

EARLY MATTERS

For Mississippi to reach its potential, we must make sure our state's children reach theirs. A strong start in childhood establishes a sturdy foundation for lifelong learning and contributions to our communities. According to the Harvard Center on the Developing Child,¹ in the earliest stages of life, the brain makes one million new neural connections each second. This period of rapid brain-building in the early years lays the foundation for later learning and even physical health.

USING DATA AS A GUIDE TO GOOD POLICY

The Children's Foundation of Mississippi aims to contribute to our shared well-being by improving the policies and systems that affect children and youth. We cannot make meaningful progress without taking an objective look at where things stand now. Knowing this, the Children's Foundation of Mississippi is committed to providing the data that communities, advocates and decision makers need to be informed.

To better understand Mississippians' attitudes and opinions on issues affecting children from birth to age eight, the Children's Foundation of Mississippi commissioned the **Mississippi Issues Impacting Children (MIIC)** academic research survey of Mississippi residents aged 18 and older. The Children's Foundation of Mississippi will draw on these findings to inform its priorities and guide its engagement with the concerns that exist in the state.

KEY FINDINGS

HIGH LEVELS OF SUPPORT FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD POLICY IMPROVEMENTS

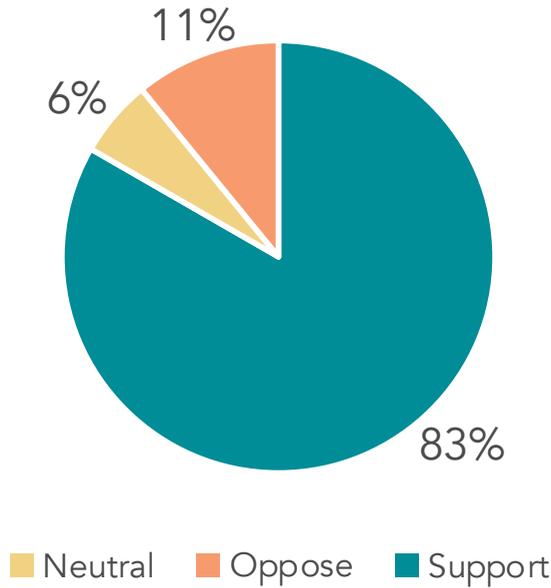
The majority of Mississippians surveyed support measures and policies that would help children from birth through age eight get off to a strong start – like quality child care, more reliable options for quality early learning, and increased rates of well-child health exams.

- Mississippi residents see early childhood spending as an investment that will pay off in the long run. Seventy-nine percent of Mississippians agree that spending money on quality early childhood education will save the state money in the long-term.

Findings presented in this brief are taken from a statewide telephone survey of Mississippi residents, aged 18 years or older. These data were collected using probability sampling techniques and using industry-standard data collection protocols. The data are weighted according to population parameters released annually by the US Census Bureau; thus, these data are, mathematically speaking, the best possible representation of Mississippi's diverse populations and communities. The survey was conducted in August of 2019 by the Wolfgang Frese Survey Research Laboratory at Mississippi State University's Social Science Research Center. The final dataset included responses from 410 randomly-selected survey participants. The survey was supported by a grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. Learn more about the survey specifics at <https://bit.ly/2UrwYgy>.

HIGH LEVELS OF SUPPORT FOR PUBLIC PRE-KINDERGARTEN

MISSISSIPPIANS' LEVEL OF SUPPORT FOR PUBLIC PRE-KINDERGARTEN

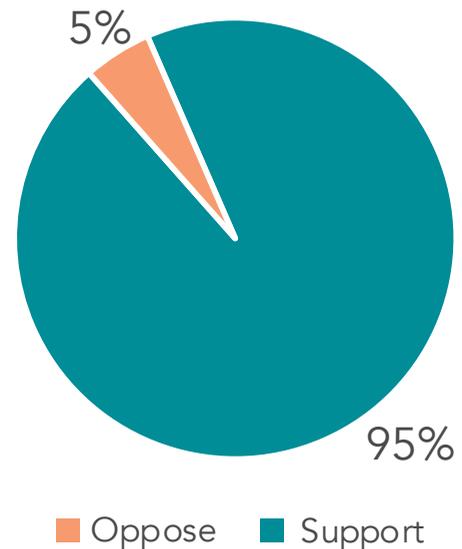


- The vast majority of Mississippians surveyed, 83%, expressed support for a public, state-funded pre-kindergarten system.
- Most would support higher taxes to ensure quality and access: 65% of Mississippians expressed support for an annual tax increase of \$50 to fund public pre-kindergarten.

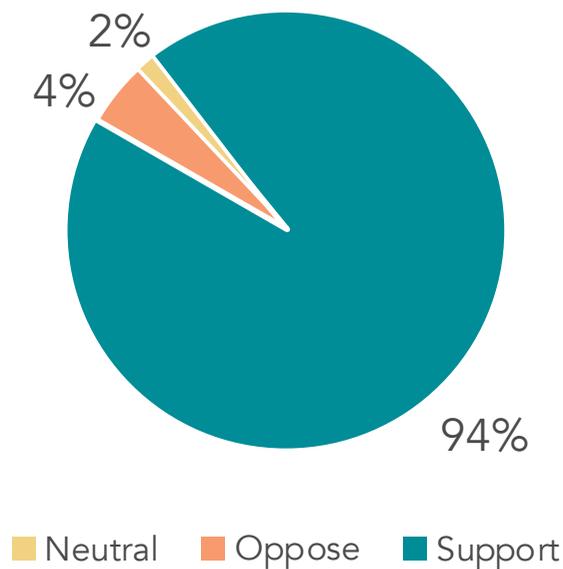
NEAR UNANIMOUS SUPPORT FOR CHILD CARE QUALITY RATINGS

- Ninety-five percent of respondents agreed that the state should rate the quality of child care centers and make these ratings available to the public.
- For parents and the public to have some guideposts in determining the quality of child care centers, Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) have been implemented (or are in the planning phase) across the country. These are most often measured by a rating scale of a number of stars or levels; the higher the number denotes that a center has met more benchmarks of quality child care. While states determine the components that are measured within QRIS, the most common areas addressed include: health and safety, program management, curriculum and learning activities, provider qualifications; child/staff ratios.^{2,3} Mississippi disbanded its QRIS system in 2016 in lieu of a new quality framework. The new framework rates centers as either standard or comprehensive and is currently being piloted. The new rating system is not yet scaled beyond Head Start centers and child care centers that accept TANF vouchers.⁴

MISSISSIPPIANS' LEVEL OF SUPPORT FOR CHILD CARE QUALITY RATINGS



HIGH LEVELS OF SUPPORT FOR WELL-CHILD CHECKS



- Survey results revealed that Mississippians value policies that make sure children get off to a strong start. Among Mississippians surveyed, 94% expressed support for requiring a wellness exam or check up before enrolling children in child care centers.

MIXED PERCEPTIONS OF STATE LAWMAKERS' ATTENTION TO CHILDREN'S ISSUES

- Ninety-two percent think that children's issues should be very important to state lawmakers – but only 22% believed that these issues actually are very important to their elected officials.
- There is opportunity for state lawmakers to lead on children's issues as the public support is very high. Mississippians want to see state lawmakers taking action and making children's issues, such as early childhood education and well-child check-ups, a priority.

DISCUSSION / PUBLIC OPINION & EVIDENCE-BASED POLICY: OVERLAPS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Early childhood experts agree that children's well-being takes a team to build – a team that includes families, but also child care providers, early childhood educators, health care professionals, and policy makers.

The survey reflects that there are key places where Mississippians' opinions and priorities align with solid evidence and trusted research that point the way to good policy and practice. These include:

Mississippi's children face many problems – and state government has a role to play in addressing them. The well-being of many of Mississippi's children is on a shaky foundation, with 28% of children living in poverty.⁵ Mississippians are aware of the many issues facing the state's youngest residents and want to see state law makers demonstrate a greater commitment to children.

Early childhood education is an investment that pays off.

According to Nobel Prize-winning economist, Dr. James Heckman, investment in early childhood education promotes optimal development in children and yields substantial economic benefits, short and long-term, to the community.⁶ Seventy-nine percent of Mississippians agree that spending money on quality early childhood education will save the state money long-term. Respondents reveal that they think a high priority should be placed on quality early education and child care.

Our state is missing opportunities to do the right thing at the right time.

- Only 30% of children under six years of age are receiving a developmental health screening that could spot social, emotional, and physical (including hearing and vision) delays early, when taking action would be most effective.⁷ Yet 67% of Mississippians support the idea of requiring a developmental screening before enrolling children in a child care or an early education setting. Increasing rates of developmental health screenings can lead to earlier detection and addressing of any problems.
- Only 8% of Mississippi four-year-olds are served by state-funded Pre-K programs.⁸ Yet 83% of survey respondents think this should be expanded. They expressed support for a public, state-funded pre-kindergarten system, and most are willing to support a tax increase to make it happen.

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ABOUT THE CHILDREN'S FOUNDATION OF MISSISSIPPI

The Children's Foundation of Mississippi was established in 2019 as an independent operating foundation focused on improving the policies and systems that affect children and youth. The Children's Foundation of Mississippi works to align and connect our systems and make sure our youth head toward a bright future. We do this by advocating for better policies, and by convening policymakers, agencies, organizations, and communities to work on systems-level problems.