UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY

2025-2026 State of the UK Early Childhood Laboratory

Initial benchmark and program evaluation

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About This Report

This report provides an empirical overview of the University of Kentucky (UK) Early Childhood Laboratory (ECL). It is intended to establish an initial benchmark for future program evaluation by documenting the ECL's employee structure, operating capacity, tuition and enrollment trends, and engagement with the University of Kentucky community.

Purpose

Create a transparent starting point for monitoring and capturing the ECL's capacity to serve Kentucky families and contribute to the University of Kentucky's mission as the state's land-grant institution.

Data sources and scope

The report draws on digital sign-in logs, administrative data, and the ECL's enrollment records. Comparison data for tuition estimates are based on values reported by Child Care Aware of America survey data from 2021-2025 (https://info.childcareaware.org/price-and-supply-2025). Interpretations of the findings discussed in the *Key Findings and Interpretations* section are that of the author and are not meant to represent any other individual or organization.

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Executive Summary

The report establishes the ECL as a multi-purpose laboratory school that provides early care and education services to families, alongside workforce preparation opportunities for UK students and academic programs. The available data show substantial reach across children, families, UK students, courses, and programs. The ECL accomplishes this with a unique staffing model that includes full-time employees, graduate teaching assistants, and a large UK student workforce.

62	**83**	**951**
children and families served	different UK student observers	UK student learning hours logged
9	**6**	**47**
UK courses using the ECL	UK academic programs using the ECL	UK student workers employed throughout 2025-2026 school year

Headline findings

- Enrollment increased by 12.7% from 2023-2024 to 2025-2026.
- Despite remaining stable for many years, the ECL's average monthly tuition has started to increase in order to keep pace with the costs required to provide high quality care and education services.
- The ECL logged 545 observation visits during which 951 hours of learning occurred for UK students throughout the the 2025-2026 fall and spring semesters.

About the ECL

Institutional role

The ECL is a university-based early childhood center within the University of Kentucky College of Education's Department of Early Childhood, Special Education, and Counselor Education. The ECL operates as a licensed child care facility in compliance with the Division of Regulated Child Care in the state of Kentucky. The ECL is accredited by the *National Association for the Education of Young Children* and maintains a 5 Star Rating through *Kentucky All STARS*. The ECL acts as a community-inclusive center, serving families with and without affiliation to the University of Kentucky. For UK students, the ECL serves as a pre-service practitioner training site offering experiential learning opportunities.

History and setting

The initial establishment of the ECL dates back to 1928. For decades, the ECL operated out of the basement of Erikson Hall on UK's central campus. In 2014, through the support of the College of Education, UK Board of Trustees, the Office of the Executive Vice President for Finance and Administration, and a generous lead gift from alumna Carol Lee Roberston, renovations began on a new site what would become the current home of the ECL. These renovations were completed in 2015, and the ECL began serving children and families at the state-of-the-art, 10,000 square foot site, located at 621 S. Limestone. In 2022, through a generous gift from Dr. Edward C. Elliot and family, the playground at the ECL was fully remodeled to promote physical activity, motor development, and the safety of all children who attend the ECL.

Mission

Model early childhood program

Serve children and families from the Greater Lexington community through an exemplary model of care and education services.

Practitioner preparation

Provide a training site for UK students preparing to become educators and related child-services practitioners.

Research support

Support rigorous and meaningful research in child development and early childhood education.

Staff and Operations

The ECL relies on a layered staffing structure that combines leadership, administrative support, full-time classroom staff, graduate teaching assistants, and UK student workers. This model supports the center's daily operations and its mission to children, families, and UK.

Staffing category	# employed during 2025-2026	Description
Leadership employees	2	Staff Director and Faculty Director
Administrative support	1	Administrative Support Specialist
Full-time staff	7	5 Lead Teachers and 2 Assistant Teachers
Graduate teaching assistants	5	UK grad students receiving tuition scholarships and stipend to work at the ECL
Student workers	47	UK students ever employed during time period and typically working 8-12 hours per week

Leadership and administration

The ECL has two directors, a Staff Director and a Faculty Director, who both oversee the center's operations. The Staff Director oversees the day-to-day functioning of the ECL in accordance with the regulations established by the Kentucky Division of Regulated Child Care (e.g., hiring and onboarding staff, scheduling, curriculum development, personnel supervision, communicating with families). The Faculty Director oversees the ECL's relationship with UK (e.g., working with programs and course instructors to support student observations at the ECL, reviewing research proposals, budget forecasting, advocacy and outreach). In addition to the two directors, there is one Administrative Support Specialist who assists with daily record keeping tasks, background check verifications for employees and UK student observers, and payment processing.

Classroom staffing

The ECL has 5 classrooms, each with a lead teacher who holds or is actively pursuing certification in Interdisciplinary Early Childhood Education. The classroom teachers are responsible for the assessment and educational programming for all children. There are also two full-time Assistant Teachers who support the preschool and infant/toddler classrooms.

UK Student workforce

Throughout 2025-2026, the ECL provided five Teaching Assistantships for graduate students at UK. These students came from the education and education-adjacent fields, such as early childhood education, special education, school psychology, and social work. In addition, the ECL also employes hourly UK student workers. Student workers are essential to the daily functioning of the ECL and help to maintain required staff to child ratios throughout all classrooms. Of note, student workers' durations of employment often vary, due to changes in course schedules and requirements of their major for which working at the ECL may impact their timeline to graduation. Thus, there is a continuous need to hire and onboard new workers throughout the year. From the start of the Fall 2025 semester to the end of the Spring 2026 semester, a total of 47 student workers were employed at the ECL, of which the majority were no longer working at the ECL come the start of summer.

Children and Families

Enrollment reach

The ECL served 62 children and families in 2025-2026. From 2021-2022 through 2023-2024, enrollment was stable at 55 children and families before steadily increasing over the last two years.

Year	Children / families served	Change from first year reported
2021-2022	55	Baseline
2022-2023	55	0.0%
2023-2024	55	0.0%
2024-2025	57	+3.6%
2025-2026	62	+12.7%

Center capacity

Enrollment capacity for a licensed child care center in Kentucky is based on the square footage of each classroom, as well as the age of the children that will be served in a classroom. Across the ECL's five classrooms, the ECL is permitted to serve 65 children and families, indicating that ECL enrollment is 4.6% below approved center capacity.

Tuition context

The average ECL monthly tuition was $1,179 in 2025-2026. Similar to enrollment trends, tuition was stable from 2021-2022 through 2023-2024, before steadily increasing over the last two years. In 2024-2025 the ECL's average tuition surpassed the estimated average for the state of Kentucky, and in 2025-2026 the ECL's average tuition surpassed the estimated national average for center-based care.

Year	ECL	Kentucky	National
2021-2022	$847	$763	$890
2022-2023	$847	$763	$904
2023-2024	$847	$763	$965
2024-2025	$1,050	$1,040	$1,094
2025-2026	$1,179	$1,067	$1,099

Descriptive comparison

For 2025-2026, the ECL tuition was $112 above the state estimate (10.5%) and $80 above the national estimate (7.3%). These differences are descriptive and do not account for program quality, hours of care per day, total days of care, types of services, ages of children served, or other cost drivers.

Engagement with the UK Community

UK Student observers

During 2025-2026, 83 different UK students made 545 visits to the ECL for a total of 951 observation hours. These students were from six academic programs at UK.

Student engagement measure	2025-2026
Unique UK student observers/visitors	83
Total # of visits	545
Average # of visits per student	6.57
Total of hours	951
Average hours per visit	1.74
UK courses utilizing the ECL	9
UK academic programs utilizing the ECL	6

Classroom distribution

The majority of UK student observation hours were spent in the ECL's preschool classrooms (59.7%) The Infant and Young Toddler classrooms had the smallest share of observations hours (10.6%).

Classroom	Average hours per week	Share of total hours
Preschool (4-5 yr)	11.63	36.7%
Young Preschool (3-4 yr)	7.30	23.0%
Toddler (2-3 yr)	9.43	29.8%
Young Toddler (1-2 yr)	1.60	5.1%
Infant (<1 yr)	1.73	5.5%

Key Findings and Implications

1. The ECL's reliance on UK students to fill critical staffing roles is both a *benefit* and a *burden*.

At a time when early care and education providers face significant difficulty recruiting skilled employees, the ECL can continually draw from an ever-changing pool of applicants who are educated and motivated (i.e., the UK student body). However, student employment is often temporary because of changing course schedules, practicum requirements, and graduation, which creates substantial and recurring turnover. This pattern mirrors the broader child care workforce, where center-based providers experience approximately 45% annual staff turnover. Consequently, ECL administrators must devote considerable time each year to recruiting, hiring, completing background checks, onboarding, training, and scheduling new student employees. Although the student workforce is essential to the ECL's operations and university mission, the time required to replace and prepare nearly half of the workforce on annual basis reduces administrators' capacity to focus on program improvement, staff development, family engagement, and other activities that directly benefit children and families. Future work is needed to balance the benefit and burden of utilizing UK students within graduate assistantship and hourly worker roles at the ECL.

2. *Approved* center capacity is not the same as *feasible* center capacity.

The ECL's state-approved enrollment capacity of 65 children does not necessarily mean that serving 65 children is operationally feasible. Though the state establishes the maximum number of children who may legally be served in a center, the feasibility of serving that maximum number of children depends on required staff-to-child ratios and the availability of funds to pay additional staff needed to maintain ratios. For example, a classroom serving 16 preschool-aged children may seek to maintain a ratio of 1 adult to every 8 children. By adding one additional child to the preschool classroom, a new adult would be required to maintain the ratio. The increase in enrollment numbers may not be feasible if the revenue generated by one additional child does not account for the expenses of hiring one additional employee. The ECL's relatively small difference in operating capacity (62 children) and approved capacity (65 children) should not be interpreted as unrealized growth, as enrolling additional children would require staffing and classroom arrangements that are not sustainable within the ECL's current operating conditions.

3. The ECL's tuition increases are reflective of challenges facing *all* child care providers.

The ECL's tuition increases over recent years reflect broader economic pressures impacting child care providers throughout Kentucky and the nation, rather than circumstances unique to the ECL. Across the early childhood sector, providers continue to face rising expenses associated with personnel, benefits, materials, insurance, utilities, and facility maintenance. At the same time, many families are already struggling to afford child care. This tension is illustrated by a 2024 Kentucky cost-of-care study, which found that the average monthly cost of providing center-based care was approximately $920 per child, while the average tuition charged by surveyed providers was only $820 per month, indicating that many programs were operating below the actual cost of delivering services. The study concluded that tuition revenue often fails to cover the full cost of operating a child care program.

Notably, these financial challenges affect families as well as providers. For Kentuckians, child care represents approximately 11.9% of the median income of a married/couple family and approximately 45% of the median income of a single-caregiver family. Consequently, providers are often forced to balance two competing realities: tuition rates are increasingly difficult for families to afford and operating costs continue to rise faster than program revenue. The ECL's increase in average monthly tuition, from approximately $847 in 2021-2023 to $1,179 in 2025-2026, should therefore be viewed within the context of a state- and nation-wide child care system in which both providers and families face significant financial strain. Rather than reflecting excess revenue, the ECL's tuition increases are often necessary to offset a portion of rising operating expenses while maintaining program quality, regulatory compliance, and a stable workforce.

4. ECL resources for supporting classrooms in hosting UK student observers, should be *equitably* distributed.

Hosting student observers advances the ECL's training mission, but it also requires classroom staff to devote additional time and effort to coordinating visits, orienting students, modeling effective practices, answering questions, and protecting children's routines and confidentiality. These responsibilities extend beyond those typically expected of employees in child care centers that do not regularly serve as training sites for university students. Because some ECL classrooms currently host a disproportionate share of student observers, those classrooms may experience a greater workload and more frequent disruptions than others. Equitable distribution does not necessarily mean assigning an equal number of student observers to every classroom; rather, observation assignments and accompanying resources should account for each classroom's number of visitors and observation hours, children's ages and needs, staffing stability, daily routines, and employees' capacity to support meaningful learning experiences for the observers. Classrooms carrying a larger share of the ECL's university teaching mission should therefore receive corresponding support, such as protected planning time, additional staffing coverage, recognition of training responsibilities, or a more balanced allocation of future observations.

Conclusion

The 2025–2026 benchmark demonstrates that the ECL occupies a distinctive role as both an early childhood program serving children and families, as well as a university center supporting student preparation, professional learning, research, and community partnerships. Its accomplishments are made possible by a committed workforce and a close connection to UK, but these same features introduce operational demands that warrant continued attention. Workforce turnover, administrative burden, rising costs of care, family affordability concerns, differences between approved and feasible enrollment capacity, and the uneven distribution of student-observation responsibilities all illustrate the complex conditions under which the ECL fulfills its mission.

This initial report provides a foundation for monitoring these conditions over time and for ensuring that resources are distributed equitably across classrooms and mission areas. Future evaluations should build on this benchmark by using consistent measures to examine not only the ECL's reach and activities, but also program quality, workforce stability, family and employee experiences, student learning, research contributions, and community impact. In doing so, the ECL can use evidence to guide continuous improvement, demonstrate its value to the university and Central Kentucky communities, and strengthen its capacity to provide high-quality experiences for children, families, and UK students.

Suggested citation

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