childhood programs for families.

This framework evaluates the capability of the platform itself and not how it is used by individual users or providers. This distinction ensures fair scoring and allows the analysis to highlight whether state systems create the conditions for families to access accurate, timely, and usable information. [The Hunt Institute](#) is an education policy partner to states across the nation and has successfully helped states develop solutions for strengthening their early education systems. This effort reflects the Institute's broader mission: to advance equity, quality, and transparency in systems by supporting states with tools that are rigorous, practical, and growth-oriented.

Parent Voices | Finding the State Child Care Finder

"I don't think I knew there was a state site when I started searching. We live in a remote area, and I wasn't sure I could find child care through a finder."

"I did not know to look for a state site. My search did not yield the state finder in the first few hits. Google maps is what comes up with providers in my area."

"The state finder did not come up when I searched for child care. I didn't even know that there was a state finder. No one even mentioned a finder!"



The Hunt Institute developed the National Child Care Finder Scale to address the lack of actionable research on child care search platforms. The few studies that discuss child care finders are focused on private and not state-owned child care finders. A review of existing studies shows that [private sites allow subjective ratings](#) and [do not have guard rails](#) that protect child care seekers or providers. [The Child Care and Development Fund \(CCDF\)](#) published a brief that outlines a framework for the design of state child care finders, including guidance on search filters, provider details, and visibility and ease of access for families. [Child Care and Early Education Research and Policy Analysis \(CCEERPA\)](#) reports that simulated searches yielded state child care finders only 17 percent of the time. The study recommends that states improve search filters, explore search engine optimization, and streamline integration with other child-care related sites. The Hunt Institute's Child Care Finder Scale adopts a [grounded theory](#) approach to build on this body of work with the goal of developing a comprehensive analytic framework. The following section provides a detailed discussion of our methods, the analytic framework comprising the scale, and the scoring rubric.



Parent Voices | The Child Care Search

“It was quite isolating as a first time mom. I checked Google to see what child care I can find nearby. If someone like an OB/GYN or pediatrician could have pointed me to a finder site, I would have used it. I go to these doctor visits anyway, so it’s a natural place to provide this information.”

“We started by asking around about child care options in our church, friends, and coworkers groups. We created a list. Then did a Google search of what’s by our house and what made sense commuting to and from work. This helped narrow it down.”

“The Google search was the first step, and that helped me see the centers and read reviews. Luckily my coworker was looking at the same time and told me she checked out a preschool that was close to me and liked it and that I should check it out. This preschool did not come up in my searches! This is not a science!”



The National Child Care Finder Scale

A grounded theory approach supported the development of a comprehensive framework. Based on a review of literature and iteratively developed through a national scan of state child care search platforms and input from parents, the framework captures recurring features across states as well as aspects that are unique to particular states. Guiding principles are:

- **Uniform scoring:** All categories are scored on a consistent scale of Met (1), Partially Met (.5) and Not Met (0).
- **Platform-focused evaluation:** Evaluation measures the capabilities of the platform, not whether individual child care providers and seekers use those features.
- **Focus on state finders:** As mentioned, CCDF requires that all 50 states and the District of Columbia have state child care finders. Only these finders are included in the sample, allowing for a national comparison.
- **Continuous improvement:** The framework is designed to encourage progress and provide a practical roadmap rather than penalize resource-constrained states. uniformly applied to all 50 states and the District of Columbia’s state child care finders, and produce a score that was solely based on features of the finder.



■ **The Analytic Framework:** The four categories comprising the framework are as follows. Each category is composed of five indicators that measure specific aspects.

Category	Research Question
Design and Integration	To what extent can all parents, including those with disabilities or limited technology access, use the finder and connect to other early childhood programs from the platform?
User Experience	To what extent does the platform assure users of its authenticity, provide clear directions for conducting a child care search, and provide user support?
Search Filters	To what extent can families customize their search through applying filters?
Provider Profiles	To what extent are provider profiles current, factual, and comprehensive?

The Scale: A four-level scale assesses the overall strength of state platforms.

Scale Levels	Definition
1 - 5 Minimal	The finder is limited or partially functional. Families can access only limited information through the platform.
6-10 Adequate	The finder meets a baseline level of usability. Families can access basic information through the platform.
11-15 Enhanced	The finder provides an array of features. Families can access nuanced information through the platform.
16-20 Exemplary	The platform demonstrates innovation, serving as a model for other states. Families can find comprehensive, trustworthy, and current information on the platform.

Methods

Developing the framework: As mentioned, the analysis applies a grounded theory approach to develop the framework through an [inductive analysis](#) of state child care finder sites:

- Initial criteria were identified through a review of literature.
- All state child care finders were scanned to identify shared features of such finders. A preliminary framework was developed spanning ten categories.
- This framework was tested on child care finders from five states and resulted in a final set of four categories that could be uniformly applied to all 50 states and the District of Columbia's state child care finders, and produce a score that was solely based on features of the finder.
- The framework is not dependent on additional documentation related to the site, ensuring that the analysis is only focused on the features of the state child finder across all 51 samples.

Validation of the framework: The following methods were used to verify the sample and vet the framework with stakeholders:

- The Hunt Institute verified the web address of all 51 state child care finders through a survey sent to the heads of state child care agencies.
- The Institute also conducted interviews with a [purposeful sample](#) of 40 parents of children aged five and under representing 17 states. The sample included parents from urban and rural regions and varied racial and ethnic and economic backgrounds. The interviews ensured that the framework integrated parent perspectives on restrictive and supportive features of finders.
- The framework and sample were refined based on validation measures.



Developing State Profiles: State profiles were developed by applying the framework to state child care finder platforms:

- Within each of the four categories are a set of features that were scored on whether the indicator was Not Met (0), Partially Met (.5) or Met (1).
- Each category has a maximum of five points.
- The Search Filters and Provider Profiles categories provided an opportunity to gain a credit of .5 per category to acknowledge states that had preferred features, despite not including all the essential features parents prioritized.
- The framework allows states to score a maximum of 20 points. The sum of all category scores determines the total score on the scale.

The framework (see Appendix I for the template) was applied to the sample of 51 verified state child care finder sites. The resulting 51 state profiles include category scores as well as total scores and are featured on the National Child Care Finder Scale website. Chapter II summarizes aggregate scores and disaggregates category scores to surface shared patterns, best practices, and areas for improvement. Chapter III connects these findings with patterns in the parent interviews to identify policy considerations for states to strengthen state child care finders. Appendix I includes details of the sample and the parent feedback questionnaire.

Parent Voices | Starting the Search

“I started looking as soon as I had a positive pregnancy test. Started with a word of mouth search. Most places had waitlists. We were looking for personal recommendations and not comfortable just looking online.”

“We started a month out after a positive pregnancy test and have toured seven sites. We are on a waitlist to start with a day care in August.”

“Once my older one was eligible for 3K, it was a whole new maze to figure out. Mostly I had to rely on friends in the neighborhood.”



II. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

This chapter summarizes the findings of the analysis of 51 verified state child care finders representing the 50 states and District of Columbia. As mentioned, interviews with parents provided the foundation for developing the categories forming the scale. Their voices are included throughout this chapter to highlight the user perspective and ground the scale. Overall, the results show that no states were at the minimal level of the scale and only a few states were at the adequate level. Most states were at the enhanced level and a few states were at the exemplary level, implying that their finders had a comprehensive set of features.



The Analytic Framework: As mentioned, there are four categories in the scale. The first two categories, Design and Integration and User Experience, are composed of five features each. The Search Filters category is composed of 15 features and Provider Profiles of 22 features. These two categories were scaled on a rubric to assess the extent to which essential and preferred features were present on finders.

Category	Research Question
Design and Integration	To what extent can all parents, including those with disabilities or limited technology access, use the finder and connect to other early childhood programs from the platform?
User Experience	To what extent does the platform assure users of its authenticity, provide clear directions for conducting a child care search, and provide user support?
Search Filters	To what extent can families customize their search through applying filters?
Provider Profiles	To what extent are provider profiles current, factual, and comprehensive?

The Scale: There are four levels on the scale, with each level spanning 5 points. The maximum score a state can receive on the scale is 20 points. The scale assesses the overall strength of state child care finders with **Minimal** representing the lowest end and **Exemplary** the highest end of the scale.

Scale Levels	Definition
1 - 5 Minimal	The finder is limited or partially functional. Families can access only limited information through the platform.
6-10 Adequate	The finder meets a baseline level of usability. Families can access basic information through the platform.
11-15 Enhanced	The finder provides an array of features. Families can access nuanced information through the platform.
16-20 Exemplary	The platform demonstrates innovation, serving as a model for other states. Families can find comprehensive, trustworthy, and current information on the platform.

National Ranking of State Child Care Finders

Graph I (below) summarizes the results of the analysis, ranking states by their aggregate scores:

- No states were at the Minimal level, highlighting ongoing efforts by all states to build effective finders.
- Ten states were at the Adequate level, indicating that their finders included basic features.
- The majority of 35 states were at the Enhanced level, indicating that they included a variety of features.
- Six states were at the Exemplary level, indicating that they had a comprehensive set of features.
- Florida received the highest score of 18/20 and New Mexico was close behind at 17.5/20. These states serve as models for designing comprehensive state child care finders.
- The median for the distribution was 13/20 and the mean was 12.7/20, both at the Enhanced level.
- The range ran from 8.5 (Adequate) to 18 (Exemplary).

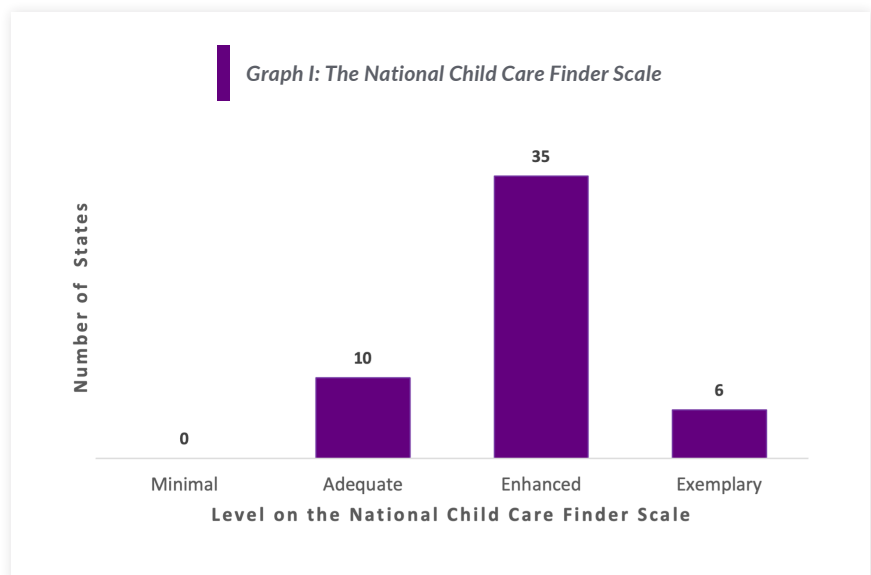


Table I displays the distribution of scores across the 50 states and the District of Columbia.

Table I: Aggregate Scores

State	Aggregate Score	Level
Florida	18	Exemplary
New Mexico	17.5	Exemplary
District of Columbia	16.5	Exemplary
Minnesota	16.5	Exemplary
Arkansas	16	Exemplary
Kentucky	16	Exemplary
Connecticut	15.5	Enhanced
Michigan	15.5	Enhanced
North Dakota	15	Enhanced
Pennsylvania	15	Enhanced
South Carolina	15	Enhanced
Utah	15	Enhanced
Iowa	14.5	Enhanced
Nevada	14.5	Enhanced
New Hampshire	14.5	Enhanced
Colorado	14	Enhanced
Alaska	13.5	Enhanced
California	13.5	Enhanced
Hawai'i	13.5	Enhanced
Tennessee	13.5	Enhanced

State	Aggregate Score	Level
Vermont	13.5	Enhanced
Arizona	13	Enhanced
Georgia	13	Enhanced
Nebraska	13	Enhanced
North Carolina	13	Enhanced
Texas	13	Enhanced
Wisconsin	13	Enhanced
Maryland	12.5	Enhanced
Ohio	12.5	Enhanced
Oregon	12.5	Enhanced
Indiana	12	Enhanced
New Jersey	12	Enhanced
Washington	12	Enhanced
Wyoming	12	Enhanced
Delaware	11.5	Enhanced
Kansas	11.5	Enhanced
Oklahoma	11.5	Enhanced
Rhode Island	11.5	Enhanced
Illinois	11	Enhanced
Louisiana	11	Enhanced
Virginia	11	Enhanced
Mississippi	10.5	Adequate

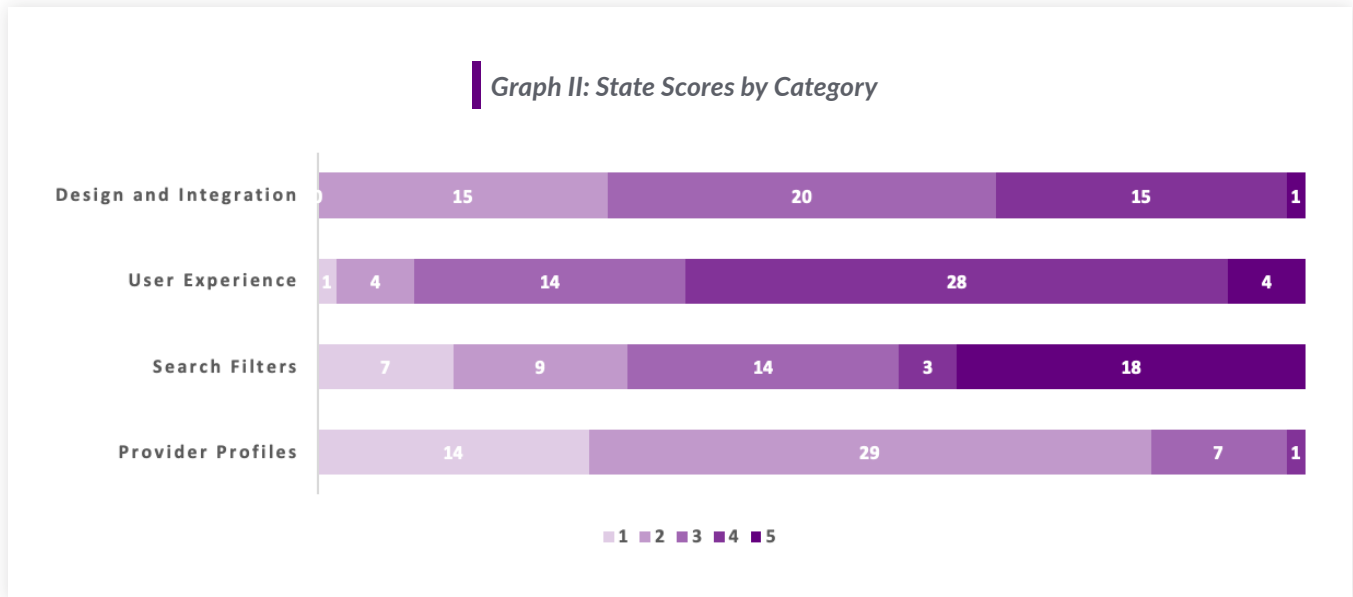


State	Aggregate Score	Level
South Dakota	10.5	Adequate
Maine	10	Adequate
Massachusetts	10	Adequate
Montana	10	Adequate
Idaho	9	Adequate
Missouri	9	Adequate
Alabama	8.5	Adequate
New York	8.5	Adequate
West Virginia	8.5	Adequate



Analysis by Category

This section disaggregates category scores to demonstrate strengths and gaps in the distribution. The maximum score for each category is 5 points.



Graph II shows that the majority of states were at a 3 or higher on most categories. Specifically,

- There were 36 states at a 3 or higher on Design and Integration.
- The vast majority of 46 states were at a 3 or higher on User Experience.
- Continuing the trend, 35 states scored 3 or above on Search Filters.
- Provider Profiles was the only category in which 43 states scored below a 3, identifying it as an area of growth for most states.

It is important to note here that the range for a category score of 1 included 1.5, 2 included 2.5, and so on. The four sections below delve into more detail on each category, including the features assessed, the distribution of states within each category, and an analysis of three examples per category.



1. Design and Integration

Parent Voices | Design and Integration

“The site should be functional on my tablet, laptop, and phone.”

“They require that you make an account to see everything. I don’t want to make an account!”

“The site I used was good for finding who takes subsidies.”

This category includes five features including responsive design across devices, compliance to the accessibility guidelines, access to the site without a login, integration with critical early childhood systems, and capability for providers to update their profiles regularly. Each feature is an important part of the design of state child care finders as well as integration of finders in state consumer education sites. Each feature is assessed on a three-point scale of Not Met (0), Partially Met (.5) and Met (1).

To what extent does the site allow all parents, including those with disabilities or limited tech access, to use the platform and connect to related platforms?

Responsive design across devices (laptop and mobile)

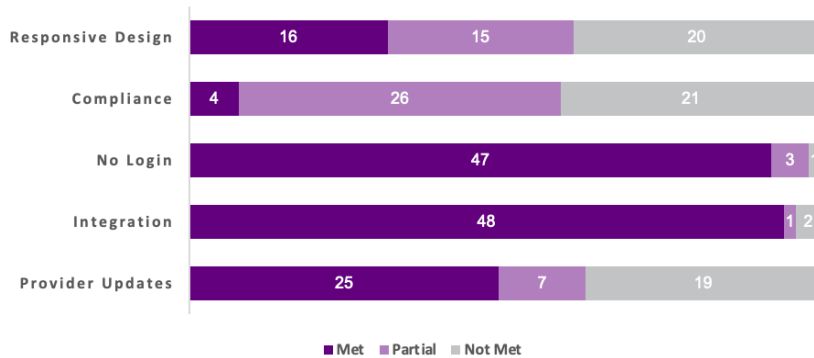
[Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.1 AA \(WCAG\) compliance](#)

No login required to use finder

Integration with state systems (Licensing, QRIS, Subsidy, Audits)

Capability for provider updates

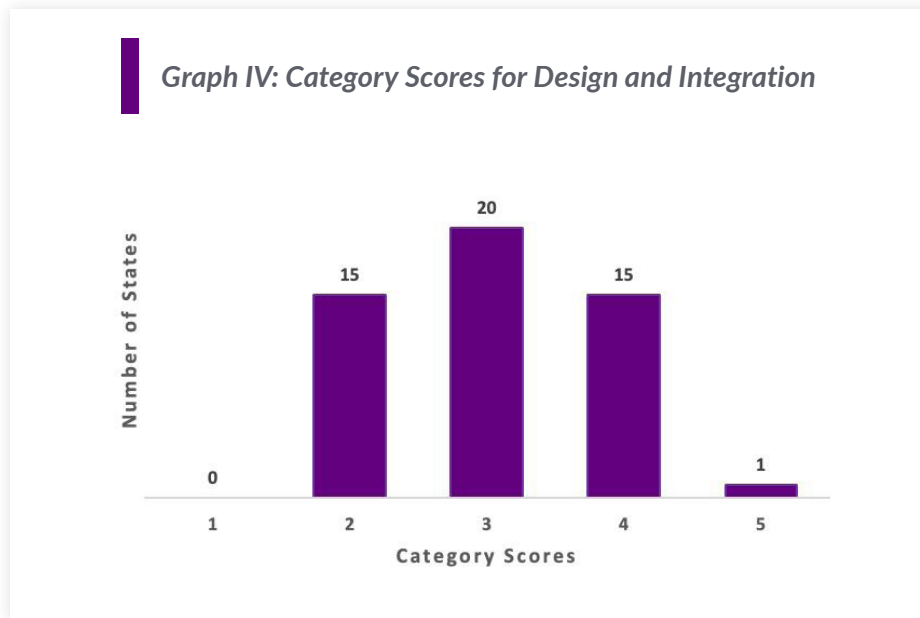
Graph III: Design and Integration Features



Graph III shows that the vast majority of states met the requirement for No login and Integration with other early childhood programs. Responsive design across devices, compliance and options for provider updates are areas for improvement for the majority of states.



Graph IV summarizes states' scores on Design and Integration. Thirty six states scored between 3 and 5 in this category, showing that there is scope for states to improve features like responsive design, compliance and provider updates.



The table below summarizes examples from three states with strong design and integration features.

Table II: Design and Integration Examples

State	Score	Features
Connecticut	5	Highlights: Only site to be wholly WCAG compliant. No login, good integration, and easy access for provider updates. Areas for improvement: None
Iowa	4.5	Highlights: Unique site with superior mobile design features. Mostly WCAG compliant, does not require a login, is integrated with other early childhood services, and allows provider updates. Areas for improvement: Mostly but not wholly WCAG compliant.
Minnesota	4.5	Highlights: Intuitive design, full integration with other state information, no login, and allows provider updates. Areas for improvement: Partially but not wholly WCAG compliant.

2. User Experience

Parent Voices | User Experience

“I’m not sure the state site is the top choice in a simple Google search. It’s very important that the site is easily searchable.”

“Ease of use is important. It can’t be a broken experience that is frustrating.”

“First time parents are overwhelmed and don’t know what to search for. I look at the filters and use them as a guide for what I should look for.”

This category includes five features including responsive design across devices, compliance to the accessibility guidelines, access to the site without a login, integration with critical early childhood systems, and capability for providers to update their profiles regularly. Each feature is an important part of the design of state child care finders as well as integration of finders in state consumer education sites. Each feature is assessed on a three-point scale of Not Met (0), Partially Met (.5) and Met (1).



User Experience

To what extent does the platform assure users of its authenticity (official nature), provide clear directions for conducting a child care search, and provide user support?

Discoverable via common Google queries

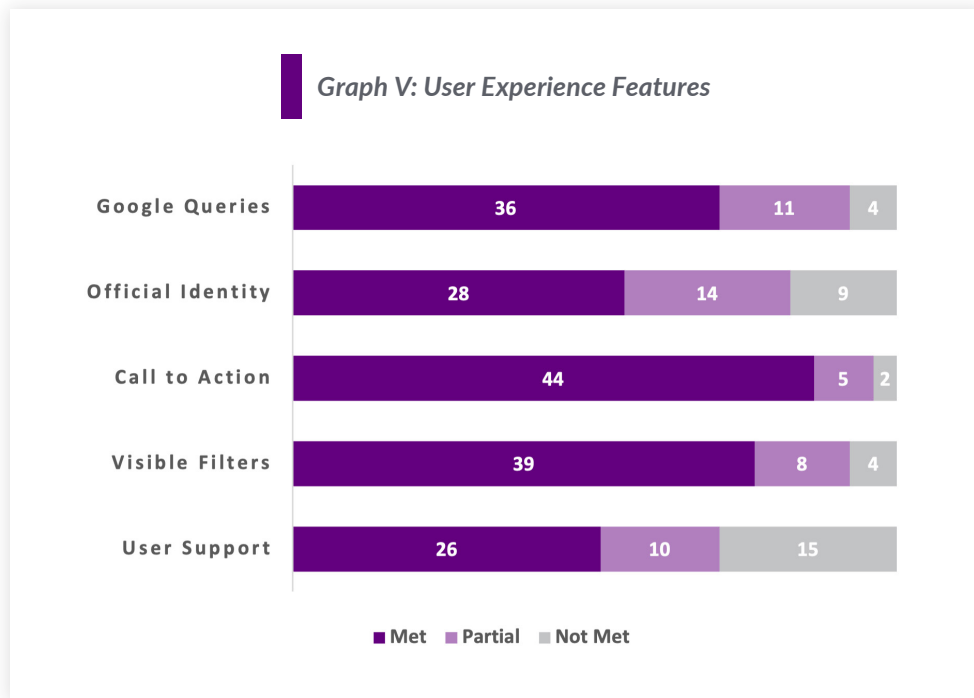
Official state identity is clear

Clear call-to-action on landing page (e.g., prominent “Find Child Care”)

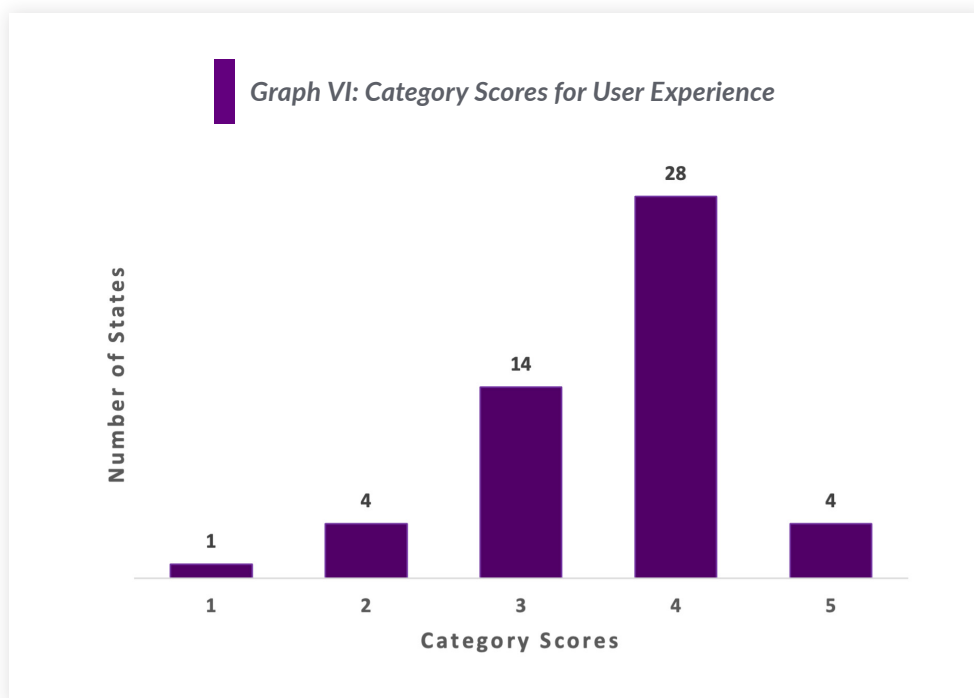
Filters are visible and clearly labeled

User support options exist (FAQ, chat, and/or hotline)

Graph V shows that the majority of states meet the requirements of this category. Areas for improvement in some states include strengthening official identity, visibility of filters, and user support.



Graph VI summarizes states' scores on User Experience. The vast majority of states, 46, had a score between 3 and 5 on User Experience, although only 4 states had a score of 5, signifying that there is scope for most states to improve on this category.



The table below summarizes strong user experience features from three states.

Table III: User Experience Examples

State	Score	Features
Hawai'i	5	<p>Highlights: Easily discoverable via a Google search, clear state identity, link for child care search is identifiable, filters are well displayed, and user support options are visible.</p> <p>Areas for improvement: None</p>
Tennessee	5	<p>Highlights: Easily discoverable, clear identity, link is identifiable, filters well displayed, and user support options visible.</p> <p>Areas for improvement: None.</p>
Nebraska	4.5	<p>Highlights: In addition to easy discovery, clear state identity, and identifiable child care search link and filters, the site features testimonials and videos from parents and quotes from providers.</p> <p>Areas for improvement: User support options can be improved.</p>

3. Search Filters

Parent Voices | Search Filters

“Location, cost, is it in a safe neighborhood are the filters I need. It was hard for me because I walked and took the bus with the baby and stroller and everything, so distance was critical.”

“Common filters were usually the number of days and hours, age range and location. But I didn’t come by any other filters. I would have liked to know about language programs, teacher to student ratio and class size. I went to the website of providers to get this information.”

“I wanted to see a breakdown by age group so that my child can transition to a different age group naturally. What is the curriculum style? What credentials do teachers have? Filters were basic when I searched. The first site only had a specific age band but that helped me filter out for the age I needed and I could go from there.”

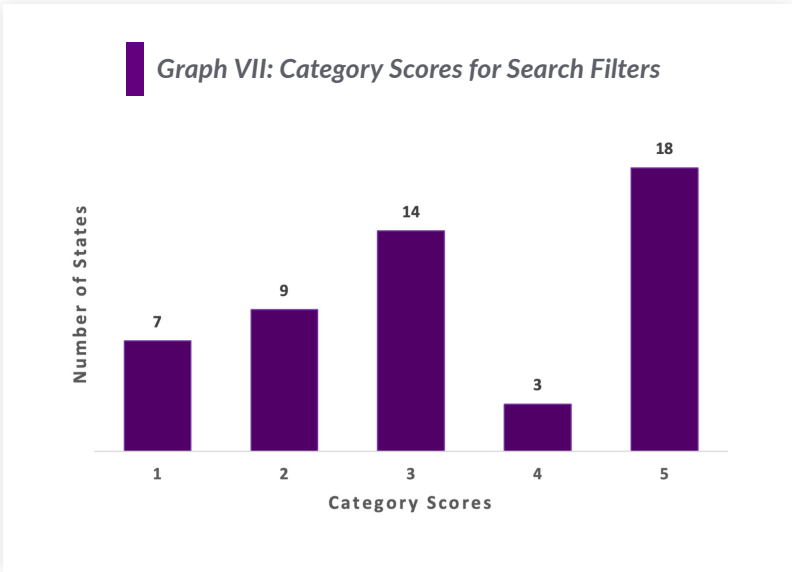
This category includes a menu of 15 features that parents identified as either essential or useful in their child care search. Filters 1-5 were identified as essential filters and 6-15 were identified as preferred features by parents. The first three points of the rubric assess the presence of essential filters and fourth and fifth point of the rubric assess the presence of essential and preferred features. Each point in this range was assessed on the three-point scale of Not Met (0), Partially Met (.5) and Met (1), as in the case of other categories. For example, if a state had most of the filters from 1-4, they were at the partial level with a score of 1.5. If they had all features from 1-4, they scored a 2. States had the opportunity to gain a .5 point credit if they offered parents preferred filters, despite not satisfying one of the first three options of the rubric, which include the filters that parents stated were essential to their search.

Search Filters

To what extent can families customize their search through applying filters?	
<i>Menu of Filters</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 01. Location (address or ZIP with radius and/or city/town) 02. Age (infant, toddler, preschool, school-age) 03. Provider type 04. Subsidy acceptance 05. Quality Rating 06. Hours of operation 07. Current availability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 08. Special needs inclusion 09. Language/s of instruction 10. Educational approach 11. Allergy-free 12. Vaccination requirements 13. Meals/snacks 14. Transportation availability 15. Map-based search view
<i>Rubric</i>	
Includes Options 1-2 = 1	
Includes Options 1-4 = 2	
Includes Options 1-5 = 3	
Includes Options 1-5 and 3 other options = 4	
Includes 1-5 and 4 or more other options = 5	



Graph VII summarizes states' scores on Search Filters. Almost a third of states did not meet the requirements for essential filters. The majority of 35 states had a score between 3 and 5 on Search Filters, of which 18 states had a score of 5, signifying that just over a third of states had strong filters.



The table below provides examples from three states with strong search filters, listing filters identified as essential and preferred by parents, and areas for improvement.

Table IV: Search Filters Examples

State	Score	Features
District of Columbia	5	<p>Essential: Location (specific zip-code, or by ward), Age (Infant, Toddler, Preschool, and School Age), Provider type, Subsidy acceptance, Quality rating (Capital Quality Designation System).</p> <p>Preferred: Hours of operation (days, and drop-off hours), Current availability (Broken down by age group), Language of instruction (Spanish), Educational approach, Meal/Snacks, Map-based search.</p> <p>Areas for improvement: Lacks special needs filter and additional languages of instruction beyond Spanish.</p>
Kansas	5	<p>Essential: Location (by home address), Age (by date of birth and broken down by age group), Provider type, Subsidy acceptance, Quality rating (Accreditation and Badges).</p> <p>Preferred: Hours of operation, Current availability, Special needs inclusion (ADA Accessible and specific special needs filter), Language of instruction (multiple options, primary and secondary available), Allergy free, Meal/Snacks, Transportation availability, Map-based search.</p> <p>Areas for improvement: Lacks educational approach, need to choose provider type to unlock robust filtering options.</p>
Texas	5	<p>Essential: Location (can tailor proximity to work, home, or along commute route), Age (Infant, Toddler, Preschool, School Age), Provider type, Subsidy acceptance (Financial Aid filter), Quality rating (Texas Rising Star Program).</p> <p>Preferred: Hours of operation (days and hours), Current availability, Special needs inclusion (by specific need), Language of instruction (extensive list of options), Educational approach (program focus section and curriculum section), Allergy free (nut, dairy, gluten) Meals/Snacks (by specific meal, and options for snacks and meals), Transportation availability, Map-based search.</p> <p>Areas for improvement: None.</p>

4. Provider Profiles

Parent Voices | Provider Profiles

“Once I get a shortlist and click on a provider profile, I’d like to see a website that I can explore.”

“Price information is key. You can’t go and tour and then find out it’s unaffordable. One place we toured checked a lot of boxes, but it was \$500 a week! That was a waste of time.”

“What does the newborn room look like? The infant room? What are staff-child ratios? How do the play areas look? What are the safety protocols? I want a picture of a day in the life for the child.”

“I wish I could see which ones have open slots now.”



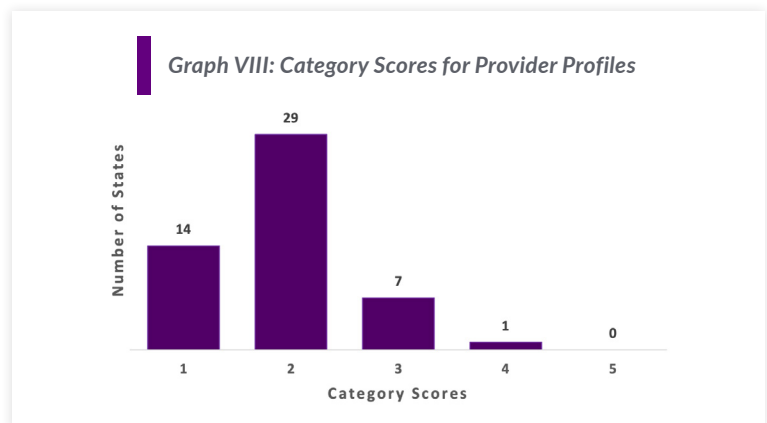
This category includes a menu of 22 features that parents identified for inclusion in provider profiles. Features 1-10 were identified as essential provider details by parents. Features 11-22 were identified as helpful preferred features by parents. The first three points of the rubric assessed the presence of essential provider details, while the fourth and fifth points of the rubric assessed the presence of preferred details. Some of the options marked with a * are research-based options that ensure higher quality in early education settings. Each point in this range was assessed on the scale of Not Met (0), Partially Met (.5) and Met (1), as in the case of other categories. As mentioned, states had the opportunity to gain a .5 point credit if they offered parents multiple features, despite not featuring all the essential details that parents prioritized.



Provider Profiles

To what extent can families customize their search through applying filters?	
<i>Menu of Provider Details</i>	
01. Name, address, phone and email 02. License 03. Ages served 04. Quality ratings and/or accreditation 05. Website 06. Pricing information by age group 07. Safety/inspection history 08. Subsidy acceptance 09. Languages supported 10. Timestamp for last updated 11. Number of slots by age group*	12. Waitlist by age group 13. Curriculum/philosophy/environment* 14. Staff-to-child ratio* 15. Teacher credentials* 16. Food availability 17. Special/medical needs 18. Transportation 19. Link to application 20. Tour scheduling 21. Favorites/alerts 22. Photos
<i>Rubric</i>	
Includes Options 1-2 = 1	
Includes Options 1-4 = 2	
Includes Options 1-10 = 3	
Includes Options 1-10 and 5 other options = 4	
Includes 1-10 and 5 or more options including at least three * options = 5	

Graph VIII summarizes states' scores on Provider Profiles. The vast majority of 43 states scored less than 3 in this category. Only one state had a score of 4.5. No states scored 5 on this category, illustrating the need for states to improve provider profile templates in alignment with family needs and improve access and supports for providers to easily update their profiles on the state child care finder.



The table below provides examples from three states, including one which had a strong provider profile template, and two which had moderately strong templates.

Table V: Provider Profiles Examples

State	Score	Features
Florida	4.5	<p>Essential: Template includes contact information, website, license information, ages served, and quality ratings, including Gold Seal rating, school readiness score, CLASS Score, clickable link for pricing information by age group, inspection reports, child certificate acceptance, languages supported, and openings updated within the last 90 days.</p> <p>Preferred: Curriculum or philosophy, staff-to-child ratios, meals provided, transportation, admissions links, and an option add to favorite features. Under program services, parents can find additional information about the daily schedule, special needs services, food programs, school readiness, before and after care and transportation.</p> <p>Areas for improvement: The location feature is provided but does not include the address for the provider, raising questions about the usability of the feature for parents and families.</p>
Michigan	3	<p>Essential: The template has contact information, licensure identification, ages served, level of quality demonstration, a clickable link to a website, pricing information, a link to a licensing inspection report, information about payment assistance, and languages offered.</p> <p>Preferred: Number of full time openings by age group, environment information, meals provided, transportation, and special education information.</p> <p>Areas for improvement: The profile has no timestamp to help parents gauge when the information was last updated.</p>
New Mexico	3	<p>Essential: The template includes address, license information, FOCUS Star Quality Ratings, and information about ages served. They also included a provider website, clickable pricing information by age group, inspection information linked with licensure number, child care assistance acceptance, languages supported, and the providers have the option to indicate availability updates within the last 90 days.</p> <p>Preferred: Photos, philosophy narrative, admissions information, staff-to-child ratio, meals provided, transportation information, button to apply for enrollment, link to schedule a tour, and a feature to favorite. The only finder that includes an 'Apply for Enrollment' feature directly within the search results.</p> <p>Areas for improvement: The profile does not provide phone or email contacts for providers. While there are options to contact providers, they require a login to access this information.</p>

III. POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

The Hunt Institute constructed the National Child Care Finder Scale to develop a framework for assessing state child care finder platforms. The purpose of the scale is to assess features of state child care finders to help states improve their design, visibility and use among parents of children aged birth to five. Chapter II established the strengths and gaps in state finders. As stated, no states were at the Minimal level, 10 states were at the Adequate level, 35 states, or more than two thirds of states were at the Enhanced level, and six states were at the Exemplary level.

From the parent perspective, design, user experience and filters are tools that help them arrive at their desired end point of a shortlist of provider profiles that they can explore further to identify the right setting for their child. Chapter III reviews patterns in parent interviews and category scores to offer policy considerations supporting the improvement of state child care finders. The chapter concludes with a practical set of considerations for state agency leads and policy priorities for legislators.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR STATE AGENCY LEADERS

1. Enhance the visibility of state child care finders

Parent Voices | Visibility of Child Care Finders

“The OB/GYN, hospital, or pediatrician could have informed us about the state finder. Child care providers don’t really talk about it either.”

“Not sure the state site is the top choice in a simple Google search. It’s very important that the site is easily searchable.”



Interviews with 40 parents representing varied socio-economic groups across 17 states revealed a critical disconnect: the majority of parents were unaware that an official state child care finder existed. Instead, most reported relying on Google Maps or Facebook groups for their search. When parents did attempt to find state resources, they found that search terms yielded multiple official-looking sites, making it difficult to identify the authoritative source. To ensure that parents can access vetted, state-verified information, state agency leaders could consider the following actions:

CLEAR IDENTITY

States could ensure that the child care finder prominently features the state seal, agency logo, or a “Verified by [State]” badge to signal that the site is backed by government oversight. This is particularly important when the finder is operated by a partner, so that the relationship is explicit, and parents are assured that the site is official.

SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMIZATION AND AI INTEGRATION

Parents noted that their search often resulted in a list including private finders that crowd out the official site. States could invest in Search Engine Optimization (SEO) to ensure their finder appears as the top result on Google and other search engines. Furthermore, states should prepare for the rise of Generative AI by optimizing site metadata and architecture to ensure that AI tools like ChatGPT, Gemini, and Anthropic recognize the state finder as the authoritative source.

OUTREACH AND STRATEGIC PLACEMENT

States could also increase the visibility of the official finder through increasing the finder’s prominence on all related government websites (e.g., Department of Health and Human Services, Department of Motor Vehicles, and Women and Infants and Children) and integrating the link into digital materials or QR code into physical materials. By embedding the finder into early parenting touchpoints - such as birth certificate mailings or pediatric informational packets - states can ensure visibility when families need it most.

2. Ensure that options for filters in child care finder filters are aligned with parents’ needs

Parent Voices | Effective Filters

“I look at the filters and use them as a guide for what I should look for.”

“Filters could be more robust on the state site. I’d like filters on quality - site and teacher quality.”



Interviews with 40 parents confirmed that searching for child care is often squeezed into work breaks or late-night hours and that they lacked the time to call dozens of providers for information. They valued tools that allowed them to instantly narrow multiple results down to a viable shortlist of 3–5 options that actually met their logistical needs. While nearly two-thirds of states offer essential filters (Location, Age, Provider Type), only one-third provide the preferred filters that parents reference. States can reduce the time and effort required of parents through adding high value filters such as the following:

REAL-TIME AVAILABILITY

The ability to filter out providers with no vacancies is the single most requested feature to reduce search friction.

SCHEDULE FLEXIBILITY

Filters for non-traditional hours (evenings, weekends, overnight) are essential for supporting the modern workforce.

FINANCIAL ACCESSIBILITY

Clear toggles for “Accepts Subsidies” or “Scholarships Available” are critical for low-income families.

INCLUSION

Filters for special needs support and dual-language programs ensure equitable access for all children.

3. Strengthen templates for provider profiles

Parent Voices | Comprehensive Provider Profiles

“I would like to see ratings and people’s feedback. I want to know how they handle allergies and what their record on safety is. I want to know what credentials teachers have and want them to post pictures of their facilities and activities.”

“Along with location, I would like the provider’s profile to include language options, teacher-to-student ratio and class size. I went to the website of providers to get this information.”

The analysis revealed that Provider Profiles are currently the weakest link in the national child care finder landscape. Nearly two-thirds of states earned a score of just 2 out of 5 in this category, indicating that most templates for provider profiles are lacking important information. Interviews confirmed that parents often bypass providers with sparse profiles, assuming they are inactive. To convert searches into actual care placements, state agencies could consider upgrading their templates in ways that enable providers to share information-rich, action-oriented templates.



Agency leaders should consider strengthening profile templates to include:

INTEGRATED TOOLS

Features that allow parents to directly message providers, schedule visits, or even apply directly from within the platform can streamline the intake process and keep families engaged.

CURRENT OPERATIONAL DATA

Fields for current tuition rates and live enrollment status (or waitlist length) help parents build a viable shortlist.

EVIDENCE OF QUALITY

Beyond simple star ratings, templates that display inspection histories, compliance reports, and verifiable quality designations (such as state awards) help parents to easily assess safety and quality.

PREFERRED PROGRAM DETAILS

Templates should allow providers to upload sample schedules, curriculum philosophies, and photos of the learning environment that allow parents to assess the culture of a program before they visit.

4. Enhance options for providers to update profiles

Findings on Design and Integration showed that over half of states were either partially (6) or not (20) integrating a feature for provider updates. Agency leaders could consider simplifying the process and providing supports that help providers update their profiles on the finder. Building in vetting mechanisms that ensure that provider updates are evidence-based would ensure that the profiles are accurate.



Policy Considerations for Legislators

01. EMBED THE IMPROVEMENT OF CHILD CARE FINDERS IN LARGER CHILD CARE INITIATIVES

Child care finders, whether public or private, are a critical part of the child care search for many parents. Policymakers, as part of broader initiatives to improve child care access, could consider prioritizing improvement of state child care finders to enhance their visibility, accuracy, and user-friendliness. Investing in seamless search-to-enrollment infrastructure will help evolve finders from static directories into integrated platforms.

02. FOSTER SYNERGIES BETWEEN STATE AND REGIONAL AGENCIES THAT OFFER CHILD CARE FINDERS

Most states have yet to fully unify governance of early childhood programs and may have more than one state child care finder in addition to regional child care finders. This necessitates investments in varied platforms that require maintenance and oversight. If these disparate platforms are not linked to a single provider database, additional resources may be required for updates and vetting of provider databases. To streamline information for parents as well as reduce costs and administrative burdens on providers and systems, policymakers could consider supporting a streamlined system of child care finders built on a unified database.

03. BRIDGE GAPS BETWEEN CHILD CARE CONSUMER EDUCATION AND OTHER FAMILY-FACING PROGRAMS

To improve the visibility of child care finders for families, policymakers could consider strengthening inter-agency partnerships to ensure that consumer education on child care finders is provided to families served by state agencies overseeing maternal and child health, socio-economic programs, early childhood education, and the K-12 system and vice-versa.

The Hunt Institute, a national nonpartisan education policy institute established by North Carolina Governor Jim Hunt in 2001, partners with state policymakers and educational leaders to advance policies that promote equity and excellence in education. Please contact Dr. Javaid Siddiqi, President and CEO of The Hunt Institute at Javaid.Siddiqi@hunt-institute.org for more information on our programs and services.



APPENDIX I

National Child Care Finder Scale: Template

1. Design & Integration

To what extent does the site allow all parents, including those with disabilities or limited tech access, to use the platform and connect to related platforms?	Not Met / Partial / Met
Responsive design across devices (laptop and mobile)	
Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.1 AA compliance	
No login required to use finder	
Integration with state systems (Licensing, QRIS, Subsidy, Audits)	
Capability for provider updates	

2. User Experience

To what extent does the platform assure users of its authenticity (official nature), provide clear directions for conducting a child care search, and provide user support?	Not Met / Partial / Met
Discoverable via common Google queries	
Official state identity is clear	
Clear call-to-action on landing page (e.g., prominent "Find Child Care").	
Filters are visible and clearly labeled	
Support options exist (FAQ, chat, and/or hotline)	



3. Search Filters

To what extent can families customize their search through applying filters?	
Menu of Filters	
01. Location (address or ZIP with radius and/or city/town) 02. Age (infant, toddler, preschool, school-age) 03. Provider type 04. Subsidy acceptance 05. Quality Rating 06. Hours of operation 07. Current availability	08. Inclusive practices 09. Language/s of instruction 10. Educational approach 11. Allergy-free 12. Vaccination requirements 13. Meals/snacks 14. Transportation availability 15. Map-based search view
Rubric	Not Met / Partial / Met
Includes Options 1-2 = 1	
Includes Options 1-4 = 2	
Includes Options 1-5 = 3	
Includes Options 1-5 and 3 other options = 4	
Includes 1-5 and 4 or more other options = 5	



4. Provider Profiles

To what extent can families customize their search through applying filters?	
Menu of Provider Details	
01. Name, address, phone and email 02. License 03. Ages served 04. Quality ratings and/or accreditation 05. Website 06. Pricing information by age group 07. Safety/inspection history 08. Subsidy acceptance 09. Languages supported 10. Timestamp for last updated 11. Number of slots by age group*	12. Waitlist by age group 13. Curriculum/philosophy/environment* 14. Staff-to-child ratio* 15. Teacher credentials* 16. Food availability 17. Special/medical needs 18. Transportation 19. Link to application 20. Tour scheduling 21. Favorites/alerts 22. Photos
Rubric	Not Met / Partial / Met
Includes Options 1-2 = 1	
Includes Options 1-4 = 2	
Includes Options 1-10 = 3	
Includes Options 1-10 and 5 other options = 4	
Includes 1-10 and 5 or more options including at least three * options = 5	



APPENDIX II: STUDY SAMPLES

Verified State Child Care Finder Sample

State	Verification Status	Child Care Finder URL
Alabama	✓	https://apps.dhr.alabama.gov/daycare/daycare_search
Alaska	✓	https://akccis.com/client/map
Arizona	✓	https://azchildcareprovidersearch.azdes.gov/
Arkansas	✓	https://ardhslicensing.my.site.com/elicensing/s/search-provider?language=en_US
California	✓	https://mychildcareplan.org/
Colorado	✓	https://raisingcoloradokids.com/en/finding-child-care/
Connecticut	✓	https://www.211childcare.org/
Delaware	✓	https://www.mychildde.org/child-care/looking-in-delaware/
District of Columbia	✓	https://mychildcare.dc.gov/
Florida	✓	https://fldoe.wonderschool.com/search
Georgia	✓	https://families.dec.state.ga.us/ChildCare/Search
Hawai'i	✓	https://childcareprovidersearch.dhs.hawaii.gov/
Idaho	✓	https://idahostars.org/Families?page13735=1&size13735=12#Search
Illinois	✓	https://www.illinoiscaresforkids.org/provider-search/?zip
Indiana	✓	https://www.in.gov/fssa/childcarefinder/
Iowa	✓	https://search.iachildcareconnect.org/



State	Verification Status	Child Care Finder URL
Kansas	✓	https://ks.childcareaware.org/childcaresearch/
Kentucky	✓	https://kynect.ky.gov/benefits/s/child-care-provider?origin=program-page&language=en_US
Louisiana	✓	https://louisianaschools.com/
Maine	✓	https://search.childcarechoices.me/
Maryland	✓	https://findaprogram.marylandexcels.org/
Massachusetts	✓	https://childcare.mass.gov/findchildcare
Michigan	✓	https://greatstarttoquality.org/find-programs/
Minnesota	✓	https://www.parentaware.org/search/#/
Mississippi	✓	https://www.mdhs.provider.webapps.ms.gov/ccsearch.aspx
Missouri	✓	https://healthapps.dhss.mo.gov/childcaresearch/
Montana	✓	https://dphhs.mt.gov/childcareprovidersdashboard
Nebraska	✓	https://stepuptoquality.ne.gov/resources-parents-families/provider-search/
Nevada	✓	https://www.nevadachildcare.org/
New Hampshire	✓	https://new-hampshire.my.site.com/nhccis/NH_ChildCareSearch
New Jersey	✓	https://www.childcarenj.gov/Search
New Mexico	✓	https://childcare.eccd.nm.gov/search
New York	✓	https://nysccf.maps.arcgis.com/apps/MapSeries/index.html?appid=bde3bc9d78e84ce193abfbe297dcb0ac
North Carolina	✓	https://ncchildcare.ncdhhs.gov/childcaresearch



State	Verification Status	Child Care Finder URL
North Dakota	✓	https://search.ec.hhs.nd.gov/
Ohio	✓	https://childcaresearch.ohio.gov/
Oklahoma	✓	https://childcarefind.okdhs.org/
Oregon	✓	https://findchildcareoregon.org/
Pennsylvania	✓	https://www.compass.dhs.pa.gov/providersearch/#/childcareprovidersearch
Rhode Island	✓	https://earlylearningprograms.dhs.ri.gov/s/?language=en_US
South Carolina	✓	https://search.sc-ccrr.org/
South Dakota	✓	https://olapublic.sd.gov/
Tennessee	✓	https://onedhs.tn.gov/csp?id=tn_cc_prv_maps%20
Texas	✓	https://childcare.twc.texas.gov/find/welcome
Utah	✓	https://jobs.utah.gov/occ/cac/search/
Vermont	✓	https://www.brightfutures.dcf.state.vt.us/
Virginia	✓	https://www.childcare.virginia.gov/families/finding-child-care
Washington	✓	https://www.findchildcarewa.org/
West Virginia	✓	https://bfa.wv.gov/page/find-childcare-provider
Wisconsin	✓	https://childcarefinder.wisconsin.gov/
Wyoming	✓	https://childcare.dfs.wyo.gov/home/

Parent Sample Summary

N=40

Mothers	Fathers	States Represented	Subsidy Recipients
30	10	CA, CO, FL, GA, HI, IL, LA, MO, MT, NC, NJ, NY, TX, VA, VT, WA, WI	10

PARENT INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

01. Demographic information (age, race, subsidy requirement)
02. What is/are the age/s of your children that you seek child care for?
03. Do you prefer to search for child care on public or private sites, or both?
04. What are the pros and cons of each type of site (public and private)?
05. How did you find child care for your child/ren (most recent instance)?
06. What features would you like to see on a child care search site?
07. What search filters would you find most helpful on a child care finder?
08. What details do you want to see on a provider profile?
09. Do you know another parent with children between the ages of 0-5 years who would be interested in providing input for this study?





Established in 2001, **The Hunt Institute** honors the legacy of the late James B. Hunt, Jr., the former governor of North Carolina who distinguished himself as an ardent champion of education.

The Hunt Institute brings together people and resources to inspire and inform elected officials and policymakers about key issues in education, resulting in visionary leaders who are prepared to take strategic action for greater educational outcomes and student success.

In 2016, The Hunt Institute became an independent, nonprofit entity and joined forces with Duke University's Sanford School of Public Policy to pursue research, educational partnerships, and events related to improving education policy.

Learn more at www.hunt-institute.org.



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