

# Community Solution Action Plan



Stevens  
County

>MN Project  
July 2014



Changing the landscape of early care  
and education in Greater Minnesota.

Because nothing is **Greater Than** Minnesota's future.

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# INTRODUCTION

## What's Greater Than Minnesota?

The Greater Than Minnesota (>MN) Project is an innovative initiative of First Children's Finance and the six Minnesota Initiative Foundations to address the challenges of rural child care and early education in Greater Minnesota.

## Why Greater Minnesota?

Too often, decisions about early care and education are made in the Twin Cities metro area while communities in Greater Minnesota are left out of the conversation. When the challenges are different, the solutions must be different. Populations may be smaller, but the stakes are just as high. Rural children are more likely to be poor than children in urban areas, and are more likely to be living in deep poverty for longer periods of time. Many rural areas struggle to attract and retain a young, educated workforce, while others lack the resources to keep up with their own growth and success. Although rural communities face many challenges, they are also resilient. They have the innovation it takes to develop nimble, creative solutions that will be effective in rural areas. The >MN Project leverages small communities' independent, can-do attitudes to address early care and education in Greater Minnesota.



## The >MN Philosophy

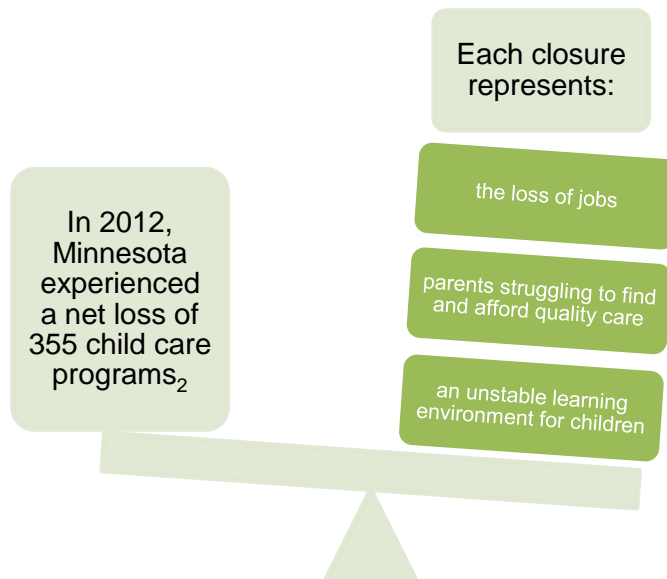
The >MN Project believes that rural communities are greater than their size in numbers. They have dreams for their children that are greater than the status quo. Together, we are greater than our challenges. Where some might see desolate swaths of land and dwindling populations, we see opportunity for innovation and renewal. We're determined to listen and learn, not lecture and diagnose. By mobilizing and empowering rural communities, we are changing the landscape of early care and education in Greater Minnesota. Because nothing is greater than Minnesota's future.

## THE >MN FRAMEWORK

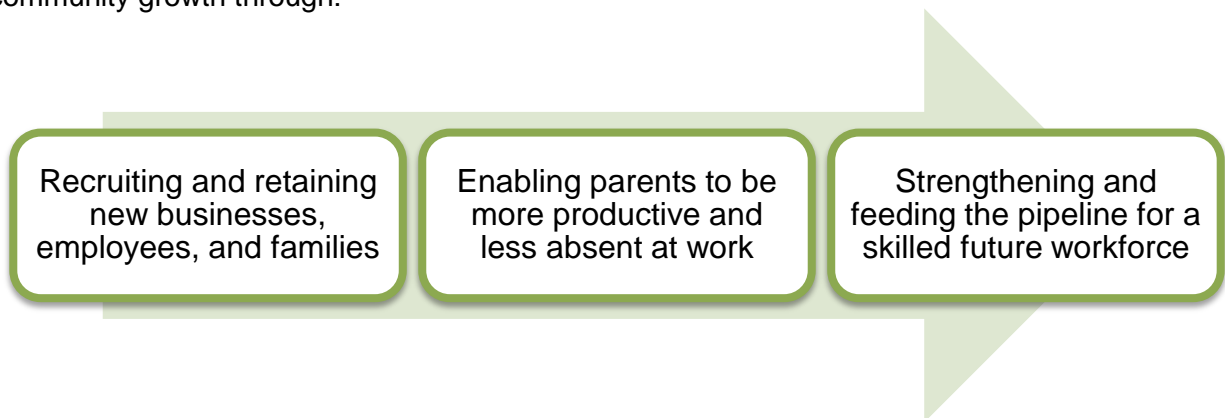
*"If employees can't find quality care for their children, they won't work for you. They won't move to your community, or they'll be forced to move away, or they might have to consider quitting their job to stay home with their children because they have no other option."*

- Kris Bevell, Editor, *Prairie Business Magazine*<sup>1</sup>

In rural communities, child care exists and often struggles within a regional market context. Ebbs and flows of the local economy greatly influence the sustainability of a community's child care supply, and vice versa.



That's why the >MN Project addresses child care and early education challenges through a framework of regional economic development. A robust supply of high quality child care fosters community growth through:




The connection is clear: when our children thrive, so do our communities. Investing in early care and education is not only the *right* thing to do for our youngest citizens, but the *best* thing to do for our economic growth and prosperity.

# THE >MN APPROACH


The >MN Project has three distinct components that build on and intersect with one another to create a comprehensive approach to addressing rural early care and education needs.

## Community Solution Action Plan



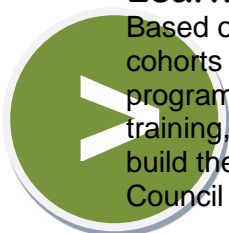
It takes a community to create a community plan. That's why each regional process begins with a Town Hall. Concerned community members, elected officials, lenders, school superintendents, family child care providers, child care centers, small business owners, large employers, teachers, Head Start, rural economic development representatives—really, *anyone* who is interested in discussing child care is invited to participate in a Town Hall meeting in their community. During that meeting, participants explore data about their community, identify successes, look for gaps and opportunities for improvement, and start to build the basis of a *Community Solution Action Plan*.

## Business Advisory Council



After the framework of the *Community Solution Action Plan* is developed, the >MN Project recruits the business community to review the plan and start engaging in the development of solutions. Engagement of the private sector is a critical component of implementation of the *Community Solution Action Plan*. Local business community members shape, inform and advocate for the plan, provide business expertise to child care business owners, and identify community resources that support successful implementation of the plan.

## Learning Cohorts



Based on the priorities established in the *Community Solution Action Plan*, learning cohorts are established. Learning cohorts contain 6-8 child care and early education programs within the region. For approximately one year, the cohort has access to training, business consultation and technical assistance from First Children's Finance to build their capacity to improve their business operations. The regional Business Advisory Council also provides business advice and mentorship to the cohort members.



**>MN's multi-layered approach meets rural communities where they are.** By building on existing strengths and providing targeted resources, the >MN Project:

- *Strengthens existing early care and education businesses*, ensuring that children have continuity of care that prepares them for success in school and beyond.
- *Expands the availability of quality child care* by creating new and innovative community partnerships.
- *Increases regional and statewide public awareness* of early care and education's role in rural economic development.

## THE REGION

### Stevens County, Minnesota

The >MN Project launched in partnership with the West Central Initiative and the University of Minnesota – Morris Center for Small Towns in February 2014.



The West Central Initiative selected Stevens County as the initial community to participate in the >MN Project.

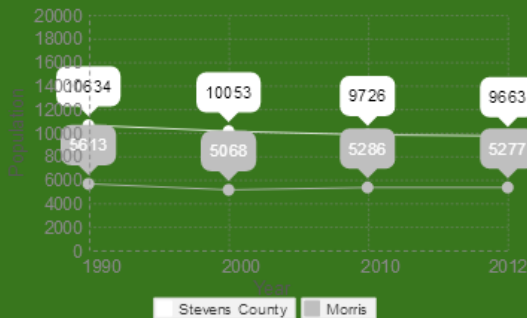


Prior to the region's Town Hall meeting, >MN gathered background data<sub>3</sub> for the area to inform the process.

## THE DATA

# STEVENS COUNTY

### Population Trends



596 children under age 5



69% of families with children under age 5 have both parents in the workforce



21.5% of families with children under age 5 lives in poverty

### LARGEST INDUSTRIES



Health Care & Social Assistance

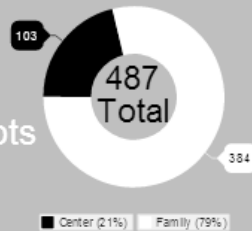


Manufacturing



Retail

Breakdown of Licensed Child Care Slots



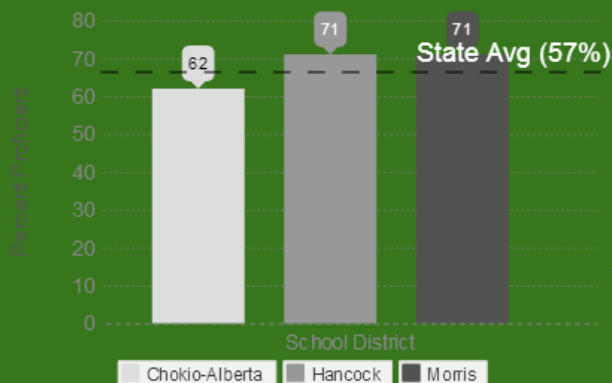
4 School-based/ Head Start/ Preschool sites



1 Parent Aware rated program

(available county-wide in 2015)

### 3rd Grade Reading\*



Prepared by  
Greater Than MN  
2014

\*Children who are not kindergarten-ready are half as likely to be reading well by 3rd grade. Children who are not reading proficiently by 3rd grade are 4x more likely to drop out of high school.

## THE TRENDS

Data is important, but it's only one piece of the puzzle when evaluating the current needs of a community.

On February 11, 2014, the community Town Hall meeting was hosted in Morris, MN, and drew over 50 participants representing child care, early education, business, government, and faith communities in Stevens County. Working together, participants reviewed the background data and identified trends impacting child care and early education in Stevens County:

- There is a strong, committed family child care association in Stevens County.
- The community believes that it is the responsibility of everyone in the community to work together to come up with solutions to providing quality, affordable, accessible early care and education in Stevens County.
- Training and professional development opportunities for providers and educators in the community are hard to find, expensive and require travel.
- Stevens County has a very low unemployment rate. Local employers like the hospital are trying to find employees who have reliable care and care during nontraditional hours (shift work) and rotating schedules (week on/week off). Child care is difficult to obtain, especially care during extended hours. The result is parents who are unable to maintain employment, or children who are in substandard care situations while their parents are at work.
- The community is experiencing a growing amount of cultural diversity and requires culturally competent early care and education for those children and families.
- There is a significant lack of infant, school age, part-time, and drop-in care in the community.
- New K-3 alignment has proven that quality early care and education makes a huge difference in kindergarten readiness. There are new, higher kindergarten standards that raise the bar for children being ready for school. This greater responsibility should come with increased support and resources for those early care and education providers that are doing the heavy lifting of school readiness.
- Licensed family child care providers expressed concerns about changes in regulations that affect their willingness to provide infant care and ability to access trainings.

*"I am hopeful that local government officials and employers recognize the importance of quality early childhood to their workforce. The exciting part of this meeting was having the many different viewpoints all voice similar concerns and be genuinely interested in tackling this issue."*

- Sue Dieter, West Central Initiative



***Thank you to everyone who participated in the Stevens County Town Hall meeting:***

Angela Ascheman, Morris Area Child Care Center  
Jone Anderson, Licensed Family Child Care Provider  
Dawn Block, Child Care Aware  
Natalie Braegelmann, Licensed Family Child Care Provider  
Maria Burns, Morris Area Child Care Center  
Emily Carruth, University of Minnesota – Morris  
Carol Cook, University of Minnesota – Morris  
Vicki Dalager, Licensed Family Child Care Provider  
Sue Dieter, West Central Initiative  
Deb Dogotch, Head Start  
Jackie Dripps, Licensed Family Child Care Provider  
Paul Erdal, First Lutheran Church  
Marsha Erickson, West Central Initiative  
Elisa Ettesvold, Stevens County Human Services  
Darcy Fuhrman, Licensed Family Child Care Provider  
Ken Gagner, Morris Area Schools  
Jan Hagen, Bremer Bank  
Jess and Aaron Hamrick, Licensed Family Child Care Provider  
LuAnn Harris, Child Care Aware  
Marie Hansen, Licensed Family Child Care Provider  
Sara Haugen, University of Minnesota – Morris Commission on Women  
Franchetta Hauptert, Stevens County Public Health  
Michael Haynes, Stevens County Economic Improvement Commission  
Judy Hein, Licensed Family Child Care Provider  
Toni Hughes, Licensed Family Child Care Provider  
Jeanne Koehtop, Licensed Family Child Care Provider  
Renee Konz, Riverview LLP  
Bob Kopitzke, Stevens County Commissioner  
Marilyn Leraas, Head Start  
Jody Loher, Head Start  
Terry Maloney, Licensed Family Child Care Provider  
Rep. Jay McNamar, Minnesota House of Representatives District 12A  
Colleen Miller, Community Member  
Julie Miller, Kids in Christ Preschool  
Jeff Miller, Morris City Council  
Joanie Murphy, Stevens County Human Services  
Amanda Nygaard, Family & Consumer Science Teacher  
Heather Quiram, Licensed Family Child Care Provider  
Tony Reimers, Morris Area Community Education  
Alexis Salas, Head Start  
Joan Spaeth, Stevens County Medical Center  
Sherry Tiegs, Licensed Family Child Care Provider, Family Child Care Association President  
Rev. Michael Vinson, Lutheran Campus Ministry – Morris  
Jenny Zeltwanger, Riverview LLP

## THE PLAN

# Community Solution Action Plan

*for Stevens County*

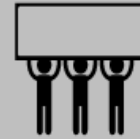
The community has identified a need for:



Child Care Options



Staff Training



Community Collaborations

### **GOAL 1**

#### **Child Care Options**

- > Assess the current kinds of child care available in the community and address gaps through innovative partnerships with local providers
- > Create a community database of specialized care options available in the community:
  - > Infant care
  - > School age care
  - > Nontraditional hours
  - > Part-time care
  - > Care for children with special needs
  - > Culturally specific child care or multi-cultural care options

### **GOAL 2**

#### **Staff Training**

- > Affordable, local trainings focused on increasing child care quality
- > Training experiences support providers achieving a high level of education in the field

### **GOAL 3**

#### **Community Collaborations**

- > Organize a community education campaign to increase awareness of the importance child care plays in the local economy and the creation of a vibrant community
- > Educate local leaders and policymakers about child care's critical role in school readiness and identify ways to build connections to quality child care programs
- > Create opportunities for local entities to support child care programs
- > Host community conversations so child care programs, local licensors, and policymakers increase their understanding of current legislation and regulations impact availability of care options in Stevens County

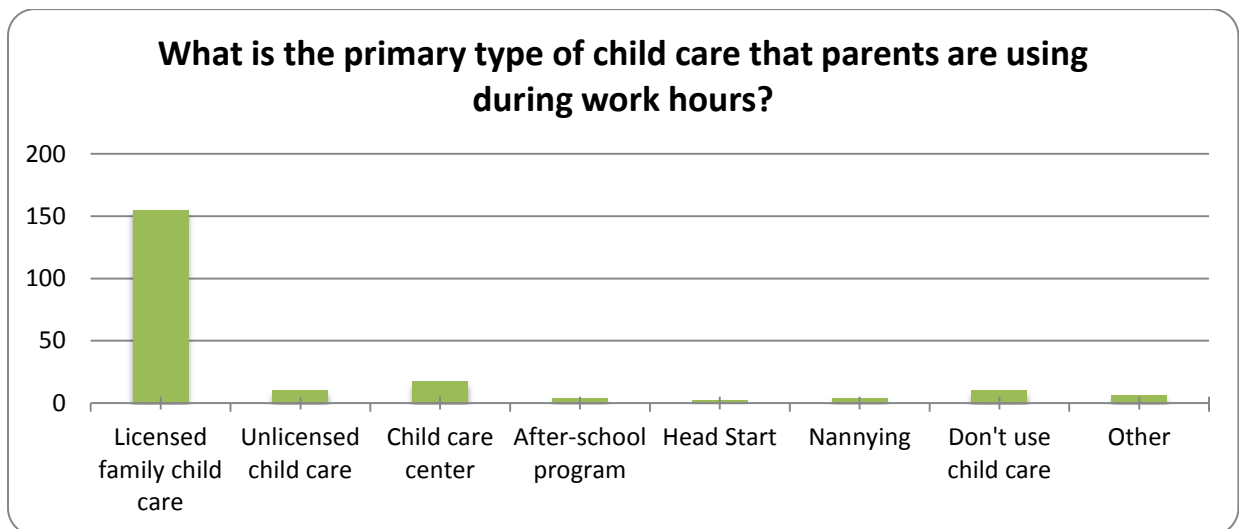
## RESEARCH FINDINGS

Following the Community Town Hall event, the University of Minnesota-Morris Center for Small Towns partnered with First Children's Finance to begin initial work on Goal 1, to identify current child care options. This innovative collaboration designed two research processes aimed at learning more about the current child care options from Stevens County parents and from existing licensed child care providers.

### Parent Survey Findings

The parent survey was designed to seek Stevens County parents' perspectives on the availability of child care, their personal preferences about the types of care available, and how the availability of child care impacts their personal decisions about their family and employment. The survey was available online for a 3-week period of time, and 210 survey responses were received. A link to the survey tool was distributed via the school district's parent electronic communication system. Stevens County licensed child care providers also shared the link with parents enrolled in their child care program.

The majority of parent survey respondents (75%) reporting using licensed family child care as the primary type of care during work hours; using a licensed child care center (8%) was reported as the second highest type of child care accessed during work hours.

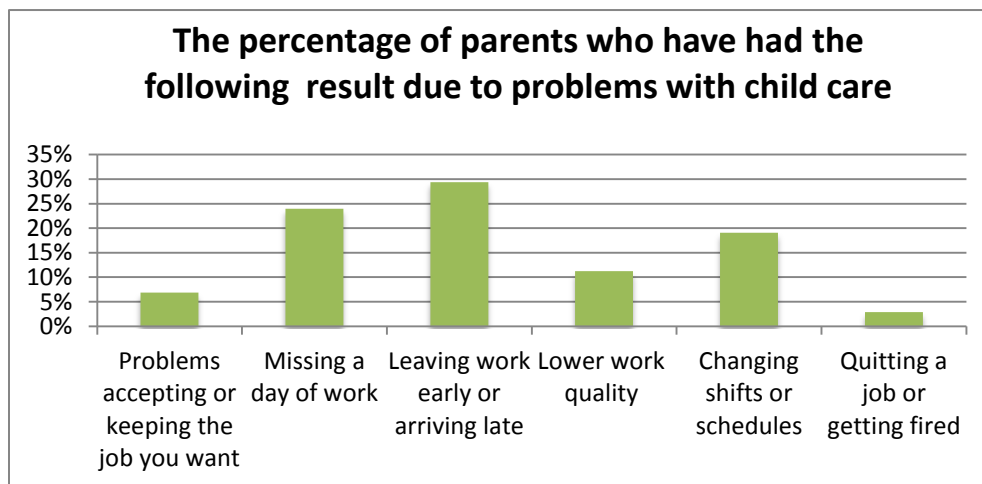


Parents were asked to identify ways in which they find child care. The highest percentages of parents find child care through recommendations from family, friends and co-workers (84%), the Stevens County Department of Human Services (19%), recommendations from a previous child care provider (19%) and from a personal relationship with a child care provider (16%).

When asked to rate the availability of child care options in Stevens County, 64% of parents rated availability as very good, good or fair, but 35% of respondents rated availability as poor or very poor. Parents were asked to rate how easy or difficult it is to enroll in their preferred type of child care. While many parents reported that enrolling in their preferred type of care was very easy (4%) or easy (42%), a significant number reported it was difficult (19%) or very difficult (15%).

Parent respondents also reported that the availability of child care impacts decisions about the size of their family, their employment and continuing to reside in the county. 10% of parents identified the availability of child care impacts their decision to have children; 23% reported it impacts their decision to have additional children. 16% of parents said child care impacts their decision to live in Stevens County.

The survey asked questions about how the availability of child care has impacted their employment. 72% identified child care as a factor that impacts their decision to maintain their employment. Parents reported having the following result due to a lack of child care:

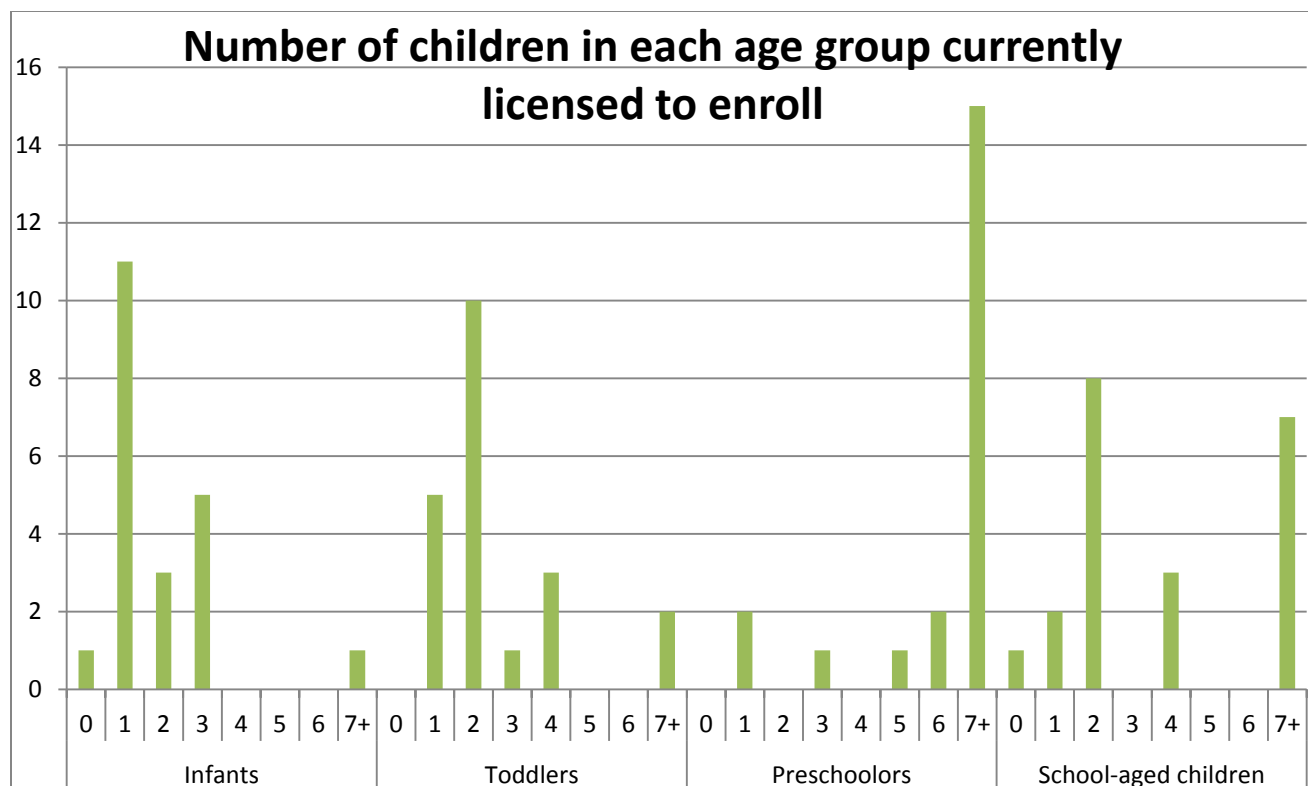


Results from the parent survey are consistent with the data, trends and goals of the Community Solution Action Plan. The parent survey results demonstrate the critical role child care plays in rural communities and the regional economy.

### **Provider Survey Findings**

The provider survey was designed to seek input from Stevens County child care providers regarding their business practices, the current state of their child care businesses and supports they may need to improve their business's profitability. The survey was available for 3 week period of time, and 23 child care providers (19 licensed family child care providers and 1 licensed child care center) completed the survey. An electronic link to the survey was emailed directly to licensed providers from First Children's Finance and the Stevens County Department of Human Services.

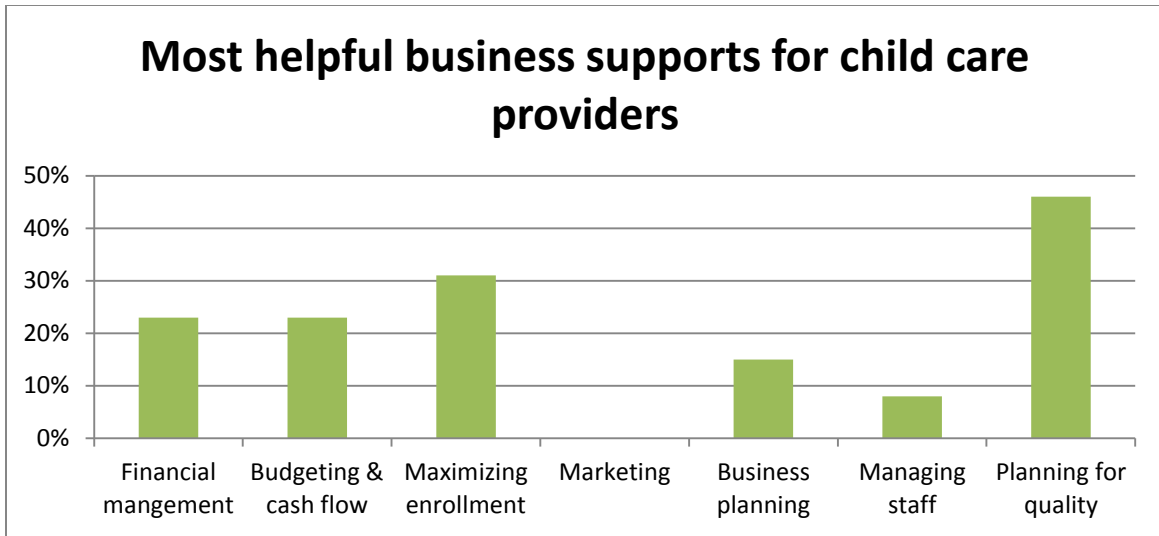
During the Town Hall event, a number of family child care providers voiced concerns about providing care for infants, so the survey asked providers questions about the age groups of children they serve. 85% of respondents reported that they currently provide care for infants. It is important to note the overall capacity for infant enrollment below:



The survey results identified a mismatch between how providers market to families and how families actually search for child care. Child care providers should note that families in Stevens County use a wide variety of methods to search for care options, including online search engines and websites, including Child Care Aware and online child care search websites.

When asked about the current condition of their child care business, 10% of providers reported that the business is profitable and they are looking to expand. 62% of provider reported their business was profitable and 26% of providers responded that their business was breaking even. No providers reported that their business was not profitable and no providers reported considering the closing of their child care business.

Given that the next steps in the >MN Project is the formation of child care business learning cohorts and engaging the business community in the Community Solution Action Plan, the survey asked about what types of business supports would be most critical.



A complete report of the research findings is currently being written and will be shared during Summer 2014. The >MN Project would like to thank the University of Minnesota-Morris Center for Small Towns for its partnership in developing and coordinating the parent and provider survey processes.

## ENDNOTES

1. “Don’t Forget Daycares,” Kris Bevell, Prairie Business Magazine, Oct. 25, 2013  
<http://prairiebusiness.areavoices.com/2013/10/dont-forget-daycares/>
2. Child Care Aware of Minnesota Annual Report, 2012  
[http://www.childcareawaremn.org/sites/default/files/attachments/2012\\_annual\\_report.pdf](http://www.childcareawaremn.org/sites/default/files/attachments/2012_annual_report.pdf)
3. Background data sources:
  - American Community Survey, US Census Bureau <https://www.census.gov/acs/www/>
  - Data Center, Minnesota Department of Education  
<http://education.state.mn.us/mde/Data/>
  - Data Tools, Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development  
<http://mn.gov/deed/data/data-tools/>
  - Minnesota State Demographic Center <http://www.demography.state.mn.us/>
  - Licensing Information Lookup, Minnesota Department of Human Services  
<http://licensinglookup.dhs.state.mn.us/>
  - Parent Aware Ratings <http://parentawareratings.org/>
  - Infographics created with Piktochart <http://piktochart.com/>



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and education in Greater Minnesota.

Because nothing is **Greater Than** Minnesota's future.

## **>MN PROJECT INFORMATION**

### **WEBSITE**

[www.greaterthanmn.org](http://www.greaterthanmn.org)

### **TWITTER**

[@greaterthanmn](https://twitter.com/greaterthanmn)

### **CONTACT**



Heidi Hagel Braid | Minnesota Director, First Children's Finance  
612-279-6504 direct

[heidihb@firstchildrensfinance.org](mailto:heidihb@firstchildrensfinance.org)



Jamie Swezey | Business Development Associate, First Children's Finance  
612-279-6512 direct

[jamie@firstchildrensfinance.org](mailto:jamie@firstchildrensfinance.org)

## **PARTNERS**

Minnesota Initiative Foundations | [www.greaterminnesota.net](http://www.greaterminnesota.net)

Otto Bremer Foundation | [www.ottobremer.org](http://www.ottobremer.org)

Bush Foundation | [www.bushfoundation.org](http://www.bushfoundation.org)