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Florida's Early Childhood
Integrated Data System

Family Economic Mobility as a Performance Measure in State Child Care Systems

A Framework for Evidence-Informed Impact Reporting

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EARLY CHILDHOOD POLICY RESEARCH GROUP (ECPRG)

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Executive Summary

State child care systems are under increasing pressure to demonstrate measurable impact on families and communities. Traditional approaches to measuring family economic outcomes have relied on threshold-based models anchored to fixed income benchmarks, such as poverty levels, living wage standards, or self-sufficiency indices. These models, while familiar, carry structural limitations that reduce their utility as performance measures for a dynamic public investment like child care.

This paper proposes that state child care systems adopt Family Economic Mobility as the organizing construct for impact reporting. Mobility, defined as measurable and directional improvement in a family's capacity to meet current needs, reduce economic vulnerability, and expand future economic opportunity, offers three strategic advantages over self-sufficiency frameworks. First, it measures trajectory rather than status, which more accurately reflects the mechanism through which child care operates. Second, it is sensitive to partial progress, enabling meaningful reporting even when families have not crossed a fixed threshold. Third, it is grounded in an empirically robust literature that is less politically vulnerable than needs-based adequacy models.

The paper provides a formal definition, a three-dimension measurement architecture, a twelve-indicator Key Performance Indicator (KPI) framework with annual data sources, and guidance on operationalization for state reporting purposes.

1. The Problem with Self-Sufficiency as a Policy Metric

The dominant models used to assess family economic outcomes in the context of child care and early childhood policy are variations on a common structure: a fixed income threshold, calibrated to a standard family budget, against which a family's earnings are measured. Four models predominate in state and federal policy contexts.

Model	Approach	Limitations for Child Care Impact Reporting
MIT Living Wage Calculator	Fixed income threshold against standardized regional budgets	Does not account for family human capital variation; static threshold obscures mobility; politically loaded framing of 'adequacy'
EPI Family Budget Calculator	Comprehensive cost-of-living budget by family type and region	Binary threshold model; no trajectory component; uniform consumption assumptions across family types
Pearce Self-Sufficiency Standard	State-level income thresholds calibrated to actual cost of living	Anchored to single-earner model; does not capture asset accumulation or human capital investment; threshold framing invites political reinterpretation
Federal Poverty Level (FPL)	Income thresholds set at 3x the cost of a minimum food diet (1963 methodology)	Widely criticized as outdated and inadequate; no regional variation; no measure of actual needs or progress

Each of these models shares a structural liability for the purposes of child care system impact reporting. They assume uniform consumption patterns across geographically and demographically diverse families, embed static snapshots rather than directional measures, and anchor evaluation to whether a family has crossed a single line rather than whether the family is moving in a positive direction. The binary quality of threshold models also creates political exposure: a child care system can produce substantial positive change in family trajectories and still appear to fail if families remain below the threshold.

There is also a growing body of scholarship critiquing the adequacy and conceptual coherence of threshold-based self-sufficiency measurement. Cellini and Karp (2010) documented significant variation in household consumption patterns across income levels that standard budget models fail to capture. Cauthen and Fass (2008) noted that the self-sufficiency standard, while an improvement over the FPL, still fails to account for variation in family human capital, community social infrastructure, or the contributions of informal support networks to economic resilience. For state child care systems, which serve an extraordinarily diverse population across community contexts, these limitations are not marginal but central.

2. The Case for Economic Mobility as an Organizing Construct

Economic mobility, as a conceptual frame, shifts the evaluative question from whether families are economically adequate to whether families are moving forward. This is both a more accurate representation of what child care does and a more defensible construct for public accountability purposes.

2.1 Empirical Foundations

The economics of intergenerational mobility provide a robust empirical foundation for this reframe. Chetty, Hendren, Kline, and Saez (2014) established that economic mobility varies substantially across geographic contexts, and that early environmental conditions, including access to stable, quality child care, are among the strongest predictors of long-run earnings and socioeconomic attainment. Their work demonstrates that the geography of opportunity is not fixed, and that early intervention can shift trajectory in measurable ways.

Heckman and colleagues (2010, 2016) extended this logic into early childhood investment theory, demonstrating that the return on investment in high-quality early childhood programs is highest for disadvantaged children and operates through skill formation, not just credential attainment. Critically, Heckman's framework treats mobility as an intergenerational construct, not a single-generation threshold. A child care investment that increases a parent's workforce participation and simultaneously improves a child's developmental readiness produces returns across two generations, neither of which is captured by an income threshold model.

Isaacs (2007, Brookings Institution) formalized the conceptual distinction between income mobility and economic stability, arguing that policy systems focused exclusively on threshold attainment miss the population experiencing movement below the line. The implication for state child care systems is

direct: a family moving from deep poverty toward stability is experiencing mobility, even if it has not yet reached a self-sufficiency threshold, and a well-designed reporting framework should capture and report that progress.

2.2 Political and Operational Advantages

The mobility frame carries three specific operational advantages over self-sufficiency for state child care reporting.

- **Trajectory sensitivity.** Mobility metrics can report positive direction of change even when families remain below commonly used thresholds. This protects reporting integrity in policy environments where absolute attainment benchmarks are difficult to reach within program windows.
- **Political neutrality.** Self-sufficiency language has acquired ideological valence in public discourse, with different stakeholders reading it as either a critique of poverty programs or a standard of adequacy. Mobility language is evaluatively neutral: it implies neither that families are failing nor that government programs are sufficient, but simply that progress is occurring.
- **Alignment with program mechanism.** Child care operates by enabling workforce participation, increasing earnings stability, and improving child developmental readiness. These are inherently dynamic processes, and mobility metrics are structured to capture dynamic change rather than point-in-time status.

3. Proposed Definition

Family Economic Mobility refers to measurable improvement in a family's capacity to meet current needs, reduce economic vulnerability, and expand future economic opportunity over time. Mobility is understood as a dynamic, multi-dimensional construct shaped by employment status, earnings trajectory, asset accumulation, educational attainment, and the reduction of material hardship, situated within the specific labor market and cost context of the family's community.

For purposes of state child care system impact reporting, family economic mobility is operationalized across three interdependent dimensions: Employment and Earnings Stability, Material Security and Hardship Reduction, and Human Capital Investment and Intergenerational Capacity. These three dimensions are described in detail in Section 4.

The definition is intentionally community-situated. A family's mobility is not evaluated against a national or state-level standard alone, but in relation to the labor market conditions, housing costs, and social infrastructure of the community in which the family lives. This reflects the geographic heterogeneity documented by Chetty and colleagues, and acknowledges that mobility trajectories in rural, suburban, and urban contexts are not comparable on a single scale.

4. Measurement Architecture

The three-dimension structure organizes the twelve KPIs described in Section 5. Each dimension has a distinct empirical lineage and maps to a distinct program mechanism through which child care affects family outcomes.

4.1 Dimension One: Employment and Earnings Stability

The most direct pathway through which child care affects family economic outcomes is enabling workforce participation. Child care subsidies and the availability of reliable child care increase employment rates, hours worked, and earnings among caregivers, particularly mothers. This dimension captures the degree to which child care participation is associated with sustained, quality employment.

Employment presence is a necessary but insufficient indicator. Hollenbeck and Huang (2014) documented that employment quality, including access to benefits, schedule predictability, and advancement opportunity, is as important as employment presence in determining whether workforce participation translates into durable mobility. The KPIs in this dimension therefore include not only employment rates but earnings trajectory, full-time status, and benefits access.

Empirical anchor: Anderson and Levine (1999) established that child care costs directly affect maternal employment rates, particularly among low-income families. Blau and Currie (2006) synthesized the causal evidence linking child care availability to employment, earnings, and long-run income stability among caregiving parents.

4.2 Dimension Two: Material Security and Hardship Reduction

Income-based measures do not adequately capture actual family wellbeing. Families at similar income levels experience substantially different levels of material security depending on local costs, family composition, health status, and access to social support networks. This dimension focuses on direct measures of hardship reduction, including food security, housing stability, and health insurance coverage.

The material security literature, anchored in the work of Meyer and Sullivan (2012) and the annual USDA food security reports, demonstrates that hardship indices provide distinct and complementary information relative to income measures. A family that has increased earnings but remains food insecure is experiencing a different mobility trajectory than a family whose earnings have increased alongside resolved food insecurity. The distinction matters for policy reporting.

Empirical anchor: The USDA Economic Research Service publishes validated food security measurement protocols used by states and federal agencies. HUD's point-in-time count and Homeless Management Information System provide housing stability indicators. The CMS Medicaid and CHIP enrollment data enable tracking of health coverage rates.

4.3 Dimension Three: Human Capital Investment and Intergenerational Capacity

The third dimension captures the mechanism that distinguishes child care from other income-support interventions: its simultaneous effect on caregiver human capital and child developmental readiness. Heckman's skill formation framework establishes that early childhood investment produces returns through two channels: enabling parental workforce participation (captured in Dimension One) and directly improving children's cognitive and social-emotional readiness for school and eventual labor market entry.

This dimension includes caregiver educational attainment and credential completion, which reflect the degree to which child care access enables caregivers to invest in their own human capital while children are in care. It also includes kindergarten readiness, which serves as the leading indicator of intergenerational mobility effects. Isaacs and Magnuson (2011) established that kindergarten readiness is among the strongest predictors of subsequent academic achievement and adult earnings, providing a validated empirical bridge between early childhood programs and long-run mobility outcomes.

Empirical anchor: National Student Clearinghouse data enables tracking of post-secondary enrollment and completion. State Kindergarten Entry Assessment data, now available in nearly all states, provides a standardized measure of child developmental readiness. WIOA Title II adult education program data tracks GED and equivalency completion.

5. Key Performance Indicator Framework

The following twelve KPIs operationalize the three-dimension framework for Florida SR program impact reporting. The framework is anchored in Florida SR administrative data collected at annual redetermination, including employer name, annual salary, household size, and FT/PT employment status. Indicators requiring data beyond what SR redetermination currently captures are identified, with recommended data linkage or collection strategies specified for each. Two indicators include both a primary annual measure and an extended 2-year rolling measure for families who maintain continuous SR enrollment across two redetermination cycles, enabling detection of cumulative mobility effects in longer-tenure families.

KPI	Definition	Data Source	Frequency	Platform / Access
Dimension 1: Employment and Earnings Stability				
SR Employment Rate	% of active SR families with at least one caregiver reporting employment at annual redetermination	Florida DCF/DEL School Readiness administrative records (employer field)	Annual	DEL SR Redetermination Database

KPI	Definition	Data Source	Frequency	Platform / Access
Caregiver Earnings Trajectory	Median change in reported annual salary between consecutive redetermination cycles. Extended 2-year comparison reported separately for families with 24+ months of continuous enrollment.	Florida DCF/DEL SR records (annual salary field); 2-year cohort subset for continuous enrollees	Annual; 2-year rolling for continuous enrollees	DEL SR Redetermination Database
Full-Time Employment Rate	% of employed SR caregivers reporting full-time status (35+ hrs/week) at redetermination	Florida DCF/DEL SR records (FT/PT employment status field)	Annual	DEL SR Redetermination Database
Employer-Sponsored Benefits Rate	% of employed SR caregivers reporting access to employer-sponsored health insurance, paid leave, or retirement benefits. [Proposed new DEL collection item at redetermination.] Interim proxy: % of SR caregiver households without active Medicaid or KidCare enrollment via AHCA linkage.	Proposed: DEL SR redetermination instrument (new 3-item collection). Interim: AHCA Medicaid and Florida KidCare enrollment records accessed through the Sunshine State Early Childhood Information Portal (ECIDS) under ECPRG data sharing agreement with AHCA	Annual	Proposed: DEL SR Database. Interim: Sunshine State Early Childhood Information Portal (ECIDS); ECPRG-AHCA data sharing agreement
Dimension 2: Material Security and Hardship Reduction				
Post-Secondary Enrollment Rate	% of SR caregivers enrolled in a Florida public postsecondary institution or DEL-approved training program during the SR enrollment year	FLDOE Florida Education and Training Placement Information Program (FETPIP); Florida College System enrollment records linked to SR case ID	Annual	FLDOE FETPIP; Florida College System
Credential or Degree	% of SR caregivers completing a	FLDOE FETPIP; Florida College	Annual; 2-year	FLDOE FETPIP; National

KPI	Definition	Data Source	Frequency	Platform / Access
Attainment Rate	postsecondary credential or degree. Annual rate reported for 12-month completions; 2-year rolling rate reported for continuous enrollees.	System completion records; NSC for out-of-state completions	rolling for continuous enrollees	Student Clearinghouse
Medicaid and KidCare Dependency Rate	% of SR families with active Medicaid or KidCare enrollment, used as an inverse indicator of health coverage progression. A declining rate over successive redetermination cycles indicates movement toward employer-sponsored or private coverage.	AHCA Medicaid and Florida KidCare enrollment records accessed through the Sunshine State Early Childhood Information Portal (ECIDS) under ECPRG data sharing agreement with AHCA	Annual	Sunshine State Early Childhood Information Portal (ECIDS); ECPRG-AHCA data sharing agreement
Income-to-Need Ratio Trajectory	Change in ratio of reported annual household income to 100% FPL for the SR family household size between redetermination cycles. Measures income adequacy progression without applying a binary threshold cutoff.	Florida DCF/DEL SR records (annual salary and household size fields); HHS annual FPL guidelines	Annual	DEL SR Redetermination Database; HHS FPL guidelines
Dimension 3: Human Capital Investment and Intergenerational Capacity				
Child Developmental Readiness Rate	% of children exiting SR and entering kindergarten who meet readiness benchmarks on the Florida Assessment of Student Thinking (FAST)	FLDOE FAST data linked to SR exit records via child identifier	Annual	FLDOE FAST; DEL SR exit records
Adult Education Advancement Rate	% of SR caregivers without a high school diploma or GED who complete an equivalency credential during the SR enrollment period	Florida Division of Career and Adult Education (FDCAE) completion records linked to SR case ID	Annual	FDCAE; DEL SR Database

KPI	Definition	Data Source	Frequency	Platform / Access
Employer Advancement Rate	% of SR caregivers who transition to a new employer with a higher reported annual salary between redetermination cycles, as a measure of active labor market mobility distinct from wage growth within a static employment situation	Florida DCF/DEL SR records (employer name and annual salary fields compared across consecutive redetermination records)	Annual	DEL SR Redetermination Database
Continuous Enrollment Retention Rate	% of SR-eligible families who maintain continuous enrollment without an administrative gap (e.g., missed redetermination deadline, documentation lapse). Serves as an inverse indicator of system-induced mobility disruption.	Florida DCF/DEL SR enrollment and gap records	Annual	DEL SR Redetermination Database

Note: SR = School Readiness; DEL = Division of Early Learning; DCF = Department of Children and Families; AHCA = Agency for Health Care Administration; FLDOE = Florida Department of Education; FETPIP = Florida Education and Training Placement Information Program (FLDOE longitudinal outcome tracking system used for postsecondary enrollment and completion research; distinct from FASTER, which is a record transfer system); FAST = Florida Assessment of Student Thinking; NSC = National Student Clearinghouse; FDCAE = Florida Division of Career and Adult Education; FPL = Federal Poverty Level; KidCare = Florida KidCare (Title XXI CHIP program). Indicators marked [Proposed] require new data collection at SR redetermination, subject to DEL instrument revision. All data linkages are executed through the Sunshine State Early Childhood Information Portal (ECIDS), managed by the ECPRG at the University of Florida. The AHCA linkage is governed by a data sharing agreement between ECPRG and AHCA, administered as part of the ECIDS/Sunshine Portal work.

6. Operationalization Guidance for Florida SR Reporting

6.1 Primary Reporting Strategy: Annual Cohort Comparison

The Florida SR administrative data structure is well suited to an annual cohort comparison approach, in which families are tracked from the point of SR enrollment through successive redetermination cycles. This is the recommended primary reporting strategy and should be established as the baseline methodology for annual KPI updates.

At each annual redetermination, the SR database captures a new observation for each continuing family, including current employer, annual salary, household size, and FT/PT status. Linking these records longitudinally by family case ID produces a panel structure from which year-over-year change

can be computed directly for each KPI in Dimension 1 and the income-to-need ratio in Dimension 2. No external data source is required for these indicators, and reporting lag is minimal since redetermination data is collected on a rolling basis throughout the year.

For families who maintain continuous SR enrollment across two redetermination cycles (24+ months), an extended 2-year comparison is reported alongside the annual measure. This enriched view captures cumulative mobility trajectories among longer-tenure families and provides a more robust signal of program impact than the annual snapshot alone. The two-year cohort should be reported as a distinct subgroup, clearly labeled, to avoid conflating annual and multi-year trends.

6.2 Data Linkage Requirements

Four KPIs require data linkage beyond the SR administrative record. The following linkages are recommended, listed in order of implementation priority.

- AHCA Medicaid and KidCare enrollment data. Required for the Employer-Sponsored Benefits Rate (interim proxy) and the Medicaid and KidCare Dependency Rate. This linkage is executed through the Sunshine State Early Childhood Information Portal (ECIDS) under a data sharing agreement between ECPRG and AHCA. ECPRG currently holds and manages this agreement as part of the ECIDS/Sunshine Portal work; re-establishing it to include SR family coverage is a targeted scope extension within the existing ECIDS framework. The linkage variable is SR case ID matched to AHCA household enrollment records.
- FLDOE FETPIP and Florida College System records. Required for Post-Secondary Enrollment Rate and Credential or Degree Attainment Rate. The Florida Education and Training Placement Information Program (FETPIP) is FLDOE's longitudinal outcome tracking system used for workforce and education research, and is the appropriate data source for population-level tracking of SR caregiver postsecondary enrollment and completion. This linkage would be performed within the Sunshine State Early Childhood Information Portal (ECIDS) infrastructure under an expanded data-sharing arrangement between ECPRG and FLDOE, using the Florida Student Number as the primary identifier where available, with probabilistic matching on name, date of birth, and zip code as a secondary approach.
- FLDOE FAST data. Required for Child Developmental Readiness Rate. FAST is administered statewide at kindergarten entry and results are maintained in FLDOE systems. This linkage is executed through the Sunshine State Early Childhood Information Portal (ECIDS) under ECPRG's data sharing agreement with FLDOE, using child identifier to connect SR exit records to kindergarten entry assessment results. FAST linkage is already operational within the ECIDS architecture and requires no new agreement.
- FDCAE adult education completion records. Required for Adult Education Advancement Rate. The Florida Division of Career and Adult Education maintains program completion records for GED and adult literacy programs. This linkage would be performed within the Sunshine State Early Childhood Information Portal (ECIDS) infrastructure. An ECPRG data sharing agreement with FDCAE, or an extension of the existing FLDOE agreement to cover FDCAE records, is required and should be pursued as part of the ECIDS/Sunshine Portal scope.

6.3 Proposed DEL Data Collection: Employer-Sponsored Benefits

The Employer-Sponsored Benefits Rate cannot be fully operationalized from existing SR administrative data or AHCA linkage alone. The AHCA Medicaid and KidCare linkage, executed through the Sunshine State Early Childhood Information Portal (ECIDS) under the ECPRG-AHCA data sharing agreement, provides an inverse proxy (absence of public coverage as a signal that employer-sponsored coverage may exist), but does not directly confirm what benefits the employer provides or whether the caregiver has elected coverage.

It is recommended that DEL add a brief employer-sponsored benefits module to the SR redetermination instrument. The module should consist of three items, administered only to caregivers who report employment at redetermination.

- Does your employer offer health insurance? (Yes / No / Don't know)
- Does your employer offer paid leave (sick days, vacation, or parental leave)? (Yes / No / Don't know)
- Does your employer offer a retirement savings plan (such as a 401k or pension)? (Yes / No / Don't know)

This three-item module adds minimal burden to the redetermination process, can be administered through the existing online redetermination interface, and would provide direct, population-level evidence of employer benefits access among SR families. Once collected at sufficient scale (recommended minimum: two full annual redetermination cycles), the module data would replace the AHCA proxy for the Employer-Sponsored Benefits Rate KPI.

6.4 Disaggregation

KPI reporting should be disaggregated along variables available within the SR administrative record and linked data systems. Recommended disaggregation variables include Early Learning Coalition service area, child age group at SR enrollment, primary caregiver education level at enrollment, caregiver language, family income-to-need ratio at enrollment (as a continuous variable, not a threshold category), SR eligibility category (working family, transitional, at-risk), and child care provider type (licensed center, licensed family home, Gold Seal provider). Disaggregation by ELC service area is particularly important for identifying regional variation in mobility trajectories and supporting targeted technical assistance to coalitions serving populations with more constrained mobility outcomes.

6.5 Reporting Calendar

SR redetermination data is collected on a rolling basis and is available in near-real-time within the SR administrative system. Annual KPI reporting should be anchored to the state fiscal year (July 1 through June 30), with a reporting publication target of October 1 of the following year. This timeline allows for redetermination data consolidation, linked data receipt from AHCA and FLDOE through the Sunshine State Early Childhood Information Portal (ECIDS), and quality review prior to publication.

The two-year cohort supplement should be published concurrently, clearly labeled with the cohort entry and exit years.

6.6 Index Construction (Optional)

For summary reporting purposes, the twelve KPIs can be aggregated into a single Florida SR Family Economic Mobility Index. Each KPI is standardized to a 0-100 scale relative to the baseline year, and dimension scores are computed as unweighted averages of constituent KPIs. A total index score is computed as a weighted average of the three dimension scores, with weights subject to DEL determination based on policy priorities. Dimension 1 (Employment and Earnings Stability) is recommended as the highest-weighted dimension given its direct alignment with SR eligibility requirements and its operationalization from primary SR administrative data. This approach enables concise annual headline reporting while the full twelve-indicator table retains diagnostic value for program improvement purposes.

7. Conclusion

The adoption of family economic mobility as the organizing construct for Florida SR impact reporting represents a meaningful and strategically durable advancement over existing threshold-based approaches. It is grounded in a robust empirical literature, sensitive to the geographic and demographic diversity of Florida SR families, and structured to capture the directional progress that child care investment produces even when families have not yet reached a fixed adequacy standard.

The twelve-indicator KPI framework proposed here is designed for operational feasibility as well as analytic rigor. The primary indicators are derived directly from data Florida already collects at SR redetermination, requiring no new primary data collection for immediate implementation. The four indicators that require data linkage to AHCA and FLDOE systems are executed through the Sunshine State Early Childhood Information Portal (ECIDS), managed by ECPRG. All linkages occur as part of the ECIDS/Sunshine Portal work, under existing or directly extensible data sharing agreements between ECPRG and the relevant state agencies. The single proposed new data collection item, the employer-sponsored benefits module, is low-burden and high-value, and is recommended as a near-term addition to the SR redetermination instrument.

The framework is offered as a foundation for DEL adoption and refinement. Indicator selection, disaggregation variables, dimension weighting, and reporting architecture should be aligned to DEL's specific accountability requirements, legislative reporting obligations, and program improvement priorities. The three-dimension structure is designed to remain stable as a common organizing framework even as individual KPIs are refined over time.

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