

The **2024 "Closing the Gap" report** by Early Learning Indiana (ELI) provides a comprehensive update on the state of early learning access across Indiana. It evaluates progress since 2021 using a data-driven **Early Learning Access Index**, which combines four key components:

Key Findings

1. Access Index

- **Statewide score:** Increased from **60.6 (2021)** to **63.8 (2024)**.
- **County variation:** Ranges from **27.3 (Fountain County)** to **76.7 (Lake County)**.
- **Top improvements:** Jefferson (+24.7), Decatur (+23.8), and Orange (+20.0) counties.

2. Capacity

- Measures how many children can be served by existing programs.
- **Statewide capacity sufficiency rate (CSR)** rose from **55.8% to 62.3%**.
- **Top counties by CSR:** Lake (104%), Marion (98.2%), Ohio (89.8%).
- **Initiatives boosting capacity:**
 - Child Care Expansion Grants
 - Early Years Initiative
 - Employer-Sponsored Child Care Fund
 - READI grants

3. Quality

- Based on Indiana's **Paths to QUALITY™** rating system (Levels 3 & 4 = high-quality).
- **52.7%** of total capacity is now in high-quality programs (up from 46.1% in 2021).
- **Top counties:** Lake (58%), Ohio (56.4%), Marion (52%).
- **Support efforts:** Advancement grants, technical assistance, and reimbursement incentives.

4. Affordability

- Average cost of care: **\$8,590/year** or **11.2% of median family income**.
- **County variation:** Union (5.3%) to Madison (14.9%).
- **Subsidized care:** Available in most counties, but actual access may vary.
- **Innovative models:** Wabash County's wage-raising initiative for child care workers.

5. Choice

- Evaluates diversity in provider types, infant/toddler care, and non-traditional hours.

- **71%** of programs serve infants/toddlers; **26.5%** offer care outside 6 a.m.–6 p.m.
 - Urban areas show higher choice scores due to greater provider diversity.
 - **Example:** Southeastern Indiana YMCA reopened its infant care program with enhanced curriculum and coaching.
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Methodology

The **Access Index** is calculated using:

- **30% Capacity**
- **30% Quality**
- **20% Affordability** (weighted more heavily toward cost-to-income ratio)
- **20% Choice** (based on infant/toddler care, provider diversity, and non-traditional hours)

Each component is normalized and scored from 0 to 1, then weighted and combined into a final index score (0–100).

Conclusion

While Indiana has made **steady progress** in expanding early learning access, **significant disparities** remain across counties and census tracts. The report emphasizes the need for **continued investment, local collaboration, and targeted strategies** to ensure all children have access to high-quality, affordable early learning opportunities.

Would you like a visual summary (e.g., infographic or slide deck) or a breakdown of data for a specific county or region?