

A logo celebrating 25 years, featuring the number '25' in a stylized blue and red font with 'YEARS' written in smaller blue letters below it.

25
YEARS

The logo for The Hunt Institute, consisting of a blue and red geometric square icon followed by the text 'THE hunt institute' in a sans-serif font.

THE hunt
institute

A faded background image showing three young children sitting at a table, engaged in play. One child is stacking wooden blocks, while others are interacting with them.

NATIONAL CHILD CARE FINDER SCALE

Executive Summary

FEBRUARY 2026

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 child care finder 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 such platforms to extract strengths, challenges, and best practices, 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 could:

- 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 develop solutions for strengthening 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.

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](#) 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](#) reports that simulated searches yielded state child care finders only 17 percent of the time. The study recommends that states improve access filters, explore search engine optimization, and streamline integration with other child-care related sites.



The National Child Care Finder Scale

A [grounded theory](#) approach supported the development of a comprehensive framework for the National Child Care Finder Scale. Based on the 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 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.

The Analytic Framework: The scale includes four categories. Each category is composed of five indicators with a total score of 5 points. The scale is scored on 20 points.

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

- The framework was developed through an [inductive analysis](#) of state child care finder sites.
- Interviews with a [purposeful sample](#) of 40 parents of children aged five and under supported refinement of the framework.
- The web addresses of all 51 state child care finders were validated through a survey sent to the heads of state child care agencies.
- State profiles were developed by applying the framework to state child care finder platforms.
- The Search Filters and Provider Profiles categories included a credit of .5 per category to acknowledge states that had preferred features, despite lacking essential features.
- 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 51 state profiles including category scores as well as total scores are featured on the National Child Care Finder Scale website.



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).

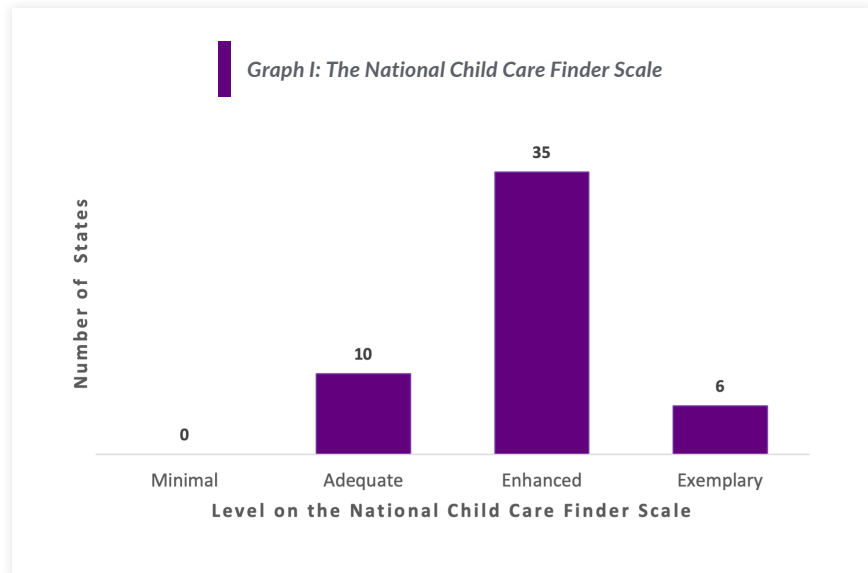


Table I displays the distribution of scores across the 50 states and the District of Columbia.

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
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

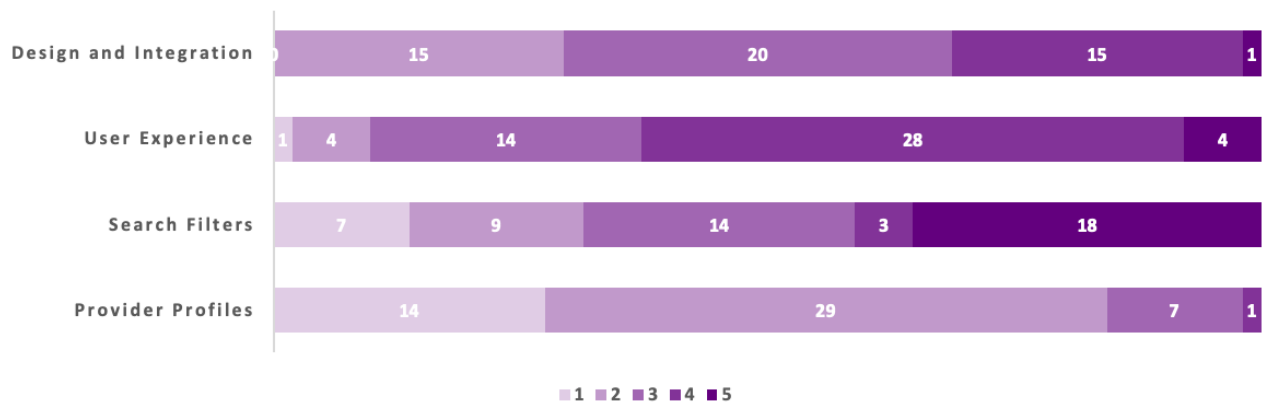


State	Aggregate Score	Level
South Dakota	10.5	Adequate
Maine	10	Adequate
Massachusetts	10	Adequate
Montana	10	Adequate
Idaho	9	Adequate
Missouri	9	Adequate
Alabama	8.5	Adequate
New York	8.5	Adequate
West Virginia	8.5	Adequate



Category scores (on a maximum of 5 points) were disaggregated to identify strengths and gaps in the distribution. Graph II shows that the majority of states were at a 3 or higher on most categories. Thirty five 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 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.

Graph II: State Scores by Category



POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

The report 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

Interviews with 40 parents from 17 states revealed that 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.
- **Search engine optimization and AI integration:** States could invest in Search Engine Optimization (SEO) to ensure their finder appears as the top result on Google and other search engines and 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.

2. ENSURE THAT OPTIONS FOR FILTERS IN CHILD CARE FINDER FILTERS ARE ALIGNED WITH PARENTS’ NEEDS

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 a highly valued feature that helps parents identify providers with openings.
- **Schedule flexibility:** Filters for non-traditional hours (evenings, weekends, overnight) are essential for parents seeking care outside of the regular work day.
- **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

To convert searches into actual care placements, state agencies could 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 help streamline the intake process.
- **Current operational data:** Fields for current tuition rates and live enrollment status (or waitlist length) are essential for helping parents build a viable shortlist.
- **Evidence of quality:** Beyond simple star ratings, templates that help providers upload inspection histories, compliance reports, and verifiable quality designations (such as state-verified awards) help parents 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.





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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