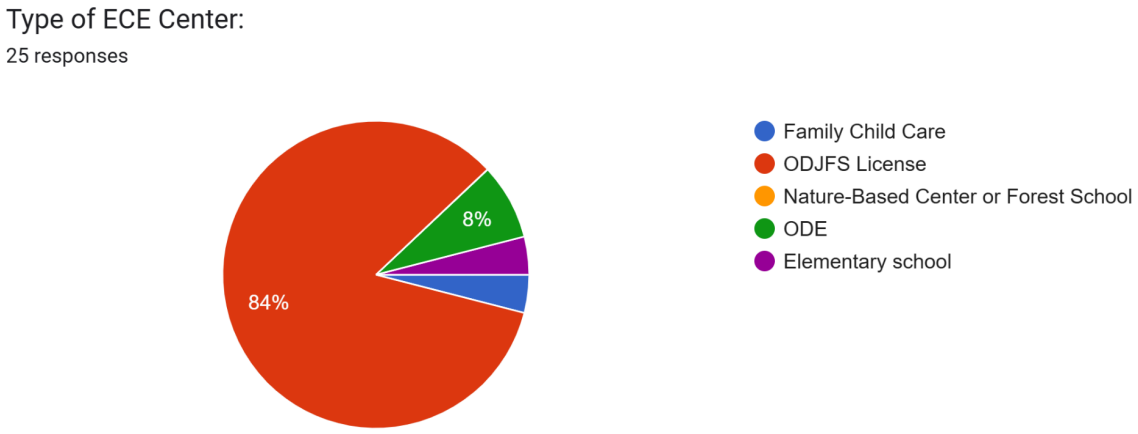
Detailed Summary of Findings

Response Rate

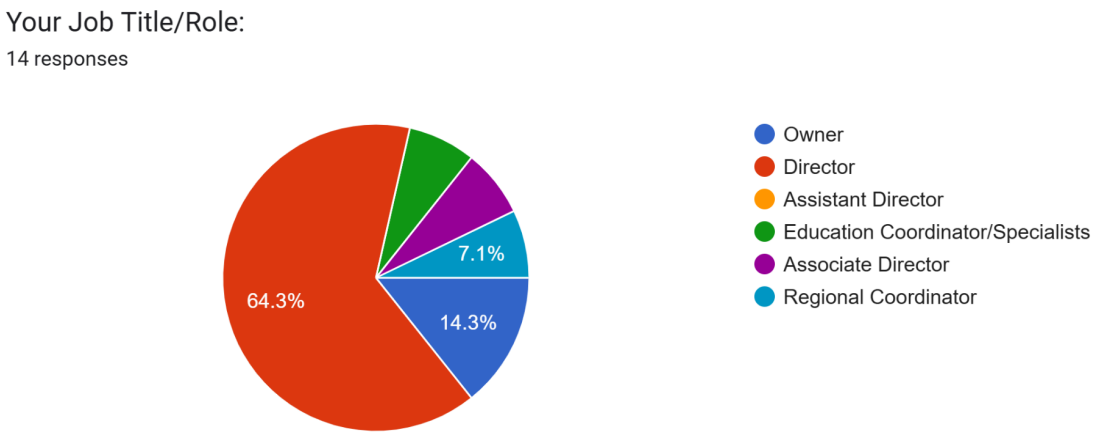
Survey was sent via the Preschool Promise Weekly Update email for two weeks to educators and administrators in 124 centers across Dayton and Montgomery County.

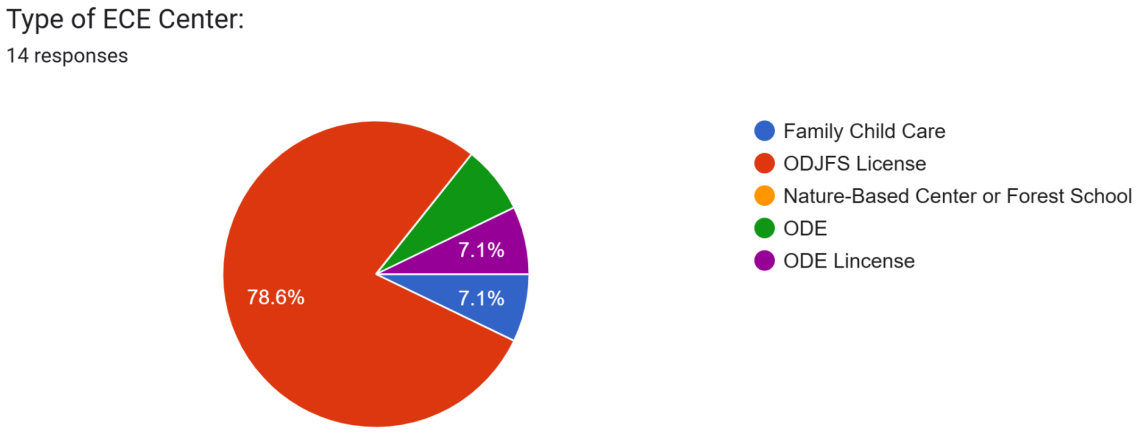
25 educators responded, included those from:

- 3 sites within DPS
- 3 sites within MVCDC
- Bombeck



14 administrators responded, including those from at least one MVCDC and DPS site.



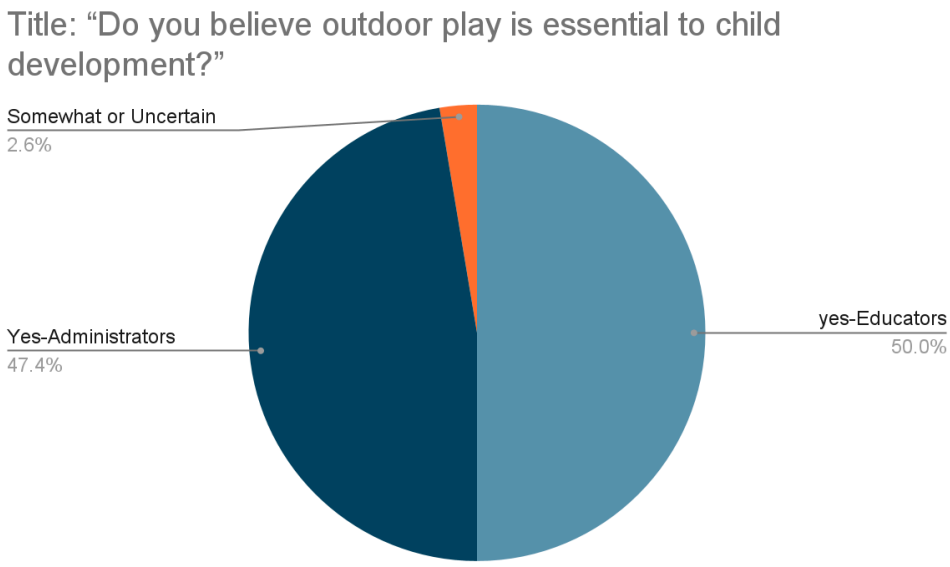


Shared Commitment and Beliefs

Across both groups, there is a strong and consistent belief in the value of outdoor play and nature-based learning. Respondents frequently mentioned benefits such as:

- Physical health through active play
- Social-emotional development, including teamwork, risk-taking, and confidence
- Cognitive growth through inquiry, observation, and exploration
- Connection to nature, building environmental awareness and empathy for the planet

Educators and administrators alike described outdoor time as a vital part of a child's learning and well-being, not just a break from "real" learning.



Both groups value outdoor play and nature-based learning as critical to physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development.

Educator quote:

"Children are calmer and more engaged after outdoor time. I wish we could do more but we're limited by policies and weather rules."

Administrator quote:

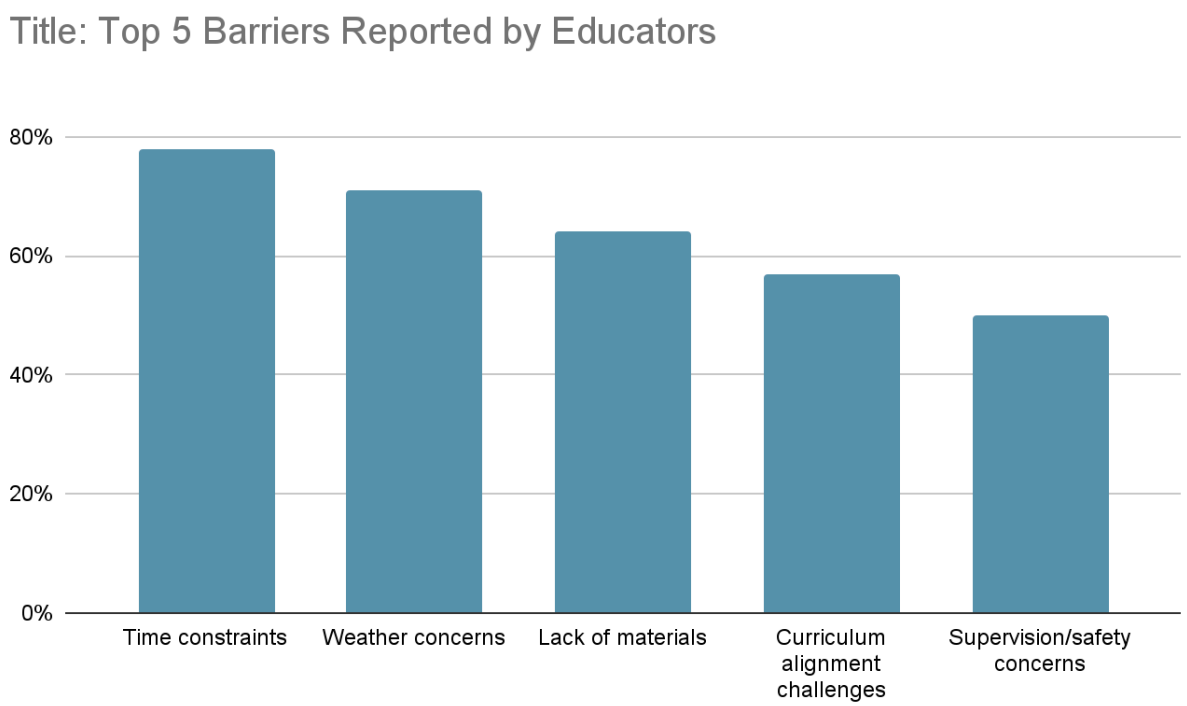
"We believe in outdoor play, but we need support to train staff and redesign our spaces. Our current playground doesn't invite exploration."

Barriers to Implementation

Educator Perspective

1. **Time and Schedule Pressures**
    a. Academic priorities and indoor routines often leave little time for extended outdoor exploration.
    b. Some educators feel pressure to "prove" learning outcomes through traditional, indoor academic methods.
2. **Weather and Safety Concerns**
    a. Fear of extreme temperatures, wet conditions, or unclear weather policies.
    b. Lack of proper outdoor clothing for children (e.g., rain gear, winter coats) is a frequent barrier.
3. **Limited Materials and Prepared Environments**
    a. Educators want more natural loose parts, materials for outdoor inquiry, and sensory experiences.
    b. Playgrounds are often seen as limited in diversity—mostly fixed equipment with little open-ended nature interaction.
4. **Curricular Alignment Challenges**
    a. Difficulty integrating mandated learning outcomes with child-led, open-ended outdoor play.
    b. A need for clearer support on how to "document learning" outdoors in a standards-aligned way.
5. **Supervision and Risk Management**
    a. Managing multiple children outdoors can be stressful without support.
    b. Concerns about falls, insect stings, or exposure to unknown plants.

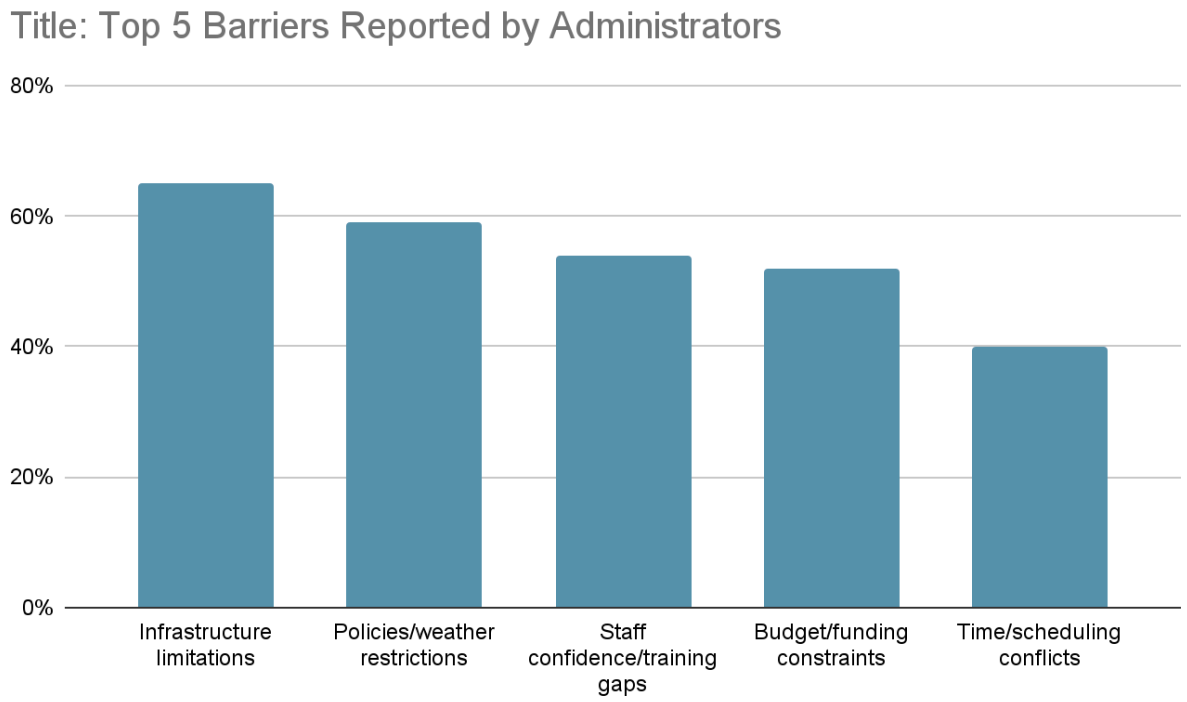
Educator-Reported Barriers



Administrator Perspective

1. **Infrastructure and Facilities Limitations**
    a. Some sites lack green space, shade, or safe natural environments.
    b. Playgrounds may be outdated, hard-surfaced, or not conducive to creative nature play.
2. **Policies and Regulations**
    a. Strict weather thresholds (e.g., no outdoor play below 32°F) and unclear clothing policies prevent frequent outdoor time.
    b. Liability concerns and safety regulations sometimes prevent risk-taking and exploration.
3. **Staff Confidence and Buy-In**
    a. Not all teachers feel confident leading nature-based experiences or facilitating outdoor inquiry.
    b. Concerns that not all staff see outdoor play as “real learning.”
4. **Funding and Resources**
    a. Budget constraints make it hard to purchase materials, improve outdoor areas, or offer teacher training.
    b. Competing priorities for limited funds.

Administrator-Reported Barriers



Note: Both groups report structural, policy, and resource-based challenges, but educators emphasize the day-to-day constraints, while administrators focus on systems and logistics.

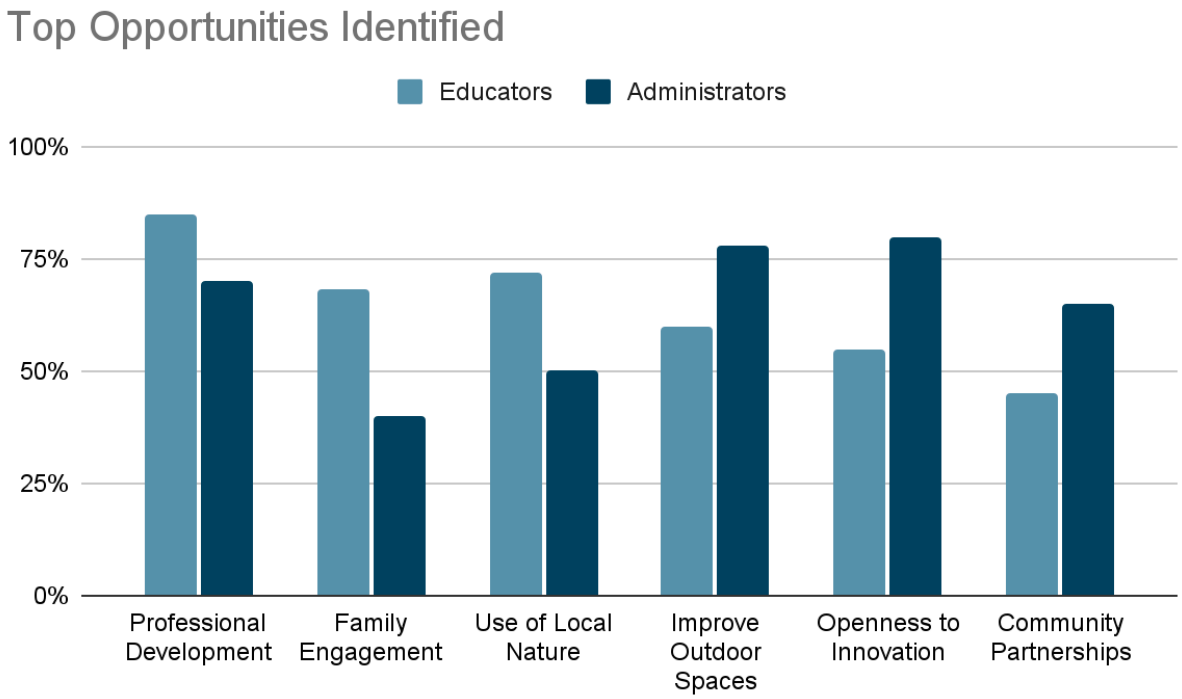
Opportunities for Growth

Educators Identified:

- **Professional Development Needs:** Many expressed interest in training to build confidence in nature pedagogy, outdoor classroom design, and curriculum integration.
- **Use of Local Resources:** Opportunities to bring in natural items, visit nearby green spaces, and integrate seasonal change into learning.
- **Family Involvement:** Desire to involve families in outdoor projects, garden maintenance, nature walks, or material donations.

Administrators Identified:

- **Openness to Change:** Many administrators showed enthusiasm for innovation in outdoor education if supported with evidence and guidance.
- **Improving Outdoor Spaces**: Several noted plans or hopes to introduce more natural elements—logs, plants, mud kitchens, water play areas.
- **Potential for Cross-Sector Support:** Interest in grant opportunities, partnerships with local environmental groups, and shared community spaces.



Educators	Administrators
Professional development on nature-based play	Willingness to improve outdoor spaces
Access to natural loose parts & materials	Support for innovation & risk-taking
Family engagement in outdoor activities	Openness to collaborative planning
Use of local nature (parks, gardens, etc.)	Interest in staff training & community links

There is alignment in goals, and an opportunity to bridge the gap through collaboration.

Alignment and Disconnects

- Aligned: Both groups agree on the importance and potential of outdoor play.
- Disconnect: Educators often feel unsupported or unsure how to implement what administrators believe in. Administrators, in turn, may underestimate the day-to-day barriers educators face.

Gap Analysis

Educator Need	Is it Currently Supported?	Notes
Daily time outside	❌ Not consistent	Often shortened or skipped
Nature-based PD	⚠️ Limited	Some interest, little structure
Outdoor learning materials	❌ Rare	Mostly fixed playgrounds
Admin support for innovation	✅ Yes	But needs clear follow-through
Family engagement in nature	⚠️ Inconsistent	Seen as opportunity, not routine

Recommendations

1. **Professional Learning and Mentorship**
    a. Offer hands-on workshops, coaching, and model lessons that connect nature-based play with learning goals.
2. **Review and Adapt Policies**:
    a. Revisit weather, clothing, and outdoor risk policies to remove unnecessary restrictions.
    b. Create clear guidelines that encourage safe risk-taking and play in all seasons.
3. **Invest in Outdoor Infrastructure**
    a. Naturalize playgrounds with logs, gardens, sand, loose parts, and water features.
    b. Ensure all children have access to weather-appropriate gear.
4. **Support Educators with Planning Tools**
    a. Develop templates, documentation tools, and examples for connecting nature-based play to curriculum standards.
5. **Build Collaborative Teams**
    a. Form cross-role outdoor learning committees (educators, admin, families) to co-design spaces, activities, and implementation plans.
6. **Engage Families and Community**
    a. Host outdoor family events, invite parent volunteers, and communicate the benefits of outdoor learning regularly.

Recommendations

- **Train & Support Educators – Provide practical PD on outdoor learning integration**
- **Update Policies – Weather/clothing policies should support daily outdoor access**
- **Enhance Outdoor Spaces – Add logs, natural elements, and flexible play spaces**
- **Align Curriculum with Nature – Offer tools to document learning outdoors**
- **Engage Families & Community – Invite participation in outdoor projects**
- **Foster Collaboration – Create educator-admin teams to lead the work together**

Summary

Area	Educator Score	Admin Score	Notes
Value of Outdoor Play	95%	90%	Strong agreement
Access to Outdoor Resources	62%	58%	Need for natural materials & space
PD Interest	85%	70%	Desire for aligned, hands-on training
Barriers (Overall Rating)	High	High	Different types of barriers by role
Readiness for Innovation	Medium-High	High	Potential for culture shift with support

Connection to Larger Trends and Standards

The findings from this survey reflect broader priorities in early childhood education and reinforce the idea that outdoor and nature-based learning is central to high-quality practice—not a supplemental activity.

Alignment with NAEYC Standards

Many of the supports and barriers identified in the surveys directly connect to the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) Standards. Nature-based learning supports:

- Curriculum and Development – Outdoor learning encourages meaningful, hands-on experiences across domains (science, physical development, math, language).
- Teaching Practices – Time in nature promotes developmentally appropriate, inquiry-driven teaching.
- Environments – Outdoor spaces are viewed as essential learning environments that should be safe, rich, and engaging.
- Family Engagement – Outdoor projects and nature exploration create opportunities to involve families in authentic, culturally responsive ways.

Early Childhood Sustainability and Wellbeing

Outdoor and nature-based learning also directly contributes to:

- Environmental stewardship – Children who regularly interact with nature develop empathy and care for living things, laying the groundwork for sustainable habits.

- Physical and mental wellbeing – Research shows children benefit physically, emotionally, and cognitively from regular time outdoors, including improved focus, reduced stress, and increased physical activity.
- Community connection – Activities like gardening, local nature walks, or caring for outdoor spaces strengthen children's ties to their local environments and communities.

These values align with national and global efforts to embed education for sustainability in early childhood, including the UN Sustainable Development Goals and leading early learning frameworks in health, wellbeing, and place-based education.

Conclusion:
These findings support the idea that expanding access to outdoor and nature-based learning is not only a response to local needs—it is also a strategic move in line with national standards and global sustainability priorities. Outdoor play is not just beneficial; it is essential.