

# STEPS to Family Child Care Success: A Unique Professional Development Program

> ***"I'm basically the link between the providers and their potential, you know, because they sometimes don't have this idea, or they don't have the vision of what they can do with their child care. And what I do is that I help them envision that. What is possible for them."***
> ***-- STEPS Cultural Navigator***

## Professional Development for Family Child Care Providers

STEPS is a comprehensive professional development training program designed to increase immigrant and refugee family child care (FCC) providers' skills related to operating a successful business. Services are provided by trusted ethnic community-based organizations (ECBOs) and cultural navigators who share providers' cultural and linguistic heritage. Evaluation data collected over the course of 6 years and 20 cohorts consistently demonstrate the efficacy of the STEPS program and its approach to professional development. Over three hundred STEPS providers have completed the 14-week training series, created a business plan, and increased or sustained their enrollment. Importantly, STEPS providers feel confident in their ability to continue to strengthen their business practices and provide quality child care services to their community. Data consistently indicate that public investments in the STEPS model—especially for immigrant, refugee, and historically disadvantaged communities—strengthens child care quality and accessibility in these communities.

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# The Promise of Family Child Care to Address the Child Care Crisis

The child care crisis in our communities is not just about availability and access for families, particularly those from culturally diverse, under resourced communities. The crisis is also about strengthening local early care and education (ECE) systems through an effective, stable, and diverse workforce.

Family child care (FCC) has long been an important part of the child care landscape, and is a favorable option for families seeking child care. FCC homes tend to be located in the communities where families live, are more informal and intimate, and are less expensive than center-based care.




The San Diego County Child Care Blueprint (2023) is focused on creating a more equitable early care and education system that allows every family to have “access to child care that meets their geographic, scheduling, cultural, language and economic needs” and ensures that “the child care provider workforce is highly valued and financially thriving.” Similarly, in San Francisco, parent engagement efforts that informed the Department of Early Childhood’s Strategic Plan 2023-2027 indicated that early education environments should be responsive to families’ culture, language, and insights about their children. Families want to see themselves in the staff working with their children and to feel that their culture is understood, represented, and valued. Because FCC providers often come from diverse backgrounds themselves and live in the same communities where they work, they can engage young children in a shared culture and language that reflect the goals and values of their family and community (Shivers et al., 2007).



Despite the many benefits of FCC, providers, and the early childhood education (ECE) workforce as a whole, are poorly paid, and wage gaps disproportionately harm Black and Latina educators. Multiple factors create these gaps, which have historical and socio-political roots that stem from systems of domination that relegated the less desirable domestic and child care work needed by white families to women of color (Hill Collins, 2009; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994).

***The past twenty years have witnessed significant discourse in the field of ECE regarding how to best support the professional development of the workforce. Coupled with this interest is an increased focus on the ways in which ECE systems often call for a one size fits all approach to quality and professional development which fails to consider the strengths and values of communities of color (Garrity et al., 2021; Souto-Manning & Rabadi-Raol, 2018).***

In addition to economic challenges, FCC providers struggle to access professional development and quality improvement efforts aimed at supporting the ECE workforce (Hooper & Hallam, 2021). These challenges are especially acute for immigrant and refugee providers due to language barriers and high levels of stress and economic instability (Garrity et al., 2021). These barriers make it difficult for FCC from diverse cultural communities to pursue, establish, and grow a sustainable business that helps address the child care crisis. STEPS was designed to address these barriers to professional development by supporting FCC providers from immigrant and refugee communities to operate their own business while providing culturally and linguistically relevant child care services to the community.

# Steps to Family Child Care Success (STEPS): Creating a Well-Trained and Supported FCC Workforce

In 2019, the Center for Excellence in Early Development (CEED) at San Diego State University joined forces with several local ethnic community-based organizations (ECBOs) to develop the Steps to Family Child Care Success Program (STEPS). Using data from focus groups conducted with FCC providers, STEPS is designed to increase immigrant and refugee providers' skills in operating a successful business, increase the availability of high-quality, affordable child care in their communities, and honor and uplift their community.

STEPS providers are served in cohorts that share ethnicity and language, and ECBOs play a critical role in the provision of the program given their long-standing presence in the community and history of providing culturally and linguistically responsive services. STEPS leverages cultural navigators hired by the ECBOs to support FCC providers in building and sustaining a viable business. Because cultural navigators are from the same cultural communities as the providers they support, they serve as a bridge to the multiple child care agencies and systems providers must navigate to operate a successful business. They assist with translation, delivering the curriculum, and supporting recruitment and child enrollment and retention. Providers also receive one-on-one financial coaching from a business counselor to identify short and long-term business goals that reflect strong business practices. As described by one provider, "We need to know how to run a business in the United States." Research on the efficacy of the STEPS model has demonstrated that cultural navigators' lived experiences as refugees and immigrants enable them to provide culturally and linguistically responsive services to the FCC providers they serve (Garrity et al., 2024).

***She is a great support for us. We are a little forgotten about and thanks to the program it has become known that there are many providers who have needs. We feel that we are not alone. When the pandemic comes and this course came out, I was about to leave the field. I told my cultural navigator that I was about to leave, that I wasn't sure about taking STEPS. She told me take it and then you decide. It was like I got back to my business and was able to get my feet back on the ground. This program came to lift us up, to lift our spirits and to help us get ahead.***
***-- STEPS FCC Provider***



# Results: Developing Confident and Capable Professionals

**To date, each ECBO has supported:**

**The Chicano Federation**

8 Cohorts
116 FCC Providers
856 Children

Spanish-speaking providers

**Horn of Africa Community**

4 Cohorts
54 FCC Providers
270 Children

Somali-speaking providers

**International Rescue Committee**

8 Cohorts
158 FCC Providers
1023 Children

Arabic, Dari, & Swahili-speaking providers

**Program outcomes over the six years of implementation include:**

**A total of 328 providers, serving 2,149 children completed the one-year program, providing evidence of the value of individualized, culturally and linguistically responsive professional development.**

**With the support of cultural navigators and business counselors, providers collectively secured $1,014,498 in capital funds.**

**94% of providers (n=318) developed personalized business plans to further increase revenue and the quality of their business.**

**Collectively, providers completed 343 best business practices for child care programs during the program period.**

**Among 211 STEPS providers surveyed, 92% of providers rated the STEPS program, either a 4 or 5 on a 5-point scale. 88% of providers were "very confident" or "confident" in newly learned business practices.**

**Enrollment increased or was sustained for 75% (n=328) of providers who completed the program.**

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# Recommendations

## Focus on Cultural Navigators

FCC providers are integral members of the ECE community yet are often considered non-professionals or babysitters (Tuominen, 2003). STEPS demonstrates that culturally and linguistically responsive professional development and the use of cultural navigators and business counselors embedded in ECBOs can strengthen FCC providers' professional development. Navigators that reflect FCC providers' distinct cultural communities are instrumental in helping providers to navigate the complex child care landscape.

When intentionally funded and programmed through trusted ECBOs, cultural navigators can be readily available and highly valuable by providing a range of support to FCC providers. Testimonials and focus group data indicate that STEPS providers feel supported and valued as professionals and highlight the role of the cultural navigator in supporting their success.

## Build Foundational Business Practices

The STEPS model supports immigrant and refugee providers who have the greatest barriers to establishing and sustaining a viable FCC business. Starting, maintaining, and growing an FCC business is challenging enough, and is more so for those who require additional assistance in navigating basic needs in an unfamiliar language. The STEPS model is a culturally and linguistically relevant professional development program that has proven results strengthening economic opportunities for providers who provide a critical service to their communities.

## Invest in Communities of Color

Data collected on the efficacy of the STEPS model have important implications at the systemic level given that each year, approximately six billion dollars are spent on PreK-12 professional development in the United States, and this investment is expected to grow an additional 8.9% by 2028 (United States Professional Learning Market Report, 2023). When considering how to allocate these funds, states, quality rating improvement systems, and other entities (e.g., Head Start) should consider the use of cultural navigators to promote culturally and linguistically responsive support that reflects the assets, resources, histories, and lives of diverse cultural communities.

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# Recommendations

## Invest in Partnerships

Public sector agencies at the local level that administer child care programs, incentives, and support can invest in professional development for diverse FCC providers. As the STEPS model shows, public agencies can create formalized partnerships with ECBOs to hire cultural navigators. Foundational curriculum and coaching methods can be tailored to meet specific populations' contexts, needs and challenges and build on their many strengths. Tracking, evaluating, and reporting on STEPS data and outcome measures to the local public sector agencies can be part of these partnerships.

## Integrate Research

STEPS represents an authentic research-practice partnership between the funding entities, the ECBOs delivering the services, the FCC providers, and San Diego State University. The program's success highlights the value of multifaceted, bi-directional relationships built on trust and a commitment to ensuring equitable access to high quality professional development that builds on community strengths. These relationships have allowed researchers to gain a deeper understanding of local contexts through first-hand access to practices and service delivery and have informed continuous improvement efforts across 4 language-based cohorts. Although building and sustaining these relationships takes time and resources, the payoff is visible in meaningful and context-driven research agendas that produce new knowledge and create positive outcomes that reduce inequities.

# Conclusions

## High Rate of Return on Investment

By investing in the FCC workforce, the children, families, and communities they serve are also supported. The STEPS model delivers:

- Increased professional development, business acumen, and stability among FCC providers, especially from immigrant and refugee communities.
- Increased child care enrollment in low-resource, diverse communities.
- Increased economic mobility for parents to pursue and maintain employment thanks to reduced child care demands.

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