

# READY REGION SOUTHSIDE FAST TRACK REGIONAL PILOT FORMATIVE EVALUATION REPORT

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## Executive Summary

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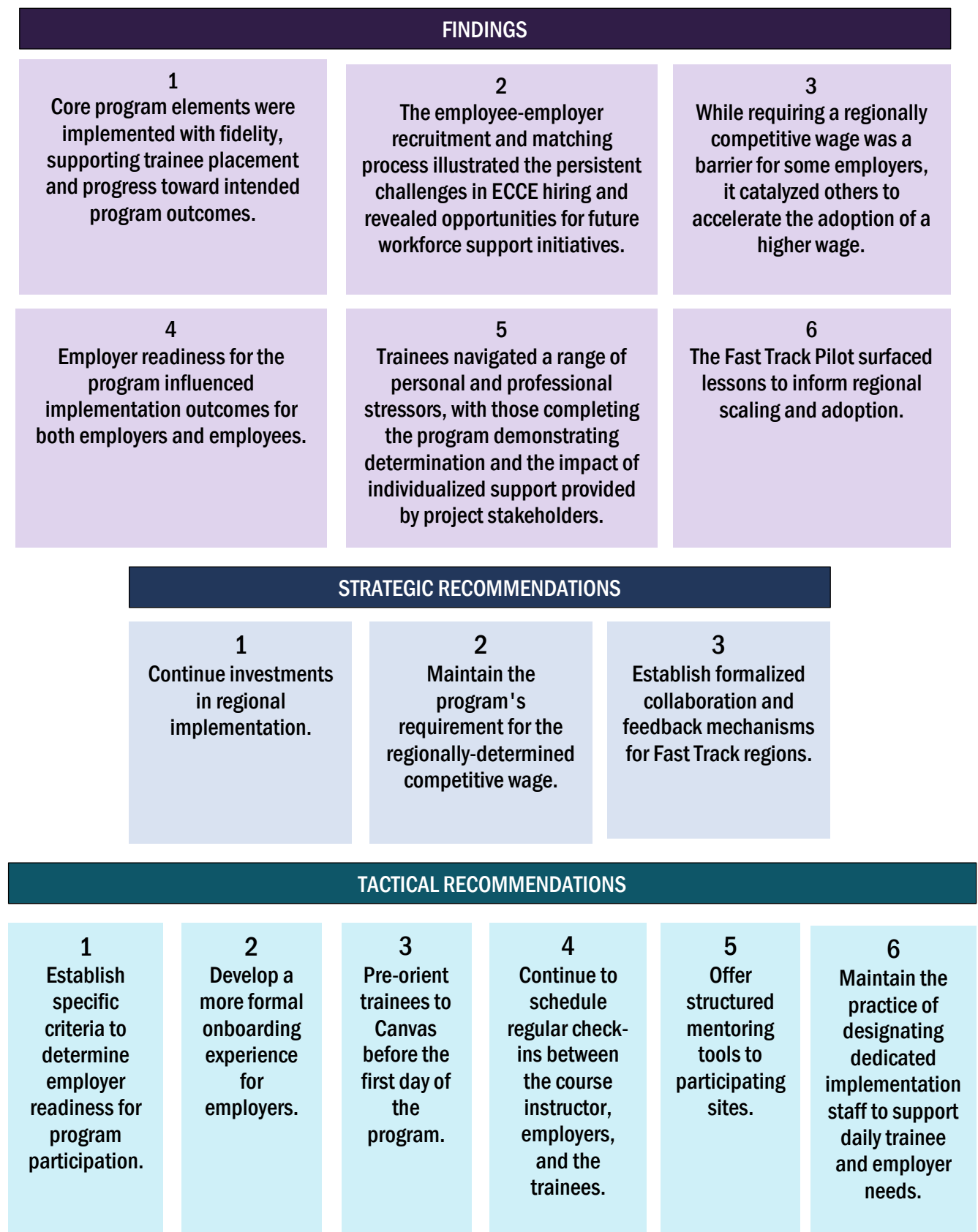
The Ready Region Southside (RRSS) Fast Track Regional Pilot was commissioned by the Virginia Early Childhood Foundation (VECF) in January 2025 to assess the feasibility of a regional implementation of the Early Educator Fast Track initiative (Fast Track). Fast Track was initially designed and implemented by VECF as a response to the pervasive staffing shortages experienced by child care programs across the Commonwealth of Virginia. The program provides a rapid-entry pipeline for new talent in the early childhood care and education (ECCE) workforce. This opportunity offered trainees a competitive wage as they completed a four-week college-level course introducing them to foundational early childhood development concepts and skills, and providing onsite practicum opportunities with ECCE employers to apply their learning.

Motivated by Fast Track's demonstrated potential, VECF engaged the Center for Early Success (CES), the designated RRSS lead organization, to pilot the model regionally and determine its feasibility for broader scaling. During the project implementation period, from January through June 2025, the Fast Track Regional Pilot resulted in the successful recruitment, training, and placement of twelve new assistant teachers with participating ECCE employers. Interested in capturing lessons learned from implementation challenges and successes, VECF engaged Luminary Evaluation to conduct a formative evaluation of the pilot, informing future iterations and guiding decisions about scaling to other regional entities.

**Throughout the implementation period, CES demonstrated high levels of coordination, collaboration, and commitment to the program's mission as they navigated challenges and supported trainees and employers, ultimately yielding a successful pilot project. At the time of data collection, all trainees reported continued employment, high levels of program satisfaction, and identified plans to stay in the ECCE field.**

The formative evaluation resulted in the following six findings and nine recommendations to inform future regionally or locally led Fast Track programming. The recommendations are divided into strategic and tactical aspects to inform system-level decision-making and drive specific programmatic improvements.

**Figure 1. Evaluation Findings and Recommendations**



## Introduction

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Nationally, child care programs struggle to attract and retain quality ECCE educators. Factors such as chronically low wages, limited employment benefits, and stressful work environments contribute to the ongoing challenge. Like many states, Virginia is facing a persistent ECCE staffing challenge, characterized by difficulties in attracting, hiring, and retaining high-quality educators who are committed to remaining in the field long-term. A statewide workforce survey conducted by the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE, 2024) found that 38% of assistant teachers and 33% of lead teachers in publicly funded ECCE programs had left their jobs in the prior year. Turnover was even more pronounced in private child care centers, particularly those serving families who rely on subsidies. Classroom closures were prevalent, and 63% of providers reported having to turn away families because they lacked the staff to accommodate them (VDOE, 2024). Providers reported losing staff to better-paying jobs that offered less stress.

Recognizing this acute ECCE workforce need, VECF partnered with the VDOE to identify a targeted solution. The Early Educator Fast Track Initiative (Fast Track) was developed to help attract new talent to the ECCE field and mitigate potential barriers to success. Specifically, the goal of the Fast Track initiative was to "add new professionals to the workforce, increasing staffing levels at child care programs across the state, and ultimately protecting child care supply so that families have access to quality, affordable care" (Virginia Early Childhood Foundation, 2023). The core components of the program include:

1. Centralized candidate recruitment and screening.
2. A four-week streamlined version of a college-level course introducing students to early childhood education. This course consists of 16 hours per week of asynchronous online learning via Canvas, an online learning platform.
3. 24 hours per week of on-the-job training where trainees apply their new skills in the classroom.
4. On-site mentoring at their ECCE place of employment.
5. A training stipend of 40 hours per week for four weeks at a regionally-determined competitive wage. (The employer is reimbursed for payments made to the trainee during the Fast Track period.)
6. Retention bonuses of \$500 at six months of continued employment and \$1,000 at one year of employment.

The implementation of Fast Track, coordinated and operated by VECF staff, initially occurred in several Ready Regions from October 2022 to May 2024. Given the fast-paced and innovative nature of the program, the staff gained valuable insights into what worked well and identified areas for improvement. VECF also realized that Fast Track was perhaps best suited for regional implementation by a local agency. In January 2025, VECF contracted with the Ready Region Southside lead agency, the Center for Early Success (CES), to implement a Fast Track Regional Pilot.

The pilot would operate for six months, and rather than serving as the central hub for recruitment and program coordination, VECF would assume a technical assistance role, while CES would become the Fast Track hub, managing all aspects of the program. Figure 2 summarizes CES's scope of work for the Fast Track Pilot Program.

**Figure 2. Ready Region Southside Fast Track Pilot Project Scope of Work**

- ✓ Provide program oversight
- ✓ Identify and recruit employers
- ✓ Convene informational meetings
- ✓ Confirm employer good standing
- ✓ Establish agreements with employers
- ✓ Conduct an orientation with employers
- ✓ Identify a project point of contact
- ✓ Provide employers with technical assistance
- ✓ Host virtual office hours
- ✓ Confirm a regionally competitive wage for trainees
- ✓ Ensure a mentor is assigned to trainees for six months
- ✓ Recruit trainees and verify eligibility
- ✓ Conduct regional advertising
- ✓ Establish a centralized screening system
- ✓ Facilitate hiring decisions and job offers within the timeframe
- ✓ Facilitate technical support for onboarding
- ✓ Engage Fast Track course instructor from the community college
- ✓ Facilitate employers providing time for coursework
- ✓ Identify community resources for wrap-around services
- ✓ Promote ECCE college scholarship information
- ✓ Participate in data collection and evaluation activities

## Methods and Data Sources

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The evaluation began in January 2025 and concluded in July 2025. The purpose of the formative evaluation was to assess the implementation of the Fast Track Regional Pilot in Ready Region Southside, identifying lessons learned that can inform future iterations of the program. The project team met with the evaluator in January to collaboratively envision project elements and create a logic model (Appendix A), which describes the project activities and their short-, medium-, and long-term outcomes. The following evaluation questions were also co-developed during these initial meetings to guide the evaluation.

- What program elements and processes were established during the pilot implementation? How was this achieved?
- What implementation successes and challenges emerged? How were challenges addressed?
- Is there evidence suggesting that the pilot is progressing toward the intended outcomes of the Fast Track initiative? How could this progress be improved?
- What lessons can be shared with the field to inform further replication and scaling of the regional pilot?
- Are there supplemental supports that would increase the potential for the Ready Region's success with implementation and sustainable results?

To answer these questions, Luminary developed a mixed-methods formative approach integrating qualitative and quantitative data to understand stakeholder experiences and identify opportunities for future improvement and scaling. Data sources and collection activities included:

- **Document and Artifact Review:** Approximately forty program and organization documents were reviewed throughout the evaluation. These documents included: examples of program participation agreements, previous Fast Track reports, organizational charts describing project roles and responsibilities, a Fast Track toolkit, examples of tracking sheets used by employer to record trainee time, Center for Early Success Newsletter advertising Fast Track, emails regarding advisement meetings, employer information sheets, social media posts, instructor tracking sheet, training tracking sheet, screening questions and procedures, internal CES team meeting agendas, and the regional pilot scope of work for CES.
- **Stakeholder Interviews:** Two rounds of semi-structured interviews were conducted with project stakeholders. Initial interviews were conducted with five CES staff members at the end of January and beginning of February 2025. The purpose of these interviews was to gain an understanding of staff members' perspectives on the launch of the pilot. A report was developed from the emergent themes and shared with the project team in March 2025 to inform the remaining pilot. A second round of interviews was conducted in June 2025, following the completion of the

project. The purposive sample selected in collaboration with VECF and the CES project team included thirteen stakeholders with diverse relationships to the project.

- **Post-participation Trainee Survey:** A brief online survey was offered to the twelve Fast Track trainees who completed the program during their final synchronous session. The survey was completed by nine of the trainees. The survey included both closed and open-ended questions.
- **Advisement Meetings:** Luminary participated in regular, one-hour advisement meetings for the regional pilot project team, facilitated by VECF. The purpose of these meetings was to track progress, discuss challenges, and reflect on program decisions and outcomes. Each meeting was recorded, and the recording was shared with the attendees. The team met more frequently during the early months of the project and approximately once a month as the project neared completion. Meetings were designed to be responsive to the project team's needs and were scheduled on an as-needed basis. In total, six formal advisement meetings were held between January and June 2025.

## Data Analysis

The evaluator used Braun & Clarke's (2019) reflexive thematic analysis approach to analyze all qualitative data (interview transcripts, advisement meeting transcripts, and open-ended survey responses). The six-stages of the process were 1) data familiarization, 2) axial coding to generate initial codes, 3) categorization to consolidate codes, 4) the identification of initial themes, 5) the refinement of those themes, and 6) incorporation of the themes into the evaluation report. Quantitative survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify the frequency of response. Given the small sample size, survey data were reported as response counts rather than percentages.

## Limitations

As with any small data set, there are limitations to the data. Although the small sample size limits the generalizability of the findings, the responses presented in this report provide valuable insights into individual participant experiences and highlight areas for potential improvement. Results should be interpreted as formative and illustrative rather than statistically representative. While the scope of this evaluation was limited to the immediate implementation period of the regional pilot project, future programming could benefit from evaluations designed to track long-term outcomes beyond the program completion cycles formally.



## Findings

### Finding 1. Core program elements were implemented with fidelity, supporting trainee placement and progress toward intended program outcomes.

VECF commissioned the Fast Track Regional Pilot in Ready Region Southside to "test the potential for Ready Regions to administer the Fast Track initiative effectively." While it was anticipated that model adjustments would likely be needed to adapt the Fast Track implementation to a regional context, core features of the model were preserved. Table 1 presents the elements of the Fast Track model, indicating whether they were observed during the regional pilot, and notes regarding model adaptations pursued.

**Table 1. Fast Track Regional Pilot Model Elements**

Model Element	Observed During Implementation	Evidence
ECCE Employer recruitment	✓	CES reached out to their existing network of providers via telephone and personally discussed the Fast Track program and its potential benefits. They held informational office hours and addressed concerns, particularly with the wage requirement.
Centralized Trainee Recruitment	✓	CES conducted coordinated advertisement using job boards such as Indeed.com, their website, social media, and personalized communication. The team screened applicants via telephone then sent viable candidates to employers for interview and next steps.
Paid Educator Training	✓	CES contracted with Traci Daniel, Assistant Professor and Director of Early Childhood Education at Danville Community College to deliver two cohorts of the four-week 16 hour per week asynchronous Fast Track course with weekly virtual synchronous class meetings. Trainees were paid \$15 per hour for up to 24 hours per week as assistant teachers in participating child care programs.
On-site Mentoring	✓	Employers were required to provide on-site mentoring. (While this was implemented, quality and consistency varied).
Competitive Compensation	✓	Participating employers were required to guarantee the regionally competitive wage of \$15 per hour. Data indicates that all trainees were paid this wage.
Teacher Kit and Laptops	✓	Each trainee received a kit with books and training materials. Laptops were loaned to ECCE sites for trainee use during training.
Ongoing Employer and Trainee Technical Assistance	✓	CES provided ongoing technical assistance throughout implementation via virtual office hours and 1:1 support and guidance. A dedicated CES staff member and core team communicated with Fast Track participants regularly to address any challenges that arose.
Connection to Wrap Around Services to Support Trainee Persistence	Formal connections not observed, however personalized support for trainees by CES observed throughout implementation	The Fast Track Regional Pilot scope of work stipulated identifying community-based wrap around services to support trainee retention (e.g. transportation, child care). Evidence of these services were not observed during data collection. However, it should be noted that trainee survey respondents did not identify additional wrap around services they would have found individually helpful. Given the small size of the pilot, developing formal partnerships to offer additional wrap around services may not have been warranted based on demonstrated participant need.

VECF originally developed and implemented Fast Track in various geographies across Virginia, accumulating programmatic experience and lessons learned. VECF leveraged this experience and provided the CES team with ongoing technical assistance from the inception of the pilot program through to its completion. Technical assistance activities included team advisory meetings, which were held every other week to monthly as needed. These meetings involved sharing previously developed templates, providing guidance on model adaptation requests, offering resources and materials, and, as needed, offering thought partnership and problem-solving support. VECF also provided real-time technical assistance to the CES team beyond advisement meetings to answer questions and collaborate on solutions to implementation challenges as they arose.

CES began implementation of the pilot with the understanding that Fast Track is designed for rapid employment and benefits from flexibility, problem-solving, and teamwork from the implementing agency. During the interviews, stakeholders recalled lessons learned from the original Fast Track implementation program. One person reflected,

*"So the first one [original Fast Track implementation] was just constant learning. Everyday we were like, 'Oh, we need to do this, or oh, we should have done this differently.' It was like a constant bombardment of learning and adjusting in real time."*

Given the experience of the first Fast Track, CES recognized that the speed of implementation would be challenging and require real-time problem-solving and expertise in various areas, including human resources, project management, operations, and programmatic support. This warranted a team approach with defined roles and responsibilities drawing from multiple areas of the organization. Stakeholders described an "all hands on deck" organization-wide, strength-based approach to support the success of the Fast Track program. Appendix D illustrates the division of roles and responsibilities distributed by the CES team across the project. Project management software, Monday.com, was utilized to support communication and progress of task and milestone completion. During the implementation, the Fast Track Pilot team held regular meetings to facilitate ongoing communication and collaborative problem-solving. As the project transitioned out of the recruitment phase, these meetings became less frequent, and the team was gradually reduced, until a smaller, core team continued the day-to-day management of the project. This flexible team structure and approach enabled the team to recognize the need to pivot and execute adjustments as necessary during program implementation. Examples of this that will be explored throughout the report include adopting a two-cohort approach to accommodate timing and recruitment needs, as well as ensuring sufficient team capacity to manage the large, unexpected volume of applications.

Stakeholders throughout the data collection attribute the success of the Fast Track Pilot to the CES's effective team approach. By leveraging cross-functional expertise and fostering open communication, the CES team successfully navigated challenges.

This collaboration supported progress toward intended short-term outcomes described in the Fast Track Regional Pilot logic model:

- Fast Track trainees increase their ECCE knowledge and skill level.
- ECCE educator vacancies decrease.
- Positive and professional employer-employee relationships are established.
- ECCE positions become more attractive because of improved compensation.

Evidence collected from administrative records, stakeholder interviews, and trainee survey responses suggests that the pilot made progress toward these outcomes during implementation. When asked to describe the greatest success of the program, the majority of interviewees identified placing twelve new educators in the field as the primary achievement. The following quote exemplifies how stakeholders typically emphasize the placement of educators in the field.

*"The biggest success for me is getting 12 new teachers that got through this training...it's just really interesting to see the sense of pride they had, especially those that really were struggling and really working hard...We have 12 teachers that got good training, were introduced to some education, and hopefully at least are thinking about continuing their education. So for me, that was the biggest success."*

A sense of confidence and pride in completion was also observed among the stakeholders participating in the data collection. One interviewee reflected on her observation of participant growth throughout the program. She described "aha moments" where individuals experience the joy of working with a child and making an impact on that child's development. "They're having these basic aha! moments. Little things like, 'Oh, I can get onto this child's level and talk to them,' or realizing that infants really can do activities. So, it's been really neat to see someone who has not been in the field and has had very little experience with children professionally learn some of these concepts and ideas."

Progress in trainee confidence and skill development was also observed in their survey responses, which described how the Fast Track experience helped prepare them for their work and enhanced their perceived motivation and interest in further educational opportunities. All nine survey respondents agreed with the statement, "The four-week course helped me prepare for work in early childhood education." They demonstrated motivation to continue in the ECCE field and intention to enroll in additional early childhood coursework. One trainee reported that she had already enrolled in a program as a junior to pursue her Bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education. The other seven survey respondents report that they have not yet enrolled in or applied for additional education, but plan to do so. Two respondents indicated that they would like to enroll in classes generally, and other respondents left more specific comments about their plans:

*"I am currently pursuing professional development in both real estate and early childhood education to expand my career opportunities and deepen my knowledge in both fields."*

*"I would love to become a teacher or go into special education."*

*"I want to at least get my associates before I decide what my plan is next for my future with my career."*

All trainees responding to the survey also noted that they feel either very or somewhat motivated to continue working in the ECCE field. Seven out of eight respondents report that they would like to stay at their current program long-term, with one indicating that she is unsure. Five of these respondents attribute their desire to stay with the program to their love of working with children, while another two report that they feel valued and supported in the current work environment. One respondent writes, "I want to stay at my current program because I feel supported, valued, and connected to both the children and the team, which makes the work environment positive and meaningful." Another remarks that her reason for remaining in her position is because of "the support I have coming from all sides."

Further evidence that the program is progressing toward its intended outcomes related to supporting educator development is the positive satisfaction ratings shared by the trainees. On average, survey respondents rated their overall satisfaction with the Fast Track program as 9 out of 10. All survey respondents (8 out of 8) reported that they would recommend Fast Track to someone interested in working in early childhood education.

In addition to outcomes focused on educator development, the Fast Track Pilot also aims to improve program work environments, as evidenced by lower employee turnover rates and fully staffed classrooms. Some interviewees shared examples of progress toward these outcomes. One participating provider noted that Fast Track provided an immediate improvement to general educator wellbeing in her classrooms:

*"It did help my classrooms with the teachers, who are usually by themselves, to have an assistant for once. And I found that actually raising the ratio just a little...I think it improved the quality. And this way, even my regular teachers had someone to talk to, someone to interact with other than just the children."*

This quote demonstrates the potential impact that incorporating a Fast Track trainee into the staffing structure can have on classroom quality. It is also an example of an ideal scenario where a Fast Track trainee is not placed in a classroom all by herself right from the beginning of her employment. Instead, she was placed in a classroom with other experienced teachers with whom she could work alongside as she learns. As will be

discussed later in this report, classroom placement that did not prioritize supporting inexperienced teachers was a program challenge that threatened both trainee persistence and the potential benefits that employers could derive from Fast Track participation.

Another participating provider also shared the immediate benefit of keeping one of her classrooms open because of her program's Fast Track participation.

*"We actually were able to keep one of our classrooms open that we thought we were going to have to close over the summer because of staffing. We just didn't have the staff to be able to staff that center. So bringing some more staff on was actually helpful for us."*

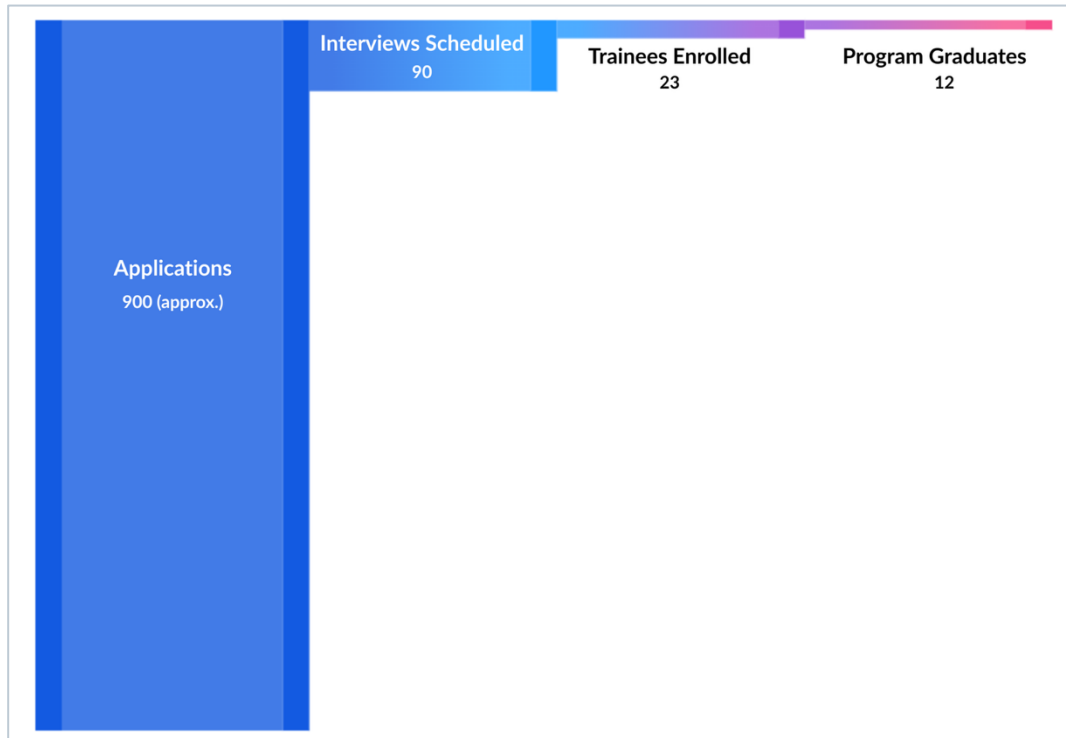
For this provider, the Fast Track program contributed to the continuity of care, preventing service disruptions for families. In the ECCE field, staffing shortages can lead to classroom closures and reduced enrollment capacity. Being able to keep a classroom open is an operational gain. While this is the experience of only one provider in a small pilot program, it suggests that workforce stabilization efforts can have a real-time impact and yield immediate returns for individuals participating.

## **Finding 2. The employee-employer recruitment and matching process illustrated the persistent challenges in ECCE hiring and revealed opportunities for future workforce support initiatives.**

Trainee and provider recruitment for two cohorts of the Fast Track Pilot occurred in February and March 2025. The CES team strategically leveraged its existing provider relationships to increase engagement. A multi-pronged outreach strategy included digital advertising on social media, word-of-mouth marketing, and candidate postings on Indeed.com. The CES team encountered the predicted challenges of recruiting employers, which were attributed to several challenges outlined later in this section. However, they also reported receiving approximately 900 applications, a "shocking number of applicants" for Fast Track trainee positions. This volume was much higher than the previous number of applications received during the original implementation. When stakeholders were asked why the process resulted in so many applications, many were unsure of the reason. Some posited that it was a better time of year for recruitment. (The previous Fast Track effort in Ready Region Southside included a November-December recruitment period.) Others attributed the uptick to the automated "Apply Now" function available to job seekers on Indeed.com. This allowed applicants to apply in seconds with a click of the button. Some interviewers thought that the algorithm had prioritized the job posting for applicants due to its regional availability and \$15-per-hour wage. Applicants then used the "Apply Now" function without much thought to the content of the job description.

The Fast Track Pilot recruitment phase also highlighted the stark difference between the number of applications received and screened (approximately 900) and the number of trainees that ultimately completed the program (12). Figure 3 illustrates the number of Fast Track candidates engaged with from initial application through project completion. Of the estimated 900 applications received, 90 interviews were scheduled with ECCE employers, 23 trainees enrolled in the program, and 12 trainees completed the coursework and graduated.

**Figure 3. Fast Track Candidates' Engagement from Application Through Completion**



CES reports that the screening process began with an initial review of the application to assess basic eligibility criteria, such as geography, education requirements, English proficiency, and ability to work in the U.S. Then a CES staff member would call each applicant to ask a series of screening questions to ensure they understood the program and level of commitment, gauge their interest in ECCE, and determine if they were a viable candidate to engage in an interview with participating ECCE employers. Interview screening questions included:

- Are you willing to commit to the one-year work commitment?
- Tell me about yourself. (This response can lead to additional questions. Feel free to explore their responses.)
- Share your experiences related to caring for children aged birth to five.
- What do you want to achieve in this role?
- When could you start working if you were selected for this role
- What questions do you have?

Stakeholders report that candidates often fail to remember which job they are applying for and have a limited understanding of the Fast Track program. Stakeholders frequently attributed this to the automated application process.

Once candidates were screened and selected for interviews with employers, the team faced another common hiring challenge: interview ghosting. Interview ghosting occurs when a job candidate indicates that they would like to move forward with the job process, schedules an interview, but fails to attend and provides no notice. Most candidates who 'ghosted' an interview do not respond to follow-ups and attempts at communication. This phenomenon has been observed nationally across every sector, including ECCE. It has been attributed to several factors, including overwhelmed hiring systems with heavy volumes of AI-driven applications, candidates' desire to avoid uncomfortable interactions, a reaction to low compensation or job fit, and a shift in power dynamics favoring job seekers in tight labor markets (Teichert, 2025).

The CES team felt this phenomenon acutely when they attempted to schedule panel interviews with multiple employers and candidates. The idea behind this interview format was that when multiple employers meet several candidates, the matching process would be more efficient. Perhaps Candidate A didn't connect well with Employer A, but aligned well with the specific organizational needs of Employer A. Having all parties attend one interview would save time for both employers and candidates, as they would not have to participate in multiple interview sessions.

CES opted to pivot from the panel interview format after they scheduled twelve interviews with two employers present. However, a number of the candidates did not attend the interviews, which created holes in the schedule and was a frustrating experience for both CES and the participating employers. After that, the team opted to send candidates directly to providers for individual interviews.

In addition to an awareness of the recruitment effort needed to fill the Fast Track positions, the volume of applications also underscored the importance of a rigorous screening and vetting process. Taking the weight of recruitment and screening off providers' shoulders was observed to be a primary benefit of the Fast Track program for providers. The CES team experienced first-hand the challenges that providers regularly face when hiring staff.

The team also navigated several recruitment challenges specific to Fast Track implementation. They included recruiting cohorts of participants, the geographic spread of employers and employees in the rural region, employer frustration with the quality of candidates, and employer inflexibility with candidate experience levels.

The CES team reported difficulty with recruiting a cohort of fifteen employees and matching them with employers so that they had start times that aligned. Employees interested in Fast Track were eager to begin their paid training experience immediately because they could not wait for employment. The team reports that some candidates



backed out of Fast Track because they were able to secure employment with a more immediate start date that better aligned with their needs.

Upon completing the screening, applicants were sent to the employers for further interviews and hiring decisions. At this point, the timeline became increasingly dependent on employer action. Some employers moved quickly, while others took more time to interview and select candidates. Stakeholders described this stage of the hiring process as "trickling," where they would have some trainees ready to begin, but waiting for the cohort to be filled. Additional delays occurred due to employers who had committed to the program dropping out for various reasons. Stakeholders described the challenge, pointing to having to refill positions in the cohorts when employer and employee commitments shifted:

*"A big challenge was just the time it took to come in every day and think, okay, we've got this cohort. We're ready to go. And you get an email. And you realize an employer pulled out, or an employee has pulled out for some reason. We usually have to try to start the process all over again, trying to get the cohorts together and get them to finish."*

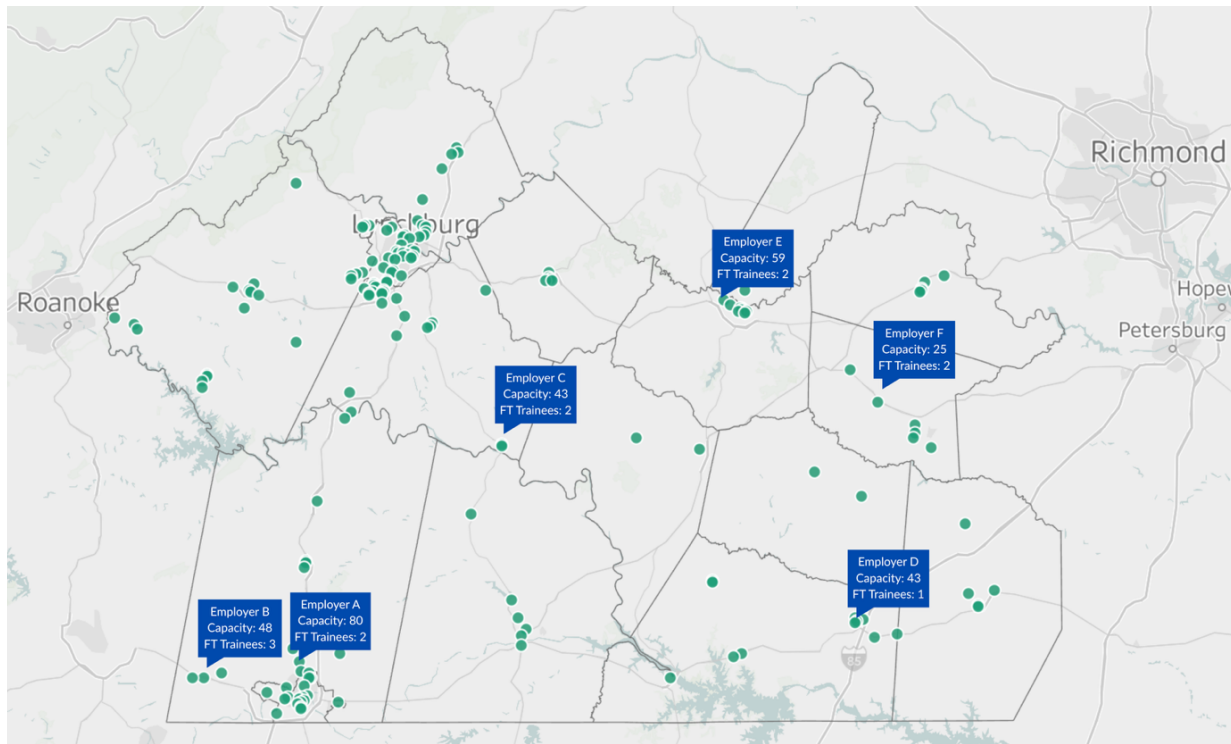
The CES team addressed the timeline challenge by splitting the program delivery into two cohorts, with VECF permission. The first four-week cohort was conducted from mid-April to mid-May 2025, while the second cohort was conducted from mid-May to mid-June 2025. The Fast Track instructor was engaged to offer the course twice. A stakeholder reflected on the rationale for adopting the two-cohort model.

*"We had a lot of sites that we would send people to...We would say, 'Okay, we've got our cohort; we've got everybody.' The next thing you know, they quit, or they [the employers] decide to let them go. So then, we're scrambling to get more people in. That's why we ended up having to do two cohorts instead of one."*

Recruitment challenges described as specific to a rural geography also compounded recruitment challenges. Ready Region Southside encompasses a broad and primarily rural geographic area in Southern Virginia, comprising three cities (Danville, Halifax, and Lynchburg) and thirteen counties. There are 170 ECCE center-based child care sites in Ready Region Southside. Figure 4 illustrates the location of the employers that participated in the Fast Track program, their capacity, and the number of Fast Track trainees who completed the program. While all employers are located in the Ready Region Southside area, the participating sites are relatively spread out and vary in distance from one another.



**Figure 4. Fast Track Employer Locations**



Source: Ready Region ECCE Supply/Demand Dashboard

This means that the centralized recruitment effort must consider matching employers and employees geographically, taking into account commuting distance and transportation needs. Stakeholders reported matching employers and employees geographically, only to have to return to the candidate pool and, in some cases, readvertise for a position if a participating program opts out because the screened candidates were no longer near a participating employer.

*"If it's a big area, just remember that if a site pulls out from one area, you cannot look at these resumes anymore when you get a site from a totally different area on the opposite side. Now you have to advertise in another whole area. It was a lot."*

Stakeholders reported that, at the outset of recruitment, they attempted to keep the recruitment pool geographically contained but found themselves expanding it further. They felt this need to expand was driven by the challenges of finding employers willing to participate. One interviewee reflected on this experience:

*"It was hard to keep it local in Danville and Pennsylvania County, because none of the sites in this area pay that much, and the ones that do didn't really want to participate. So that's why we kind of had to make sure it got expanded out further than what it was to even be able to get the 15 people."*

Stakeholders wondered if these challenges were specific to rural locations. They argued that if they were recruiting for urban sites in a more concentrated geography, the candidate pool would have been matchable with more sites. Additionally, candidates may have an easier time accessing public transportation to their workplace. While a Fast Track implementation in a rural location is viable, implementing agencies should be aware of the additional barriers that can delay the recruitment process.

Another recruitment challenge that emerged during the implementation was employer frustration with the quality of candidates. This frustration is not unique to Fast Track. One stakeholder noted that across the country, child care providers consistently report a struggle to attract and retain quality educators. As a result, they are forced to compromise on quality, hiring individuals they would not consider in a strong labor market.

*"Nationally, the workforce is struggling to get really good people in the workforce...And this is one of those fields where you can't fake the work."*

Another confirmed this sentiment,

*"Anecdotally, and we see in survey data that there are lots of programs that are in this position of having to compromise on the quality or the experience of applicants they can select because they just need to meet ratio requirements."*

This struggle was also observed among the interviewed employers, who voiced their frustrations. One provider shared,

*"We have a big problem with the labor pool in this area. A lot of people are unable to pass the background investigation or the child registry. Or they're just not interested in doing this type of work for the money."*

Several interviewees highlighted Fast Track's potential to engage higher-quality candidates.

*"The nice thing about Fast Track is that it kind of allows sites to be matched with folks that have been pre-vetted. They are immediately connected with the tools and resources they need to be successful."*

Others described the difficulty that emerged from casting too wide a net that did not always yield the highest quality and most interested candidates. While all participating employers saw value in the recruitment and screening capacity Fast Track offered, some wanted to have greater assurance that the criteria and standards being used to screen candidates aligned with their specific needs. One employer stated:

*I like the fact that they prescreened. But I don't think they were actually looking for the elements that we need, for example, availability and flexibility. How often do they call out? Do they have children? I think that could have been done just a little better."*

Other employers struggled to accept educators with no prior ECCE experience, and some cited this as a barrier for employer engagement and program participation. For example, one program pursuing Fast Track participation eventually had to opt out because its organization's board did not want inexperienced individuals working with their program's children. Another stakeholder reported that she observed providers in the market for lead teachers rather than assistants with no experience.

Three out of six participating employers opted to enroll their own newly hired employee into the Fast Track program, rather than hire the candidates sent to them from the Fast Track pool. Some decided to do this because they were unhappy with the quality of candidates they were receiving. In contrast, others saw it as an efficiency and a way to connect their newly hired staff with a high-quality training experience. While Fast Track is intentionally designed to alleviate the burden of recruitment for providers, this permutation of enrollment highlights another potential value of the program: as a means for employers to outsource a high-quality training experience for their new and less experienced assistant teachers. One interviewee, who manages a larger center, described CES as a valuable partner that offers quality training as part of an orientation for new hires. She viewed Fast Track as an extension of this work and saw an opportunity for Fast Track to serve as an ideal development experience for new hires in larger centers. She noted that it would be beneficial for a group of newly hired trainees at a larger center to enter Fast Track as one cohort, allowing them to collaborate and support one another throughout the experience.

The experiences with Fast Track employer and employee recruitment described in this section highlighted opportunities to enhance the Fast Track Pilot's recruitment model. Future recruitment efforts may benefit from geographically focusing the program's recruitment pool to streamline the matching process. While Fast Track is designed to attract individuals new to ECCE, the model could also be adapted to include candidates who have expressed an interest or undergone educational programming but lack formal work experience. Interviewees describe these candidates as individuals pursuing community college coursework or other technical programs. This may alleviate employer concerns about a lack of formal experience, while still providing a solid pathway into the field for those who have yet to work formally in a classroom setting. Additionally, Fast Track could serve as a re-entry point for individuals who may have left the field, are interested in returning, but have not found the right opportunity or incentive to do so.

While challenging, the recruitment phase provided the CES team with valuable insights into the ECCE hiring experience and the daily operations of child care providers, which will directly inform future workforce support initiatives. One project stakeholder shared:

*"This experience will help them understand. They probably already understood. It's not that they didn't, but there's a different, deeper connection with the employers' day-to-day operations and understanding of the workforce that they are bringing. They are having interactions with these individuals who are coming into Fast Track and realizing, this is what the employers are doing on a daily basis."*

This sentiment highlights that one of the less anticipated benefits of the Fast Track Pilot program was the opportunity for CES as an organization to provide workforce support and technical assistance, walking alongside providers as they hire staff and navigate the challenges directly.

Guided by this deeper connection and understanding, stakeholders discussed the potential for a centralized hiring mechanism for local child care providers—a sort of shared service to relieve the recruitment and screening pressure on employers. They ideated on building an applicant pool where interested employees could be systematically matched with employers.

*"Maybe adopting the idea of helping employers set up interviewing at one particular time in one particular location, which cuts back on them having to call candidates and having that back and forth. It would take that heavy weight off of them... 'Hey, here's a candidate pool. You're welcome to come.' It would be easier if it were more localized, more focused on one particular locality [at a time] rather than spreading across the region."*

This idea also underscores the desire to keep the recruitment effort localized in response to the unique challenges experienced in recruiting in a rural region.

### **Finding 3. While requiring a regionally competitive wage was a barrier for some employers, it catalyzed others to accelerate the adoption of a higher wage.**

The Fast Track Pilot's regionally competitive hourly wage requirement (\$15 per hour for Ready Region Southside) was viewed by many stakeholders as an implementation challenge, but also as a powerful message demanding action and sector-wide change. Holding the wage requirement steady was described as a strategy to elevate the conversation about compensation and offer a pathway for providers to progress toward a more competitive wage. All nine trainees responding to the survey reported that they currently receive a wage of \$15 per hour.

Some employers noted that they were comfortable paying the \$15 hourly wage for assistant teachers from the outset, since they were already moving toward adopting that change. Fast Track just pushed them to do it sooner. One interviewee reflected on this change.

*"That was a hard pill to swallow at first. However, we were already in the process of trying to raise our minimum wage workers up to something like that [\$15 hourly wage]...I mean, we went with it with the knowledge that basically we would get reimbursed for the four weeks...I don't know. We just figured it would be worth it...because if we could get any better people than what we had been getting, then we were willing to go with it."*

Other employers reported that they were already paying the \$15 hourly wage and that it was not a participation barrier to them. The employers communicating this were typically larger, with multiple sites and a robust organizational infrastructure.

However, stakeholders report that this openness to the \$15 per hour wage for assistant teachers was not the norm, and for many, the wage made it challenging to enroll employers into the Fast Track program. The primary reasons employers gave for their hesitancy were that Fast Track trainees do not have enough experience to justify the higher hourly wage. Many also noted that some of their lead teachers do not make \$15 per hour, and it would not be possible or fair to pay this rate to inexperienced assistant teachers.

Stakeholders also observed that employer tolerance for the \$15 differed according to location. Responding to the difficulty they faced recruiting employers into the Fast Track program, some stakeholders suggested lowering the wage to encourage more providers to participate in the program. One interviewee reflected on recent work completed with 15 local administrators in the Danville/Pittsylvania County area, as well as the assistant teacher rates observed among this group. The majority of administrators reported starting their assistant teachers at between \$12.41 and \$14 per hour, and lead teachers at between \$13 and \$15 per hour, depending on experience. These rates aligned with anecdotal employer feedback received during Fast Track employer recruitment. "Just taking a guess without the actual data, I would say that 85% to 90% of the 'no' responses stated that the pay was the barrier to participation."

To reiterate, while the higher wage deterred some providers from participating in Fast Track, the CES team persevered and identified providers willing to adopt this wage. The result was twelve educators who are on more financially sustainable pathways at the start of their ECCE career. The competitive wage is a core programmatic value for Fast Track and also one of its most formidable implementation challenges.

#### **Finding 4. Employer readiness for the program influenced implementation outcomes for both employers and employees.**

The Fast Track implementation offered CES a view into the operations of participating child care providers. Interviewees observed that sound employee management practices, resulting in a positive workplace culture and environment, were key predictors of program success for both trainees and employers. Positive practices identified included human resource policies, clear operational procedures, and support for educator mental health and wellbeing. These employers were reportedly more equipped to integrate Fast Track trainees into their classroom teams. One of the primary challenges faced by trainees participating in Fast Track was feelings of overwhelm (detailed in the following section). These challenges were experienced less acutely by trainees employed with providers who had predictable schedules and structures for trainees to follow and placed them in rooms with experienced lead teachers to work alongside them. Stakeholders argued that these initial positive work experiences, which demonstrated employers' readiness to onboard trainees with no prior experience, were just as meaningful as offering a higher wage.

*"I think people have these ideas that if you give a good salary and a job then you are good. But if the person doesn't have the training and doesn't feel competent, they may not stay. Or if the employer doesn't have a good work structure, they may not stay, even if the pay is competitive. There are just other things that have to go into an overall workforce."*

This sentiment was also detected in the direct feedback shared by trainees through their survey responses. Interestingly, when asked to rate their agreement with the statement "Being paid during the Fast Track training period made it easier for me to participate in the program," four out of the eight respondents agreed or strongly agreed, and the other half of respondents (four out of four) selected neutral, neither agreeing nor disagreeing. However, when asked if they plan to continue working in their child care program long-term, seven out of eight said yes, and one trainee said she was unsure. Their reasons for wanting to stay included their love for working with children and the support they received from their colleagues. One trainee reflected:

*"I want to stay at my current program because I feel supported, valued, and connected to both the children and the team, which makes the work environment positive and meaningful."*

While several trainees completing the Fast Track program benefited from positive work environments and supportive relationships with their employers, others experienced programs with weaker infrastructure or higher levels of organizational strain. Reflections from stakeholders who observed these less successful cases indicate that often, the child

care programs that were most desperate for staffing were often the least prepared to provide consistent hours, mentorship, and the structure necessary to support new hires. This led to a cycle of frustration and attrition for employers.

*"Some programs are so desperate for employees right now, and that's why they're signing up for Fast Track. So it's a cycle. They need Fast Track people because they're desperate for employees. But they get these Fast Track people, and we're trying to train them, but they still get thrown into the classroom before they're fully ready and understand appropriate practice and ways to handle behaviors. So they get frustrated and they leave."*

An example of the impact of a less structured environment was observed in a survey comment where a trainee described the support she needed, but did not receive during her program experience.

*"Child care help. Most of the time, we had no other teachers, and I had to try to work [on coursework] at home because I was behind."*

While this trainee persevered and completed Fast Track, her experience highlights the strain that programs struggling with staffing and operations can place on new educators. These dynamics also underscore the importance of assessing program readiness before educator placement and offering targeted supports to ensure both the trainee and employer are set up for success. Future iterations of Fast Track may benefit from incorporating site readiness assessments to identify struggling employers and increase the likelihood that trainees are entering more stable, supportive onboarding environments.

Project stakeholders also report that, due to the speed of planning and launch, it was challenging to assess employers' readiness and "hold out" for those who demonstrate a commitment to the Fast Track mission, solid staffing and human resources policies, and a strong workplace culture. Stakeholders argued that additional planning and recruitment time would benefit both providers and employers because they could take steps to assess and support readiness.

Project stakeholders report that Fast Track is not a fit for every child care provider, but it can be an excellent option for employers who have good structures in place, believe in the mission of adding educators to the field, and are willing to invest the time and resources into a less experienced trainee.



## **Finding 5. Trainees navigated a range of personal and professional stressors, with those completing the program demonstrating determination and the impact of individualized support provided by project stakeholders.**

Most Fast Track trainees who entered the program began with enthusiasm and a commitment to pursue a new career in early childhood education. They also entered with a range of personal and professional challenges that hindered their full engagement with the program. For many, the challenges were significant, including balancing parenting responsibilities, adjusting to a new job, and managing fast-paced college-level coursework. For example, one trainee in the first cohort was preparing to have a child. She left the first cohort and hoped to return in the second, but was unable to do so. Other trainees who were parents needed child care for their own children. Stakeholders recalled helping one participant in particular navigate a need for child care to support her participation:

*"We had a young lady who had a conflict with child care. We had to come back and ask VECF if that's something normal [with Fast Track]? We were trying to figure out a way to support her so that she could start at the site and have a child care slot for her own child so that she could go."*

Each trainee had unique circumstances and needs. Stakeholders report that getting to know them as individuals and supporting them throughout the program was an important role that the CES project manager and course instructor took on. Trainees benefited from regular (at least weekly) conversations as they progressed through the program, which helped them manage stress and challenges as they arose.

One of the most discussed challenges trainees faced during their Fast Track experience was the tension that resulted from combining a fast-paced college workload with transitioning into a new field and a new job.

Depending on the employer and their individual orientation requirements, trainees were sometimes simultaneously pursuing orientation activities and learning policies and procedures for a new workplace, in addition to being in a brand-new field. This resulted in participants experiencing feelings of overwhelm that led some to drop out of the program.

For example, one participating employer reported that, due to the timing of the cohort start, two Fast Track trainees began working at her center two weeks prior to the cohort's actual start. Once the cohort started, they decided to leave the program. The employer reported that they told her it was way more work than they thought it would be. She felt frustrated because she had spent two weeks training them, only to have them walk away.



Another employer recounted a similar experience, describing how they started Fast Track with four trainees, but two of them left mid-program, stating they had decided they didn't want to participate. When asked if they shared why they left, the employer responded:

*"They didn't give a specific reason. It was a mother and a daughter, and basically, I guess they felt they already knew enough because they were providing a certain amount of home child care on their own at home...I just don't think they wanted to go back to school."*

Another trainee completed some of the first week of coursework and then informed her employer and CES that she no longer wanted to pursue the coursework and instead wanted just employment. An interview reflected:

*"She wanted to still work and get all the bonuses and benefits, but she didn't want to do all the coursework, so she decided to pull out. Another employee went on lunch break and never came back."*

These examples demonstrate what was also learned during the interviews: when trainees leave the program in response to overwhelm, they tend to do so at the beginning of the program. Trainee turnover is always a challenge due to the demands of coursework and the transition into a new field with new expectations. However, are there strategies to mitigate the initial stress and overwhelm that trainees experience?

Compounding this challenge were reports that many trainees were not receiving the sixteen hours per week during the workday to complete their coursework. Multiple trainees experienced this challenge, as confirmed by eight out of thirteen interviewees and by trainee survey responses. One stakeholder recalled that when they reviewed invoices for reimbursement of trainee hours, they noticed the employers were not giving hours for coursework. One employer reported realizing the time necessary for coursework and the implications this has on how trainees should be initially placed in classrooms.

*"I think my issue was I thought I could use them as regular workers, and that within two weeks, they'd be able to be in a classroom. But they can't do that, and the coursework, and you just have to not necessarily lower your expectations, but be willing to be flexible."*

Some employers recognized the need for trainees to have dedicated time for their coursework, but struggled to allocate it to them due to staff shortages. One reflected:

*"Because of the labor pool, a lot of times they were able to put that time in during our regular working hours because they didn't have enough extra staff to watch the kids while they're online."*

When trainees were unable to finish their work during the day, many took it home and completed it in the evenings or on the weekends. Stakeholders report that many assignments were submitted on Sunday evenings, suggesting that trainees completed them outside of business hours at home.

Also, there were reports of some trainees struggling with the speed of course delivery and workload. One stakeholder reported becoming aware of a trainee who was struggling to keep up with the course. She communicated that she had learning differences and was supported by an individualized education plan (IEP) in high school, and was considering dropping the course. However, she was offered accommodation and collaborative support and became determined to persevere and complete the program. A stakeholder recalled:

*"We were really supporting her and... talking to her employer just to let them know that she's having a hard time. Is there any way you can support her as much as possible? Make sure she's getting the time she needs so she's not feeling overwhelmed."*

This trainee successfully completed the program, expressing pride in her achievement and motivation to continue growing in the field. The example also highlights the importance of understanding the individual circumstances of each trainee and taking the time to offer direct encouragement in coordination with employers to reduce barriers and support program persistence.

Some sites were intentional about ensuring that trainees receive scheduled, dedicated time to complete their coursework. Again, these tended to be employers with more operational structure in place. These employers described offering trainees dedicated workspaces and a predictable schedule of four hours each day. Their coursework time was often in the morning, and then they would join a classroom in the afternoon to work with existing staff and apply their learning.

*"So they usually get a break during the day. We scheduled it during their lunch breaks and nap times, and were able to step away during those hours to complete their coursework. And they get planning periods also."*

Another employer described her slightly different approach to offering dedicated time. She had two trainees and reported that one person did the coursework in the morning, while the other was in the classroom. Then they switched places in the afternoon. This strategy enabled her to benefit from the immediate capacity provided by Fast Track trainees at her center, while still meeting the expectation that trainees pursue coursework during the workday.

An additional factor impacting trainee experience was the mentoring model. For some trainees, on-site mentoring was a meaningful source of encouragement and professional

growth. For others, mentoring was inconsistent, and in some cases, trainees reported not having an assigned mentor or being aware of one. When asked whether they had been assigned a mentor at their center, six out of eight trainees reported having one, and two out of eight trainees reported not having one. When asked to rate their agreement with the statement, "My mentor was supportive and helpful," seven people agreed, while one person strongly disagreed. This was one of the people who reported that they did not have a mentor onsite at their center. The other trainee who reported not having an assigned onsite mentor considered the course instructor their mentor. The frequency of mentors checking in with trainees ranged from about once per week to daily or almost daily, and was more frequent than trainees seeking help or guidance from their mentor, with about half of the survey respondents selecting 'often' or 'sometimes' for this question. The other half selecting 'rarely' or 'never.'

Open-ended survey responses described a range of trainee-mentor relationships. One trainee described their mentor as "someone I really look up to...They're always there with good advice, honest feedback, and the kind of support that pushes me to be better." This person also reports that their mentor reaches out to them several times a week and that they often seek guidance from them. Other respondents described their mentor as helpful, supportive, and approachable. One noted they "never had one," and another demonstrated confusion about who their mentor was. This trainee believed the course instructor was their mentor, meaning they did not have one assigned (that they were aware of) at their site.

Interviewees described an informal mentoring model in which employers had the flexibility to tailor the mentoring experience to fit their specific workplace needs. One employer reflected that they served informally as a mentor to two trainees and were satisfied with this approach.

*"I was trying to talk daily with our two participants, just to ask them how things were going and what they were learning. I'm thinking it's kind of helping them have a different outlook on child care because everybody needs some kind of training...so we can all be on the same page."*

Another employer described a more formal approach to mentoring as she engaged one of her staff members to serve as the assigned mentor. This staff member had prior experience as an Early Head Start coach, making the mentoring process a natural fit. This mentor was able to build personalized relationships with the trainees and enjoyed the role. Another provider described a more applied, structured approach that mirrored the center's onboarding process. She decided to break up the staff handbook into daily learning objectives and implemented this structure over four weeks. She noted that this allowed for more reflective conversation with new hires.

While the flexible mentoring approach worked for some, others would have appreciated having a syllabus or written guidance with suggestions on how to approach the mentoring

process. This was especially true for newer program administrators who may not have had as much direct personal experience with ECCE mentoring and professional development. Another stakeholder questioned the frequency of mentoring at the sites. While mentor logs were turned in, some of them appeared to be quickly filled in at one sitting.

Program stakeholders also discussed how they restructured the mentoring approach during implementation by integrating the course instructor more directly into the mentor engagement process. The instructor facilitated check-ins and worked to connect feedback between participants and mentors. This effort was observed to streamline communication and coordination.

The navigation of challenges faced by trainees as they progressed through the Fast Track program revealed several opportunities for improvement. First, program administrators should consider more formally managing employer expectations regarding initial trainee capacity and workload. Several stakeholders suggested establishing a formal orientation or training opportunity at the outset of the Fast Track program to clarify expectations and best practices for success. Interviewees reported having conversations throughout the implementation that reinforced the program's requirements. However, some employers still expressed surprise at certain elements, such as the inability to place trainees in a full-time capacity. Some emphasized the importance of providing a clear schedule for coursework and reinforcing that Fast Track trainees are not immediately available to function as full-time classroom staff. It should also be emphasized that trainees are most successful when paired with an experienced lead teacher and should not be assigned to a classroom alone and without support.

Additionally, several stakeholders suggested reenvisioning the Fast Track order and pacing of programmatic elements to better balance the needs of both trainees and employers. Some felt that the four-week training cycle should be completed before placing participants at employer sites. Others suggested that an extended course timeline or a self-paced model would offer greater flexibility, thereby reducing the pressure on both trainees and employers. However, others emphasize that these adaptations would compromise the purpose and fundamental strength of Fast Track, that it is an expedited pathway into an ECCE career. It may not be suitable for everyone, but for trainees who complete it, it can serve as the motivation and confidence boost needed to continue on a more promising career trajectory.

## 6. The Fast Track Pilot surfaced lessons to inform regional scaling and adoption.

While stakeholders primarily discussed implementation challenges and strategies to address them, all emphasized that Fast Track is a strong program and has scaling and replication value. The Fast Track course was repeatedly described as a valuable asset, one that state and regional partners would be eager to access. As one stakeholder noted,

*"I think that the community college course is a really big asset of Fast Track. I know it is something that I heard from other federal and state partners, that they were really interested in it as a broader sort of tool or resource outside of the very specific Virginia context."*

This sentiment highlights the course's potential for application in areas beyond the pilot region. Stakeholders shared their perspectives on some of the most appealing characteristics of the course:

**The course is easily transferable to new instructors.** The Fast Track course is based on the year-long Introduction to Early Childhood course, originally created and offered by the Fairfax County Office for Children. The course was reformatted to include four weeks (16 hours per week) of asynchronous online learning paired with 24 hours per week of on-site application in a child care classroom. The course was specifically designed to be delivered by instructors engaged by implementing agencies. The pilot offered an opportunity to assess how well that course could be implemented in a new context with a new instructor. Project stakeholders report that the course content and materials were ideal for easy implementation. A stakeholder summarizes this sentiment,

*"I do think the course shells [course modules on Canvas] are a great resource. They're already built. They're organized. They're easy to follow, and that's one thing that people have reached out to me about. Just the fact that they're already developed, and that makes it easier for an instructor to pick up and teach."*

This quote illustrates the utility of the Fast Track course as experienced during the pilot. Its transferability was demonstrated to simplify implementation and enhance the feasibility of scaling, as extensive research and design time were not required to adapt the course for the RRSS context.

Given the minimal instructor time required to prepare course content for delivery, the regional pilot team reports that the instructor could undertake additional synchronous support activities with trainees. Specifically, the team scheduled weekly, live meetings on Monday mornings. This allowed the instructor and CES team members to check in with trainees, reinforce key concepts from the week, and attend to any emergent collective or

individual challenges. As noted previously in the report, trainees developed deeper connections with their instructor and one another, and some even viewed their instructor as a mentor who could help them address persistent challenges.

The Fast Track course was also described as a rigorous yet achievable introduction, or for some, a reintroduction to college coursework and continuing education activities. For participants with prior educational experiences, the Fast Track course provides a bridge back to formal higher education. For other trainees, this course was their first postsecondary experience. One participant reflected on the renewed educational focus that her Fast Track experience gave her.

*"I do plan on going back to school in the Fall...I may go back to [college name], but I also may try a different college...either way, I'm going to go back in the Fall and hope to continue until I get my certificate. I'm hoping to pursue early childhood education, the full program, and try to go as far as I can with that."*

While some participants faced individual barriers and challenges due to the rigor of the coursework, they also emphasized that the educational experience motivated them to seek out additional opportunities.

In addition to stronger connections to educational opportunities, trainees also conveyed the immediate value the course had for them in terms of their skill development and confidence in the ECCE setting. Trainees completing the survey were asked to write in an open-response describing which aspects of the course were most helpful to them. Five out of the nine trainees discussed the child development module and its real-world application to their classroom experiences. Others (four out of eight) described the learning environment of the course itself and the modality of course delivery (observations, videos, and lectures). Stakeholders also observed this value as one shared,

*"It was intense and fast, but it's good work. The outcome is what we want...We saw how employers really appreciated it...We saw how the trainees really learned."*

Reflections on the value of the Fast Track course also offered insights into how the course delivery could be improved and applicable lessons learned for agencies implementing Fast Track in the future. Several stakeholders discussed the challenges that trainees faced during onboarding into Canvas, the online learning platform, and accessing coursework. One stakeholder mentioned that many trainees continued to struggle, and time was spent during the first week of the course delivery, troubleshooting technical challenges and access issues. This resulted in some trainees starting the course already behind in content and feeling the need to catch up. It was suggested that trainees be onboarded to the Canvas platform a week before the course begins, allowing them an opportunity to work through any challenges. That would allow everyone to start fresh on the first day of course instruction on an even playing field. Stakeholders and trainees also emphasized the

importance of providing laptops for accessing the coursework. According to the survey, which asked trainees how often they used their laptops to access coursework, all nine respondents reported using them often or very often.

During data collection, several additional suggestions were shared, offering advice that could support the future scaling and replication of the Fast Track program to other locations. The first was to ensure the inclusion of both long-term and short-term outcomes to support and justify the scaling of the program. According to the pilot program logic model, the short-term outcomes (i.e., outcomes observable in the months after program completion) identified include:

- Fast Track trainees increasing their ECCE knowledge and skill level.
- ECCE educator vacancies decreasing.
- The establishment of positive and professional employer-employee relationships.
- ECCE positions becoming more attractive because of improved compensation.

Mid-term outcomes (i.e., outcomes observable a year or two after program completion) identified include:

- Fast Track graduates pursuing additional educational opportunities and professional development.
- Employee retention rates improving for participating employers.

The long-term outcomes (i.e., the outcome ideally observable three to five years beyond program completion) are improved working conditions and a stabilized ECCE workforce, which contribute to program quality and sustainability.

Some stakeholders believed that the most critical metric for measuring the achievement of these outcomes is retaining educators in their jobs for at least a year.

"The retention is probably the biggest thing, though. I think, seeing there is a through line where you can get a qualified person in the door upfront, and then they stay. If you can demonstrate there is evidence of that retention."

To accomplish this, agencies should ensure formal mechanisms are in place to follow up with trainees for years beyond their formal participation in the program. While stakeholders mentioned informal follow-up with trainees beyond the pilot, they did not describe plans for formal outreach. Building intentional mechanisms for long-term follow-up is a vital project enhancement to consider for both the current work and future agencies implementing Fast Track.

Another action suggested to identify and support progress toward outcomes is the continued effort to collect lessons from agencies implementing the program. Stakeholders report that Fast Track is highly responsive to the geographical context in which it operates,



and each site is likely to experience slightly different challenges. For example, the regional pilot in RRSS navigated recruitment challenges unique to rural localities, which may differ from those in more urban settings.

An implementation lesson learned from the regional pilot that stakeholders highlighted as critical for future agencies pursuing Fast Track to understand is the importance of having sufficient organizational capacity in place. The CES team found that the staffing capacity needed, particularly during the recruitment phase, was greater than initially expected. Originally, the team anticipated spending approximately one-third of the project budget on advertising and outreach during recruitment, and 13% on administration costs. However, given the additional staff time used to manage implementation and navigate emergent challenges, the actual allocation was adjusted accordingly. Because less funding was utilized during the outreach, VECF approved a reallocation of unused dollars from the advertising and outreach portion of the budget to staff administrative costs. Project stakeholders shared that their primary lesson learned regarding organizational capacity is to ensure there is a large enough team in place to manage the possible high volume of applicants, and then reduce to a core team when the cohorts have been established and the coursework has begun. This core team should have the capacity to field daily phone calls with questions from both trainees and employers. They should also expect to engage in daily communication throughout the program with trainees, as supporting their persistence was a high-touch experience. One stakeholder describes the team's evolution during implementation.

*"We used to have the entire staff that was working on it. So we're all there together, hearing the same updates. And so after the updates got redundant, and we were just kind of checking in, we made the call to release the majority of the group and keep a core. There were, I think, about five or six of us in the core group participating, whereas before it was closer to probably ten or twelve."*

Finally, as project stakeholders considered the future of Fast Track implementation, they determined that the future of Fast Track lies with local implementation through a regional network model, such as the Ready Regions. There were several reasons for this, including the unique ability of Ready Regions to be directly connected with local child care employers and attuned to their specific needs. As observed during the Fast Track Regional Pilot, they come to the work with existing trusting relationships with ECCE employers and can offer localized coaching and technical assistance. One stakeholder summarized the Ready Region advantage,

*"Fast Track is a good pilot and a good program. We do believe that based on Southside's experience, it's probably best implemented on a local level with a partner who's very interested in managing the very heavy day-to-day work that's required for Fast Track from start to finish."*



Stakeholders also suggested exploring the idea of multiple regions collaborating to centralize core functions such as recruitment, instructor training, and administrative oversight. This strategy would streamline operations and enhance administrative efficiency, particularly as teams navigate the initial, time- and resource-intensive recruitment phase.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

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The RRSS team demonstrated that implementing the Fast Track program at the regional level is both feasible and viable. While the project team had to overcome the implementation challenges outlined in this report, the result was 12 new ECCE educators who completed the program. At the time of data collection, they were all employed at a regionally competitive wage of \$15 per hour, satisfied with their Fast Track experience, and had plans to remain with their current employer for at least the following year. The project illustrated that a regional Fast Track implementation will be more successful when supported by an embedded community-based team with strong operational capacity and established trust among the child care provider community.

Based on the lessons learned during implementation, the following strategic and tactical recommendations are suggested to strengthen future iterations of Fast Track and to support regional partners as they continue to scale the program across Virginia and beyond.

### Strategic Recommendations

**1. Continue investments in regional implementation.** Stakeholders believe that Fast Track is best implemented at the regional and local level with Ready Regions serving as the administrative hubs. However, Fast Track can be a complex program to launch and administer, often presenting unanticipated challenges. Throughout the data collection, stakeholders discussed the value and importance of VECF support and technical assistance. Project champions should continue to support regions as they pursue locally driven program implementation, especially those encountering program management for the first time.

**2. Maintain the program's requirement for the regionally competitive wage.** The elevated compensation required by Fast Track is one of the program's most defining hallmarks, but it also contributes to some of the most significant implementation challenges. While reducing the wage would ease the burden of employer recruitment, it would also dilute the message that ECCE staff should receive higher wages. Elevating stories of employers who are willing to adopt this wage, which often requires innovative thinking and reconfiguration of budgets, demonstrates progress and pushes the work forward. As other regions adopt the Fast Track program, they should recognize that

technical assistance to help providers plan for sustainability is important to the model's viability.

**3. Establish formalized collaboration and feedback mechanisms for Fast Track regions.** Based on the pilot's experience and previous iterations of the Fast Track operated by VECF, each implementation offers lessons learned and information about the feasibility of programmatic variations and enhancements. For example, in the regional pilot, the team decided to add a weekly synchronous meeting to the Fast Track course experience. They also engaged the instructor to provide more direct support to trainees and their employer. In response to challenges related to recruitment and the program timeline, the team decided to offer Fast Track in two cohorts. This solution allowed a group of trainees who were ready to begin to move forward and have the time, flexibility, and latitude necessary to recruit the second group of trainees. As more Ready Regions pursue the program, it may be helpful for them to draw upon these past experiences and add their own to the collective body of Fast Track knowledge, including information about key outcomes such as educator retention over time.

### **Tactical Recommendations**

**1. Establish specific criteria to determine employer readiness for program participation.** Throughout the pilot, stakeholders observed that often, employers opt into Fast Track out of desperation to hire staff. Although not always the case, many employers experiencing high levels of employee turnover frequently struggle to maintain a positive workplace environment supported by strong structures, policies, and procedures. For a Fast Track trainee, brand new to ECCE, entering this type of environment can result in barriers to program completion and diminish their motivation to remain in the field. To address this, it may be helpful for implementing agencies, with the support of VECF, to establish a set of criteria or operationalize them in a rubric or checklist that recruiters can use to assess the readiness of employers to participate in the program. Also, to support this employer vetting process, it may be necessary to build more time into the recruitment phase and the project cycle in general. This would relieve some of the pressure that team members recruiting employers may feel to get everyone onboarded by a deadline, which can lead to compromises on employer quality and readiness.

**2. Develop a more formal onboarding experience for employers.** An implementation challenge observed among participants was that trainees were not receiving sufficient time during the day to complete their coursework. This created stress and overwhelm, and for some, resulted in their exiting the program. Implementing agencies may want to take more formal steps to set clear expectations with employers. Even employers who voiced a desire to streamline project meetings requested training at the outset of Fast Track. Elements of this training may include establishing a specific schedule for trainee coursework and implementing a formal mentoring model.

**3. Pre-orient trainees to Canvas before the first day of the program.** Several stakeholders and trainees identified technical challenges with accessing Canvas during the first week of class. As a result, some trainees found themselves needing to catch up on the week one coursework from the beginning. Implementing agencies may want to consider allowing trainees earlier access to Canvas to ensure everyone has what they need to begin their work.

**4. Continue to schedule regular check-ins between the course instructor, employers, and the trainees.** Stakeholders report that involving the course instructor in conversations with the employers and trainees deepened their connection throughout the experience. Because the trainees are in such close contact with the instructor as they submit assignments, participate in the discussion board, and meet as a group, they are typically comfortable reaching out to the instructor with challenges and issues they may face. For example, one trainee who was struggling with a learning difference and was considering dropping the program came to her instructor and discussed her challenge. The instructor was able to bring together the employer and CES to discuss accommodations and ultimately arrive at a solution that supported the trainee who completed the program. Formally accounting for this instructor function when they are engaged will ensure that everyone is on the same page regarding expectations for the instructor role.

**5. Offer structured mentoring tools to participating sites.** While some employers utilized staff members with specific experience in ECCE mentoring, others took a more informal approach. Some appreciated this flexibility, while others voiced the need for more structure and guidance. Interviewees envisioned a formal mentoring model that includes a weekly syllabus, conversation guide, and specific resources to support practice. Developing a Fast Track mentoring model may also encourage consistency with the experience across implementing sites.

**6. Maintain the practice of designating dedicated implementation staff to support daily trainee and employer needs.** Initially, stakeholders reported that implementing Fast Track was an "all hands on deck" team approach to manage the volume of recruitment. Later, as the program launched and progressed, this team was reduced to a small, core group that managed the day-to-day. However, throughout the implementation, a project manager remained consistently engaged, serving as the primary point of contact for both trainees and employers. This manager would field daily questions, troubleshoot emerging issues, and ensure that each participant had the support they needed to persist and succeed in the program.

In conclusion, the Fast Track Regional Pilot in Ready Region Southside demonstrated that a regional agency can successfully implement the Fast Track model. When undertaken by a strong, collaborative organization such as CES, emergent challenges can be addressed, and the Fast Track program can realize its potential as a lever for systems change. The insights in this report are offered to guide future program iterations, support regional partners, and advance the Fast Track mission. They represent the collective experiences of

project stakeholders involved in this specific pilot. While other regions may encounter different challenges or uncover additional insights, the reflections in this report provide a foundation for other agencies to consider and build upon.

## References

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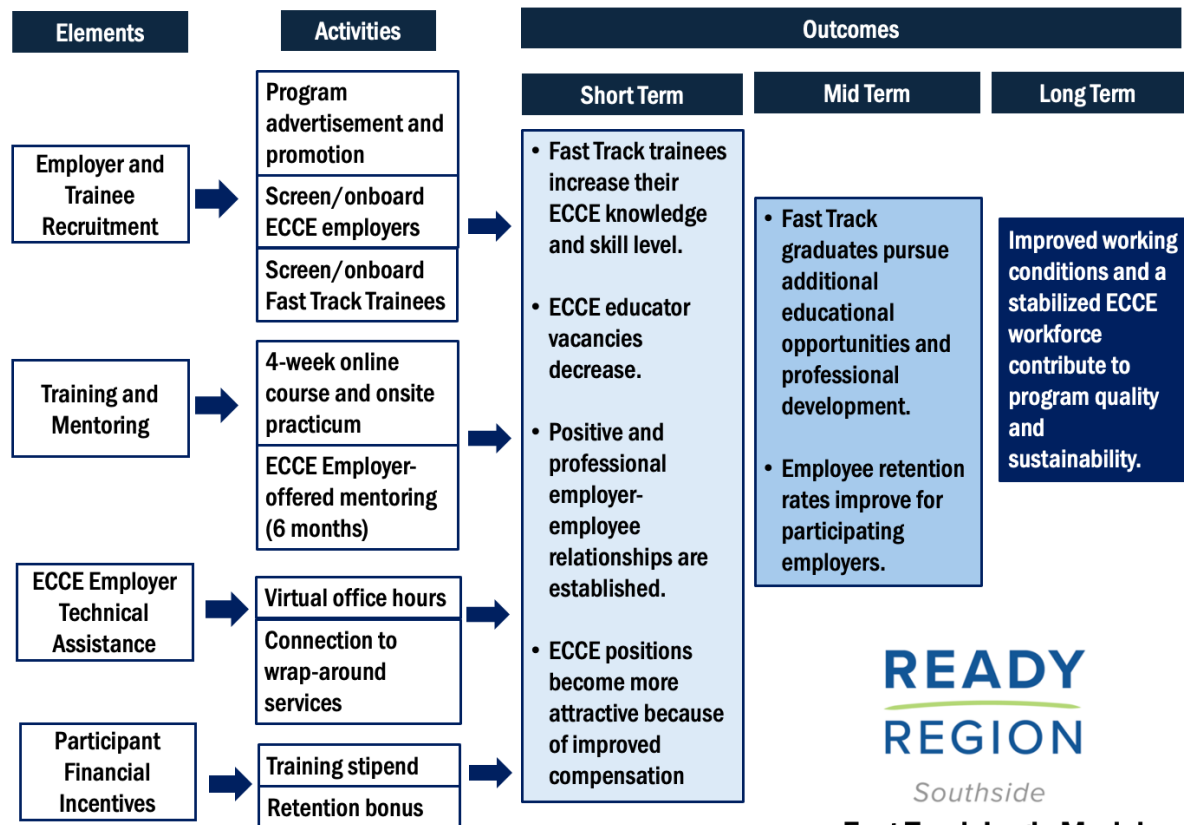
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## Appendix A. Ready Region Southside Logic Model



**READY**  
REGION  
Southside  
**Fast Track Logic Model**

Assumption: Participating ECCE employers guarantee the regional competitive wage to new assistant teachers as defined by Virginia's cost modeling.

## Appendix B. Interview Questions

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### Round 1 Interviews with RRSS Staff

#### Vision and Goals

- What excites you most about launching the Fast Track program?
- What are the key outcomes you hope to see for the program and its participants?

#### Strengths and Opportunities

- What existing strengths or resources in the region do you believe will support the program's success? How will you leverage them?
- Are there any unique opportunities or partnerships you foresee leveraging to enhance the program's impact?

#### Implementation Planning

- What strategies have been most effective in getting ready for the pilot's launch?
- How do you plan to address any challenges that might arise during implementation?

#### Lessons from Past Experiences

- Please describe any lessons learned from previous experiences with the Fast Track program that you will consider as you implement this program?

#### Support and Needs

- What types of support or resources would further strengthen your ability to deliver on the program's goals?

### Round 2 Interviews

#### I. Role and Engagement

<b>Ready Region Southside Staff</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Can you describe your responsibilities related to Fast Track and how you supported implementation?</li></ul>
<b>VECF</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• From your perspective, what was the primary purpose of the Fast Track pilot in this region?</li></ul>
<b>Community College Partners</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• How did you support the delivery of the Fast Track course or work with trainees?</li></ul>
<b>Fast Track Trainees</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Can you tell me what attracted you to the Fast Track program?</li><li>• Why did you decide to pursue a career in Early Childhood Care &amp; Education?</li></ul>

<b>Fast Track ECCE Employers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What motivated you to participate in the Fast Track pilot?</li> </ul>
<b>ECCE Stakeholders</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To start, could you share a bit about your role and how your work intersects with the early childhood education and care (ECCE) system in Virginia?</li> <li>• How familiar are you with the Fast Track pilot, and what have you heard or observed about its goals or model?</li> </ul>

## II. Reflections on Implementation

<b>Ready Region Southside Staff</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What aspects of implementation went as planned? What required adaptation?</li> <li>• How did you engage employers and trainees throughout the program? What strategies were most effective?</li> <li>• What challenges emerged during implementation?</li> <li>• How did the team address those challenges?</li> </ul>
<b>VECF</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How did the implementation align with the vision and goals for the initiative?</li> <li>• What were key strengths and challenges you observed?</li> </ul>
<b>Community College Partners</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What was your experience with the 4-week course format and delivery?</li> <li>• What worked well in terms of instructional support and what could be improved?</li> </ul>
<b>Fast Track Trainees</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What was your experience like with the online training? What did you like about it, what could have been better?</li> <li>• Tell me about your experience with the on the job training.</li> <li>• How did your mentor support you? Was it helpful?</li> </ul>
<b>Fast Track ECCE Employers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Overall, how did you like the Fast Track program? Where were some implementation strengths and challenges?</li> <li>• How did you feel about the quality of candidates recruited through the Fast Track program?</li> <li>• How did the onboarding and training process go for the new educator(s) at your site?</li> <li>• What was your experience with the \$15/hour wage requirement?</li> <li>• What was the mentoring process like? What went well and what could have been improved?</li> <li>• Would you recommend Fast Track to other employers?</li> </ul>
<b>ECCE Stakeholders</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• From your perspective, what ECCE workforce challenges is Fast Track aiming to address?</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do the core features of the pilot—such as accelerated training, onboarding support, and wage incentives—seem well aligned with current needs in the field?</li> <li>• Are there aspects of the model or implementation approach that you think are especially promising or worth paying attention to?</li> </ul>
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### III. Perceived Impact and Outcomes

<b>Ready Region Southside Staff</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What changes did you observe in participating providers or trainees?</li> <li>• Are there examples of success you'd highlight?</li> </ul>
<b>VECF</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What progress did you see toward increasing workforce capacity or educator retention?</li> <li>• How did the pilot inform thinking about the future of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Fast Track?</li> <li>○ ECCE workforce development?</li> <li>○ Compensation, recruitment, and retention?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>Community College Partners</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Did you observe any differences in motivation or performance among Fast Track trainees?</li> <li>• Have any students expressed interest in further coursework or degree pathways?</li> </ul>
<b>Fast Track Trainees</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What have you learned from this experience?</li> <li>• Do you plan to stay in early childhood care and education or pursue more training?</li> </ul>
<b>Fast Track ECCE Employers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What impact has this had on your staffing, classroom quality, or business operations? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Were you able to serve additional children? If so, how many, did the number of classrooms you could staff change?</li> <li>○ Do you anticipate your Fast Track participation having any impact on the revenue of your business?</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Has it changed how you think about hiring or supporting new staff?</li> </ul>
<b>ECCE Stakeholders</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Although you weren't directly involved, do you see Fast Track contributing to broader workforce or systems goals in Virginia?</li> <li>• What potential impact might a model like this have on workforce supply, professional pathways, or quality in ECCE?</li> <li>• Are there specific indicators or types of evidence that you'd consider important when assessing the pilot's success?</li> </ul>



#### IV. Lessons and Future Implications

<b>Ready Region Southside Staff</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What would you do differently in a future implementation of Fast Track?</li><li>• What supports are needed to scale or sustain this work?</li></ul>
<b>VECF</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What lessons from this pilot might inform the design of future state-level efforts like Fast Track?</li><li>• What conditions would need to be in place for long-term sustainability of initiatives like the Fast Track Pilot at the local level?</li></ul>
<b>Community College Partners</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What changes might make this model more effective for learners?</li><li>• How could higher ed partnerships be strengthened in future rounds?</li></ul>
<b>Fast Track Trainees</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What advice would you give to someone considering or starting the program?</li><li>• What would make the program even better for future participants?</li></ul>
<b>Fast Track ECCE Employers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What would help you continue hiring through a program like this?</li><li>• What supports would make it easier for other providers to participate?</li><li>• Do you have needs for specific technical assistance or tools to help you improve your human resources or business practices? If so, what would they be?</li><li>• Do you have a formal wage scale or compensation structure? Is this something you would like to learn more about?</li></ul>
<b>ECCE Stakeholders</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What lessons or insights from the ECCE landscape should inform the future of Fast Track or similar efforts?</li><li>• What considerations should be top of mind for funders, policymakers, or implementation teams if this model is expanded or sustained?</li><li>• Is there anything else you'd like to share about how Fast Track fits into the current moment for Virginia's early childhood system?</li></ul>

## Appendix C. Survey Questions

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Thank you for taking a few minutes to share your experience with the Fast Track program. Your feedback will help improve the program for future participants.

**This survey is anonymous and confidential.** Your name will not be collected, and your individual responses will not be shared with your employer or program staff. The survey is being conducted independently by **Luminary Evaluation**.

### Instructions:

Please answer each question as honestly as you can. Most questions are multiple choice, with a few open-ended questions for you to share more detail if you'd like. The survey should take about 10 minutes to complete.

Your voice matters—thank you for contributing!

### Training Experience

1. The four-week online course helped prepare me for work in early childhood education.
  - a. Strongly disagree
  - b. Disagree
  - c. Neutral
  - d. Agree
  - e. Strongly agree
2. How often did you use the laptop or digital tools provided during training for your coursework?
  - a. Never
  - b. Rarely
  - c. Sometimes
  - d. Often
  - e. Very often
3. (Open response) What course content was most helpful to you?
4. (Open response) Are there topics you wish had been included in the training?

### Onsite Practicum and Mentoring

5. I had a mentor assigned at my center.
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
  - c. I'm not sure

6. My mentor was supportive and helpful.
  - a. Strongly disagree
  - b. Disagree
  - c. Neutral
  - d. Agree
  - e. Strongly agree
  - f. Not applicable
7. How often did your mentor check in with you during the 4-week practicum?
  - a. Never
  - b. Once or twice
  - c. About once per week
  - d. A few times per week
  - e. Daily or almost daily
8. How often did you seek help or guidance from your mentor?
  - a. Never
  - b. Rarely
  - c. Sometimes
  - d. Often
  - e. Very often
9. (Open response) How would you describe your relationship with your mentor?
10. (Open response) What additional support would have improved your practicum experience?

### **Compensation and Incentives**

11. Being paid during the Fast Track training period made it easier for me to participate in the program.
  - a. Strongly disagree
  - b. Disagree
  - c. Neutral
  - d. Agree
  - e. Strongly agree
12. The pay I received during training felt fair for the work and learning I was doing.
  - a. Strongly disagree
  - b. Disagree
  - c. Neutral
  - d. Agree
  - e. Strongly agree
13. I currently earn at least \$15/hour.
  - a. Yes

- b. No
- c. I'm not sure
- d. Prefer not to say

14. (Open Response) If you'd like, please share how being paid during training affected your ability to stay in the program or job. (Open response)

### **Wraparound Supports**

15. Did you access any support that helped you attend class or your work? (e.g., transportation, child care)?

- a. Yes
- b. No

16. (Open response) If yes, which supports were most helpful?

17. (Open response) Were there supports you needed but didn't receive?

### **Career Outlook**

18. Since completing Fast Track, have you enrolled in or applied for any additional early childhood coursework, credentials, or degrees?

- a. Yes
- b. Not yet, but I plan to
- c. No, and I don't plan to

19. (Open response) Please describe any additional professional development or education you have pursued or plan to pursue.

20. How motivated do you feel to continue a career in early childhood education?

- a. Not at all motivated
- b. Not very motivated
- c. Neutral
- d. Somewhat motivated
- e. Very motivated

21. Do you plan to continue working at your child care program long-term?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. I'm not sure

22. (Open response) What makes you want to stay at or leave your current program?

### **Overall Satisfaction**

23. On a scale of 1 to 10, how satisfied are you with the Fast Track program overall?

- 1 = Not at all satisfied

- 10 = Extremely satisfied

24. Would you recommend Fast Track to someone interested in working in early childhood education?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. I'm not sure

25. (Open response) What suggestions do you have to improve the Fast Track program?

26. (Open response) Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experience?

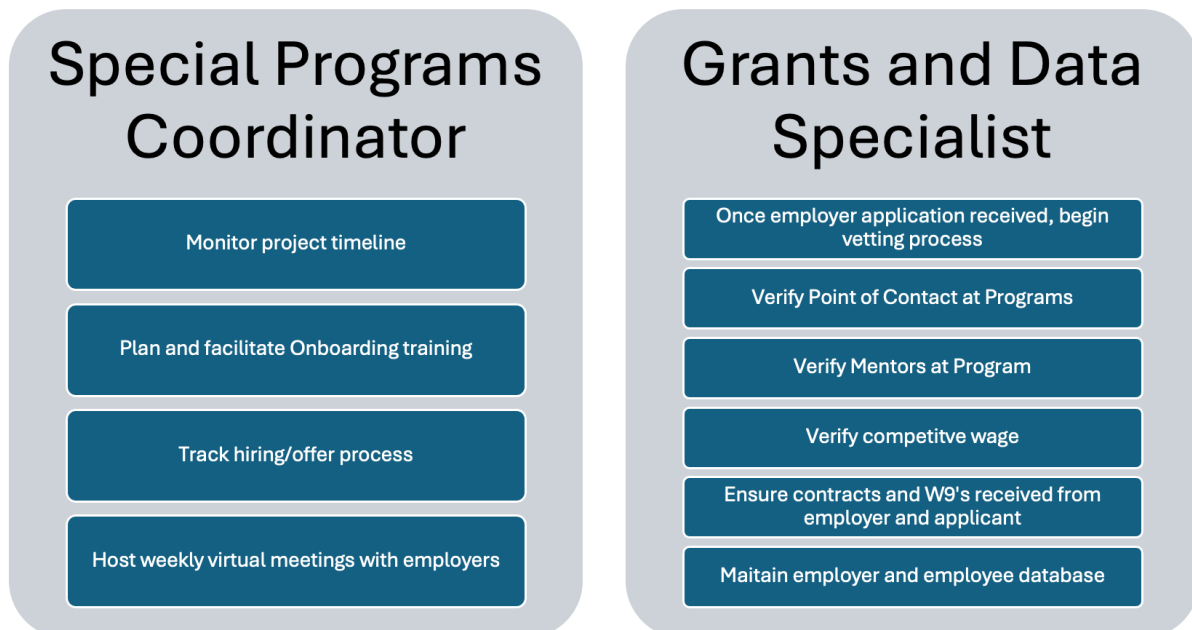
## Appendix D. Fast Track Teams and Responsibilities

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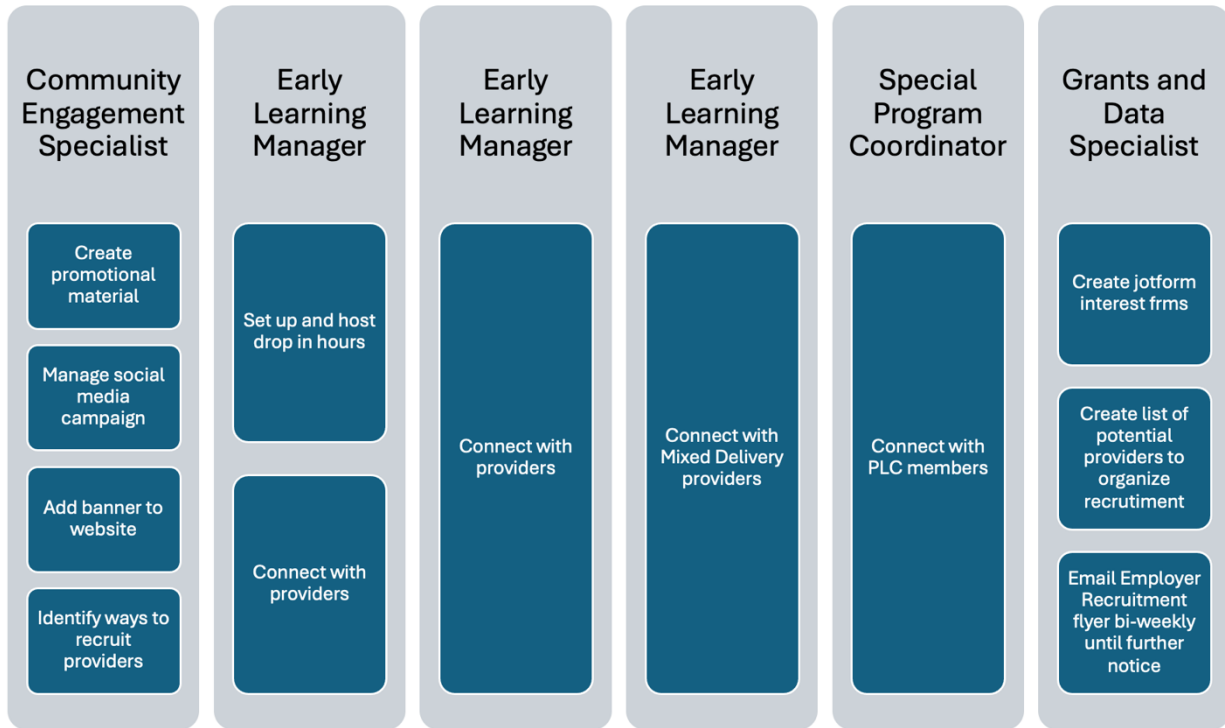
### Applicant Support



### Employer Support



## Outreach & Recruitment Support



## Leadership (Executive Director, Director of Community Impact, Director: Ready Region Southside)

### Tasks

- Review VECF contract and edit if needed
- Establish system for screening applicants
- Determine timeframe for employers to make hiring decisions
- Facilitate hiring decisions and job offers
- Assign applicants to programs
- Identify resources to support applicants (ie childcare)
- Set up procedure for handling reimbursements and incentives

Source: Center for Early Success, 2025. The evaluator modified this document by adding position titles rather than displaying individual names as in the original document.