

THE WORKING POOR FAMILIES PROJECT

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IMPROVING JOB QUALITY FOR THE EARLY CHILDHOOD WORKFORCE

By Judy Berman, PhD., and Melanie Kruevelis, DC Appleseed¹

THE WORKING POOR FAMILIES PROJECT

Strengthening State Policies for America's Working Poor

Millions of American breadwinners work hard to support their families. But, despite their determination and effort, many are mired in low-wage jobs that provide inadequate benefits and offer few opportunities for advancement. In fact, nearly one in three American working families now earn wages so low that they have difficulty surviving financially.²

Launched in 2002 and currently supported by The Annie E. Casey, Joyce and W. K. Kellogg foundations, the Working Poor Families Project is a national initiative that works to improve these economic conditions. The project partners with state nonprofit organizations and supports their state policy efforts to better prepare America's working families for a more secure economic future.

For more information:

www.workingpoorfamilies.org

INTRODUCTION

Early care and education (ECE) professionals are among the lowest paid workers in the U.S. economy. On average, they are paid only slightly more than cashiers and dishwashers, slightly less than coat and locker room attendants, and less than half of what kindergarten teachers earn despite working full-time year-round. Nearly half of the workers that the Bureau of Labor Statistics classifies as “child care workers” enroll in some form of public assistance for themselves or their families, such as Medicaid and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and many are eligible for child care subsidies themselves.³ Nationwide, almost two million workers are paid to work in the ECE economy.⁴ Women comprise the vast majority, and people of color are disproportionately represented in the ECE workforce.⁵ Most ECE workers are parents themselves, and more than 60 percent of the ECE workforce is employed full-time.⁶

Studies of the ECE workforce have found that poor compensation, along with inadequate access to employee benefits, drive the field's high turnover rate of 30 percent annually — nearly four times higher than the turnover rate for elementary school teachers.^{7,8} Relatedly, low morale and a lack of support from administrators and fellow teachers also contributes to the field's instability.^{9,10,11} The high degree of churn in the ECE field is harmful to both children and their families. Turnover interferes with children's attachment to a caregiver, which can disrupt their early development in many ways, such as increasing aggressive behaviors as they age.¹² Moreover, high turnover costs businesses as they scramble for temporary coverage, and constantly recruit, hire, and train; and turnover affects employee morale and parent trust.

State governments have a critical role in improving these conditions and creating opportunities to strengthen job quality for the ECE workforce. All states have numerous levers to influence worker wages, benefits, and overall employment standards and protections. States also have postsecondary

educational systems that can provide the education and training needed to strengthen the skill level of the ECE workforce. And while the role of states in administering ECE varies nationally, state-level innovations have been at the center of a movement to improve ECE. States continue to enhance access and the quality of care provided to our youngest children, building on decades of highly-regarded research demonstrating the long-term returns on investments made for participants in high-quality ECE services.

The Working Poor Families Project is a national initiative that seeks to strengthen state policies on behalf of low-income working families. This policy brief addresses opportunities and strategies for investing in the working conditions of early childhood educators in order to increase their economic security and improve retention in the field. Not only can such investments lead to reduced poverty and directly increase the economic security of nearly 2 million ECE workers and their families, but good teachers raise the quality of early care and education,¹³ producing strong economic and social returns for society.

Given the long-term benefits of high-quality ECE, states would benefit from doubling down on their investments in the ECE workforce. This requires both an understanding of the complex web of ECE administration, and an appraisal of the options states have to improve the working conditions of early childhood educators.

CURRENT STATUS OF EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION: FUNDING STREAMS AND FRAGMENTATION

Early educators work in a variety of programs and settings, differentiated in large part by the funding streams from which they derive support. These streams include state and local public school funds, federal Head Start (HS) and Early Head Start (EHS), and the federal Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF), a program of the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) which funds subsidy payments for child development centers and homes that serve low-income children. There is also a large private market which derives funding primarily from tuition and fees paid by families.

States play important regulatory roles in determining licensing standards for child development facilities (regardless of whether those facilities participate in publicly-funded programs). In many states, state agencies also play a role in determining eligibility for participation in such publicly funded programs, such as establishing quality standards beyond licensing. Some states are more inclusive than others in designating what types of facilities are required to be licensed, with exclusions typically defined by number of children cared for and/or affiliation with a faith-based organization. The larger the unregulated sector, the less leverage public entities have to improve job quality.

Definitions: Early Care and Education & Head Start

We use the term **Early Care and Education** or **ECE** to refer to developmentally appropriate teaching and care for children from birth to five years of age. For the purposes of this brief, this term includes what is commonly referred to as “childcare,” as well as preschool and pre-kindergarten programs, which typically focus on three and/or four-year olds. ECE services are provided in center- and home-based settings, as well as public school classrooms, and also include programming provided under the aegis of Head Start/Early Head Start.

Head Start (HS) is a federally funded public early childhood and family support program that supports the cognitive, social, and emotional development of low-income and vulnerable children from birth to five years old, with the aim of improving participating children’s readiness for school while reducing poverty. Early Head Start (EHS) is a branch of the Head Start program that specifically serves infants, toddlers, and pregnant women and their families who live below the Federal Poverty Line.

Even when teacher education, experience, and role are the same, compensation for providers varies widely across these settings, with the lowest wages and the least public leverage available in privately-funded unlicensed settings. In the hierarchy of conditions of employment for early educators, wages, benefits, and professional support tend to be best in public schools, including some publicly-funded pre-K programs, and worst in community-based child development centers and homes.¹⁴ Workers who care for infants and toddlers, versus those caring for preschool-aged children, also fare worse in terms of wages.¹⁵

Part of the distinction among these different settings grows from their implicit, if not explicit, purposes. Community-based child development centers and homes have typically served as work supports which provide for the safekeeping of young children while parents work, while preschool and public pre-kindergarten classrooms educate and socialize young children to prepare them for kindergarten and academic success. Head Start and Early Head Start — the most comprehensively designed public ECE programs — do both, as well as attend to the physical and mental health of the children and parents with the goal of ending poverty. The science of human development, along with research on causes of poverty, have caused the purposes of child care and education to begin to blur. There are important implications for public policy.

A child's earliest years are foundational to later achievement: "When children do not have access to appropriate stimulation, or barriers to opportunities for productive learning exist, these can lead to early disparities in capability that generally persist in the absence of effective intervention."¹⁶ In other words, children who do not get appropriate support as infants and toddlers enter kindergarten already behind, and those gaps in cognitive and social-emotional development can persist.

Longitudinal studies of high-quality ECE programs have shown that children who participate in these programs often demonstrate increased cognitive scores, high school graduation

rates, college attendance rates and labor market participation, among other benefits; while their parents have higher employment and earning rates.¹⁷ This confers greater importance than ever on the work of ECE providers, especially those who serve children born into poverty or who work in community-based settings with children from ages zero to three.

POLICY OPPORTUNITIES FOR STATES

This section reviews key policy areas where states can help strengthen both the economic status of the ECE workforce and the quality of ECE throughout the state — with important consequences for children, families, and the economy. The six policy areas address opportunities and levers to enhance the skills and working conditions for the ECE workforce, which benefits both these workers and their families, as well as the quality of education for children in their care.

1. Leverage Quality Rating and Improvement Systems

One strategy that most states are using to organize and incentivize improvements in ECE programs is establishing a Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS). The Administration of Children and Families defines QRIS as:

A systemic approach to assess, improve, and communicate the level of quality in early and school-age care and education programs. Similar to rating systems for restaurants and hotels, QRIS award quality ratings to early and school-age care and education programs that meet a set of defined program standards. By participating in their State's QRIS, early and school-age care and education providers embark on a path of continuous quality improvement.¹⁸

QRIS can be defined in statute, regulation, or administrative policy, and can be applied to one or all segments of the ECE environment. Given a lack of consistency in QRIS implementation and indicators, it is not yet possible to assess the

impact of these systems on the ECE workforce nationally. However, states can take steps to incentivize improvements that benefit workers. A state's QRIS (or multiple systems, as some states administer QRIS locally, rather than statewide) can be leveraged to improve working conditions for the early care workforce by including worker protections in its rankings criteria.

North Carolina's QRIS is part of a statutorily-defined facility licensing scheme that applies solely to community-based ECE programs. Other states, including Vermont, apply their QRIS to all regulated settings, including publicly-funded pre-kindergarten classrooms in both schools and licensed centers. QRIS indicators cover a range of program areas, including curriculum, family partnerships, and administration, and they vary across states. Programs advance up the quality rating system by

meeting conditions in some or all of the categories, depending on the structure of the QRIS.

The table below shows states with QRIS indicators related to working conditions (note that 15 states either do not have a QRIS or do not have data available for comparison).¹⁹ A minority of states include employment protections in their rating criteria, and even fewer extend these protections to home-based workers.²⁰

The significant cross-state differences in both the workplace supports that are included in states' QRIS rating criteria and the structure of the systems themselves mean that access to these policies can vary depending on where an early educator lives, and the type of provider or workplace. For example, many states operate their QRIS by allowing providers to choose from

Table 1: States with QRIS Indicators that Improve Staff Working Conditions

State (States not included either do not have QRIS, or do not have worker protections as part of their quality indicators)	Worker Protection Indicators for Center-Based Providers Included in QRIS		Protections Extend to Home-based Care Providers
	Salary and Benefits	Compensation for Time Spent on Professional Development	
Colorado	X		
Delaware	X		X
Kentucky	X		
Maine	X		
Maryland	X		X
Massachusetts	X		X
Michigan	X		X
Nebraska	X		X
Nevada	X		
New Hampshire	X		
New York	X		X
Ohio	X	X	
Oregon	X		X
Pennsylvania	X		
Tennessee	X	X	
Utah	X	X	
Vermont	X	X	X
Wisconsin	X		

Adapted from the [Early Childhood Workforce Index - 2016](#).

a menu of options to earn points in a particular category. While respectful of program autonomy and variation, this strategy can undermine the effectiveness of including wage, benefits, and professional supports criteria in the QRIS because it can allow programs to advance up the rating scale without committing resources to the most significant needs of their workers.²¹ States should work toward having a QRIS that requires providers to meet all conditions to move up in ranking, including improving conditions for the ECE workforce.

Massachusetts' QRIS offers a model program by implementing a provider ranking system and extending provisions to home-based provider staff. Providers must meet all of a given level's criteria, including workplace quality criteria, in order to advance.²² Thus ECE providers looking to move to a Level 3 ranking or above must meet certain workplace standards, such as ensuring paid planning time; establishing clear salary schedules; and providing at least one workplace benefit to staff, such as paid leave, health insurance, or tuition reimbursement.²³ At Level 4, the benefits must include paid vacation, paid sick leave, and health insurance, and the program must provide incentives for educational attainment. The Massachusetts system also ensures that equitable standards apply to both center- and home-based educators — one of only 10 states to do so.²⁴ While a model in several aspects, Massachusetts' system does not require providers to compensate staff for professional development, hindering educators' ability to boost their skills and credentials.²⁵

A few states link tax-credit eligibility for ECE center-based staff to a center's participation in their state's QRIS, to encourage engagement in the QRIS and increase the availability of high-quality early care. As background, using tax credits to supplement early educators' wages is advantageous because of the relative stability of funding, as these financial supports are embedded in states' tax codes and thus are less vulnerable to budget cuts or changes in legislative priorities.²⁶ However, there are limitations to using tax credits to boost early educators' economic stability. Given that nearly 75 percent of early educators worry

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about their ability to meet monthly expenses, a salary supplement paid only once a year retroactively will not alleviate financial pressures faced by the early childhood workforce.²⁷

Several states offer excellent examples of tying QRIS ratings to tax credits for the ECE workforce. Louisiana's School Readiness Tax Credit provides a refundable tax credit of up to \$3,260 for child care teachers and directors who have worked for at least six months in a QRIS-rated provider.²⁸ To encourage continuity of care for children and provider job stability, this credit does not offer higher tax credits to centers with higher QRIS ratings. Instead, an eligible teacher in a one-star rated center receives the same credit as an equally educated teacher in a five-star center, limiting the incentive for a qualified teacher to leave a low-rated center to earn a higher credit in a center with a better rating.²⁹ The tax credit does, however, increase in value as educators attain higher credentials and gain more experience in the classroom.

In 2016, Nebraska enacted its own version of the School Readiness Tax Credit, creating two credits for the ECE workforce: one refundable credit for educators in QRIS-rated centers, and an additional non-refundable credit for QRIS-rated programs.³⁰ Like Louisiana's program, the refundable credit is prorated for increased educational attainment and front-of-the-classroom experience, with credits ranging from \$500 to \$1,500.³¹

2. Support Equitable Salaries with Reimbursement Rates

The Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF), a program of the Child Care and Development

Block Grant (CCDBG), is an important source of federal funding that supports both access to ECE for working poor families and increased program quality. Though its direct effects are limited to those programs participating in the subsidy program, CCDF provides room for states to use the subsidy program to influence worker compensation.

Under CCDF, states have flexibility to set reimbursement rates, but rates must be benchmarked to the area childcare market. “Market rate studies” were the standard tool that states used to develop the benchmarks, but under the recent reauthorization of CCDBG, states were given permission to use CCDF funds for cost-based benchmarking.³² Unlike market rate studies which determine how much ECE providers charge per child, cost modeling studies determine what it costs for providers in that state to meet licensing requirements and QRIS standards. Ensuring that revenue keeps up with costs is essential to the health of the childcare sector, and maintaining and/or building the supply of high-quality childcare slots.

Because market rates for tuition are often set artificially low based on perceptions of what families are able and willing to pay, reimbursement rates based on cost data rather than market data are better able to provide programs with the revenue necessary to improve working conditions for the ECE workforce. But to be effective in improving working conditions for early educators, the state’s cost model must build in sustainable salaries for ECE workers, rather than using data on current low wages. If the cost model shows what it costs to provide ECE services to a child at current wage and benefit rates, the resulting reimbursement rates will likely be higher than rates currently set by market rate studies, but still insufficient to support improvement in compensation.

A good example of how this can work comes from the District of Columbia. Because of changes created in the District’s childcare market by the implementation of universal pre-K for three- and four-year-olds, many of the District’s community-

based providers struggle with the higher costs of caring for infants and toddlers.³³ The District has also been working to increase the number of high-quality infant and toddler slots to meet current and future demand. For these reasons, the District opted to use a cost-modeling approach instead of a market rate study. The cost model demonstrated that programs at all quality levels with fewer than about 50 children struggle to collect enough tuition revenue to break even.³⁴

The District built the state’s required benefits into the model, such as minimum accrued sick and safe leave, and assumed that employees received at least the District’s “living wage,” (\$13.80 in 2015 when the model was created) though that wasn’t necessarily the case in reality, based on self-reported salary scales.³⁵ The District has raised reimbursement rates, and issued an RFP to support a shared service³⁶ pilot program to support child care homes. Legislators have referred to the cost modeling study in a bill that would require the state to pay reimbursement rates to providers based on a cost model with K-12 pay parity built into it.³⁷

Beyond providing data to help properly set reimbursement rates, cost modeling offers the ability to support other needed changes in the early education field. Notably, cost modeling can demonstrate the specific enrollment and quality conditions under which programs can break even, and can help programs identify strategies that will make them more financially viable.

3. Create Parity with the K-12 System

States can address one of the primary imbalances among teachers at different publicly-funded schools and programs by promoting parity in access to pay, benefits and other factors among pre-K and K-12 teachers. Since the early 1990s, states have increasingly adopted publicly-funded pre-kindergarten programs, with programs operating in 43 states and the District of Columbia.³⁸ While the adoption of state-funded pre-kindergarten programs signals a state’s recognition that quality ECE is a crucial public good, akin to K-12 schooling, the wide compensation gap between

pre-K and K-12 teachers impacts high turnover for pre-K teachers.³⁹ The early education of low-income children is more likely to be affected by teacher turnover than that of their higher-income peers,^{40, 41} ultimately limiting and undermining the utility of ECE as a tool to close socioeconomic achievement gaps.

According to the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), there are approximately 4.5 million three- and four-year-old children enrolled in preschool programs across the country. Roughly 2.6 million of these children attend public programs,⁴² including both state- and locally-funded pre-kindergarten, and federally-funded special education and Head Start. In some jurisdictions, these public services are limited to low-income children or others who are at risk of starting school without the necessary preparation. In other areas, such as the District of Columbia, programs for three- and four-year olds are universally accessible at public expense, many in the same buildings and under the same governance as K-12 classrooms.

Despite the increasing investment in pre-kindergarten programs across the United States, the median annual salary for preschool teachers (working in both public schools and other settings)⁴³ is nearly half that of kindergarten teachers (\$28,790 annually for preschool teachers, compared with \$52,620 for kindergarten teachers).⁴⁴ Low earnings among early childhood educators contribute to an industry turnover rate that is four times higher than that of elementary school teachers.⁴⁵ In addition, turnover rates have been shown to increase where educational requirements are raised without commensurate increases in compensation.⁴⁶

These pay disparities also apply to pre-kindergarten administrators. In most jurisdictions, there are different training and credentialing requirements for elementary school principals and ECE center directors, as well as different pay scales. Both positions provide administrative and pedagogical leadership for educational institutions, often for same-aged children in similar classrooms. Yet expectations around prior experience and

educational attainment, as well as the expected content of preparatory programs, can be vastly different. The result is that center directors earn, on average, only 60 percent of what elementary school principals earn.⁴⁷

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Inadequate access to workplace benefits, such as employer-sponsored health insurance, retirement plans, or paid sick and/or family leave, create further inequity between public pre-kindergarten teachers and their K-12 counterparts, even for those whose programs are located in public school buildings. While workplace benefits are the norm in most K-12 educators' compensation packages, data suggests that access to such benefits are far from universal for pre-kindergarten teachers, even less common for teachers of infants and toddlers, and vary depending on the setting where they work.

Only six programs in four states currently provide parity across pay, benefits, and professional responsibilities for both lead and assistant teachers in publicly-funded programs.⁴⁸ And only four states — Oklahoma, Tennessee, West Virginia, and New Jersey — extend parity to pre-K teachers working in both public and community-based settings.⁴⁹ The irregularity of parity policies creates an imbalance within the ECE profession, leaving most workers unable to reach equitable pay despite doing the same job. States should consider standardizing parity policies to address this inequity and imbalance.

It is important to note that while ensuring salary parity for pre-K and K-12 is an important step in

improving conditions for the ECE workforce, its utility is limited by the complexity of ECE service delivery and funding. Many early educators work outside the domain of publicly-funded pre-K programs in privately-funded settings, or they care for children not yet old enough for pre-K or for children served through the subsidy program. Parity policies will not reach those educators unless the policies are deliberately extended and funded. As states increase investments in public pre-K programming, the inclusion of parity policies can greatly improve conditions for this growing sector of the workforce.

4. Innovate Funding Streams

States combine a variety of federal, state, and local funding sources to fund ECE programming. The Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG, which includes the Child Care and Development Fund or CCDF) the Social Service Block Grant Program (SSBG), and Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) are among the federal programs that can feed into state funding for ECE. Several states blend federal Head Start and Elementary and Secondary Education (ESEA) Title I funds to serve more Head Start-eligible students in public preschool and pre-K classrooms. State agencies have the responsibility of effectively coordinating these funding streams. As the Ounce of Prevention Fund notes, “it is more efficient for entities that administer early childhood program funds to develop and harmonize policies, rules, regulations and procedures on blending and braiding at the ‘upstream’ or government agency administrative level, rather than at the individual family and provider or ‘downstream’ level.”

States themselves have a variety of funding sources available for early care and education, such as revenue from “sin taxes” or existing school K-12 resources.⁵⁰ Some states actively encourage the layering, blending, and braiding of multiple funding streams to support high quality, full-day, full-year ECE programming. Examples include legislative initiatives (e.g., Oregon) or implementation supports, like a searchable database (e.g., Colorado).⁵¹

One important mechanism for funding preschool or pre-K classrooms to support competitive salaries is through the K-12 funding formula, which determines the allocation of a blend of federal, state, and local resources. Today, nine states plus the District of Columbia have chosen to use their school funding formula to allocate resources to pre-K classrooms.⁵² Employing the school funding formula for pre-kindergarten provides a more stable funding mechanism for pre-K programs than separate block grants or other funding sources that could be more readily cut in state budget appropriations.⁵³ It may also signal to policymakers and residents alike that ECE is a cornerstone of public education, shifting discussions of ECE as a work-support program to considering it an educational necessity, aligning with developmental science and K-12 achievement goals.⁵⁴

Research has linked formula-based funding to better salaries for early care workers. In states using formula funding to finance pre-K, wages for early care teachers are about seven percent higher than those in states whose public pre-K programs are funded through block grants and other non-formula funding schemes, and are also closer to reaching salary parity for pre-K and kindergarten teachers.⁵⁵ Using a funding formula does not automatically translate to pay parity, however. Only five of the states using a funding formula also have salary parity (Iowa, Kentucky, Oklahoma, Texas, and West Virginia) and of these, only two (Kentucky and Oklahoma) offer benefits parity as well.⁵⁶ This points to the importance of including specific mechanisms to address compensation directly in any effort to expand access to ECE.

As of yet, no states have used the K-12 funding formula to support ECE programs for infants and toddlers, the workforce for which remains the lowest paid. This may be due, in part, to the nature of infant-toddler programs which are typically in community-based centers and homes. Any public funding to these programs, outside of specialized grants, generally comes through the subsidy program. That program reimburses for an individual child’s enrollment or attendance, as compared to K-12 programs, where funding is based on an annual audit of all students. But

contracting for ECE slots, which is allowed and even encouraged under the CCDBG to close a variety of childcare gaps, including slots for children in rural areas, can help get past this barrier and align infant-toddler funding with K-12.

Contracting under CCDBG is typically done using annual agreements, with payments based on enrollment and distributed on a weekly or monthly basis, which is more similar to typical K-12 school funding than subsidy reimbursements. CCDBG allows states to add quality criteria and other requirements that do not exist for other providers in the subsidy program and allows states to negotiate higher payments for these slots as well.⁶³ This mechanism could be used in combination with a K-12 funding formula to ensure those serving the highest need children are compensated at commensurate rates. Indeed, the National Center on Subsidy Innovation and Accountability considers contracting a viable way to pilot strategies that may be politically risky or expensive to implement on a full statewide basis.⁶⁴

Another opportunity is leveraging ESSA's expanded scope. In 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) — the primary federal legislation governing the K-12 system in the United States — expanded to integrate early education throughout the law's provisions. Although Title I has supported preschool services in the past, ESSA now requires that states describe how they will support school districts that choose to use ESSA funds for early childhood programming. In addition, ESSA funds earmarked for professional development can be used to develop the skills of early education leadership and educators. Title II, in particular, focuses on developing educators' skills, as well as those of principals and other school leadership, in the hopes of building capacity to better serve teachers.⁶⁵ Oregon leveraged these new guidelines in its 2017 ESSA implementation plan, where the state outlines efforts to expand scholarships and professional development opportunities to ECE educators.⁶⁶ Other states looking to build greater coherence between their ECE and K-12 systems should consider reserving their own ESSA funds for the professionalization of the ECE workforce.

Rural Considerations

States looking to improve the working conditions of ECE professionals must also factor in the challenges of delivering ECE services in rural areas that may lack a sufficient pool of early childhood educators with the requisite training and credentials.⁵⁷ Early childhood educators in rural areas might face issues with transportation or a lack of professional development activities.⁵⁸ More than half of children in rural areas do not have access to quality early care and education settings, forcing families to make childcare arrangements that may not be as developmentally enriching as care provided by professionals.⁵⁹

States should work to expand pre-kindergarten programs, and ensure that access is equitably distributed between the state's urban, suburban, and rural areas.⁶⁰ Ensuring that funding for pre-K uses the state's school funding formula can help rural providers who might not have the capacity to competitively apply for grant funding.⁶¹

States have several other options to increase skills for rural educators: expanding scholarship opportunities for early educators, for instance, by adopting the T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood scholarship program; (see page 11) increasing the availability and recognition of alternative educational models, such as West Virginia's program for ECE educators to earn credits toward a credential via free online coursework; and allowing flexibility for rural providers in using their state funding, such as covering enhanced transportation-related costs so that educators and students can get to both centers and professional development opportunities.

5. Expand Educational Opportunities for Early Childhood Educators

This section covers three avenues states should consider to improve skills and certifications for educators: improving credentialing and career pathways; expanding scholarship programs and availability; and recognizing prior learning.

Improve Credentialing and Career Pathways

For several decades, national initiatives have pushed the ECE field toward greater professionalization, with higher degree and credentialing requirements. The federal Head Start program played a key role in spearheading credentialing in the ECE workforce. In 1990, Head Start instituted a new requirement that at least one teacher in every Head Start classroom hold a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential.⁶⁷ Since then, Head Start has continually increased the educational attainment requirements for its workforce; today, half of all Head Start teachers are required to hold a bachelor's degree.

In its influential 2015 report, the Institute of Medicine (IOM) echoed the guidance of Head Start, recommending raising the standards of the ECE workforce by requiring all lead childhood teachers to have a bachelor's degree.⁶⁸ While many support this general direction, they also worry about the impact on the current workforce. It is clear that providers will need scholarship funds (see below), time off work, and other supports to meet these increased educational requirements, and compensation levels will need to go up to retain newly-degreed professionals. Moreover, this movement to professionalize the ECE workforce should not be seen as a part of requirements that merely allow programs to maintain their licenses and contracts; rather, they should be enacted as career pathway systems that opens professional opportunities with increased earning potential for early educators.

A well-designed career pathway allows people to enter training or education programs at various points in their career, in order to boost occupational skills, gain a career-relevant credential, and increase earnings.⁶⁹ Effective

career pathway programs also make needed student supports available, such as academic advising tailored to the student's professional goals, access to social services, and scholarship opportunities to fund their education.⁷⁰

Several state and regional efforts are underway to address this complex set of issues. States such as New Mexico, Minnesota, and Illinois are implementing pathway programs to systematize efforts to educate ECE professionals. Many

Gateways to Opportunity: Illinois Professional Development Systems

The State of Illinois has made excellent progress in establishing a robust, coherent career pathway for early childhood educators.⁷² Gateways to Opportunity, a multi-level, industry-recognized ECE credentialing system, maps onto seven core content areas and aligns employment opportunities from entry level to lead teacher, with specialization opportunities available in infant-toddler development, school-age and youth development, administration, and family childcare, among others.

The credentialing system aligns with the state's QRIS and with post-secondary degrees, and includes scholarship opportunities. Additionally, through the federal Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge grant, Illinois has further aligned post-secondary coursework with the competencies underlying the credentialing system. This aims to make articulation between two- and four-year institutions more seamless, reduce time-to-degree by ensuring that fewer credits are lost during transfers and eliminating redundancies, and embeds industry credential attainment within the post-secondary degree programs.⁷³

national initiatives promote higher education alignment for early childhood educators, including seven state and one regional implementation cohort working with the National Academy of Medicine to create strategic plans to advance the goals in the IOM report.⁷¹

Expand Scholarships

Currently, 48 states and the District of Columbia provide scholarships for those looking to attain a credential in ECE (Arkansas and South Dakota do not).⁷⁴ More than half of state-based scholarships available are managed through the T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood® Scholarship program, which provides for both scholarships and salary increases for educators who successfully complete their program.⁷⁵ Five T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood® states also participate in the WAGE\$® project, which provides additional biannual salary supplements to early educators as they advance along a career pathway.⁷⁶ A few states, such as Wisconsin, administer their own version of a salary supplement program aimed at incentivizing the

retention and increased educational attainment of the ECE workforce.⁷⁷ Like WAGE\$®, these programs typically provide annual or biannual lump-sum payments to workers who certify that certain conditions have been met. Regardless of whether a state increases credential requirements, providing scholarships for early educators is critical to improving the working conditions of the ECE workforce. State-level evaluations of the T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood® program demonstrate that access to scholarships is linked to reduced turnover in ECE centers.⁷⁸ T.E.A.C.H. participants also benefit from increased wages.⁷⁹

Recognize Prior Learning

For early childhood educators, increasing their educational attainment — whether motivated by a desire to earn a higher salary, improve their skills in the classroom, or comply with new credentialing requirements — can be a crucial step in boosting their economic security. But for the ECE workforce — largely comprised of low-income women —

T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood®

One of the earliest and best known efforts to promote higher education achievement and higher wages for the early childhood workforce came from North Carolina. Based on an early childhood workforce study that revealed low pay, low rates of educational achievement, and turnover rates of 40 percent in the field, the T.E.A.C.H. (Teacher Education and Compensation Helps) Early Childhood® program was developed. The program combines higher education scholarship funds, work supports, and bonuses or wage increases upon completion of credits with commitments from recipients to remain as teachers for designated periods of time. The program has been licensed and replicated in 23 states, some of which incorporate it into their QRIS system as a program improvement strategy. Nationally, the program has increased educational attainment, increased compensation for teachers an average of eight percent annually, and reduced turnover among participants.

T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood® has been instrumental in helping build career pathways. In some places, the scholarship funds created a market for degrees in ECE and development and motivated colleges and universities to develop responsive programs. T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood® sponsors have negotiated articulation agreements on behalf of participants and used other strategies to support low-income working adults in advancing to higher credentials. In this way, T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood® has supported steady, incremental progress for participants toward greater economic security.

significant barriers can impede their ability to earn a degree, such as low incomes that inhibit their capacity to pay for college, or demanding schedules that challenge an educator’s ability to focus on school.⁸⁰

One way to reduce these barriers is to offer early educators college credits for prior learning (CPL) and experience. Prior learning credits — earned through tests, portfolios, or other assessments of a student’s existing knowledge or skills — reduce the number of credits a student must take to attain a credential, thus reducing both the time and financial investment required to graduate. Studies of prior learning programs have found that access to CPL is associated with better academic outcomes and higher graduation rates for students.⁸¹ The adoption of CPL is also linked to improved persistence among low-income students, adult learners, and students of color — three demographic groups that are well-represented in the early education workforce.^{82, 83}

Increasingly, states are looking at CPL as a strategy to build a more skilled workforce and to do so across their postsecondary system so all colleges and campuses are applying the CPL consistently for all prospective students, including ECE students.⁸⁴ In Wisconsin, for instance, the state’s technical college system (WTCS) created the Wisconsin Core Competencies, a framework that outlines and unifies the curriculum for two-year ECE degrees.⁸⁵ As part of the core competencies, ECE students enrolled in a WTCS program all share the same requirements for earning CPL, allowing students to more easily transfer credits between campuses. Students enrolled in one of the state’s technical colleges are also eligible to use prior learning credits to satisfy up to 75 percent of their ECE degree requirements, reducing the cost and time needed to complete their coursework.

6. Support Data Collection and Analysis

All of the state policy strategies described thus far require good data to design and implement; thus improving data collection and analysis is also a key effort in which states should engage to improve the ECE workforce. Many states have

conducted workforce and compensation studies to better understand the ECE landscape and the investments necessary to produce meaningful change.⁸⁶

In Colorado, for example, work is beginning on the implementation of the state’s Early Childhood Workforce 2020 Plan. Anticipating a shortage of workers in its early care and education sector to serve its growing population, the plan is built on the premise that “Recruiting and retaining highly-qualified professionals will be an ever-increasing challenge if the state cannot find solutions to the compensation issues that plague the early childhood industry.”⁸⁷ The plan was developed as part of Transforming the Early Childhood Workforce in Colorado, a public-private partnership between the Colorado Department of Education, Colorado Department of Human Services, and Early Milestones Colorado.

Building on the accomplishments of the Early Childhood Professional Development Plan 2010, the strategies identified in the 2020 Plan include building and mapping clear career pathways, making available scholarships and loan-forgiveness, expanding funding for wage and benefit enhancement programs, and building data resources to guide and evaluate policy. Among the data resources that the plan references are regular early childhood workforce studies, an EC Workforce Program and Policy Scan (an index of early childhood funding sources), Colorado Early Childhood Sector Economic Analysis (to understand the economic realities of the ECE industry and its impact on the state’s economic development), and a Talent Pipeline Report (from the Colorado Workforce Development Council, highlighting workforce needs in high demand industries and describing Colorado’s workforce pipeline challenges). This effort requires these multidisciplinary approaches as well as broad stakeholder engagement to raise job quality in the early childhood sector.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Delivery of ECE services varies widely in the United States, both between and even within states. This mixed-delivery system can make it difficult to ensure equitable compensation reaches early educators across settings, and that compensation is reasonably aligned with educator experience and educational attainment. It is becoming increasingly clear that early childhood systems are just as essential to children's education as K-12 systems and, like K-12 systems, rely on highly skilled, well-supported, and adequately compensated teachers to perform optimally.

The recommendations below leverage existing funding streams and ECE infrastructure, like licensing, that states can use to strengthen the ECE workforce, and align with the overall aim of expanding access to developmentally appropriate, high quality early education throughout the country.

- **Build worker compensation increases into initiatives to raise quality.** Qualified, well-supported teachers are the foundation of high-quality programs; high turnover and poor teacher preparation reduce the return on investment of other quality investments. CCDF provides great flexibility to states to invest in a range of strategies that improve the quality of ECE services, including QRIS and professional development systems.

a. Leverage Quality Rating and Improvement Systems: States should build working conditions and compensation into their Quality Rating and Improvement Systems. For states that already have a QRIS with indicators for salary scales, benefits, and professional supports, ensure that these quality markers are designed to maximize their value to workers.

b. Support equitable salaries with reimbursement rates: States should meet the requirements for CCDF by using a cost-modeling study rather than a market rate study. Improved compensation and benefits should be built into the study to

fully understand what the costs will be to providers who choose to pay better salaries and provide better benefits, and raise subsidy reimbursement rates accordingly.

- **Support policy, practice, and funding that continues to professionalize the ECE workforce, which fosters high-quality ECE.** Decades of scientific research has clearly demonstrated that early childhood development is complex and qualified ECE professionals do more than hold babies and keep children safe and clean. Creating strong alignment with the K-12 system can help.
 - a. Commit to pay parity between elementary school teachers and ECE teachers in school and community-based settings:** Be sure to include benefits and professional supports, and pro-rate wages based on working hours.
 - b. Embed federal and/or state funding for early childhood classrooms in the per-student funding formula:** Adequate funding for high-quality ECE can help ensure that all students, including those at highest risk for academic failure, will have access to skilled professionals who can help them reach their fullest potential.
- **Enhance educational opportunities for ECE professionals by building early care and credentialing career pathways and opportunities.** The economic security of ECE professionals depends on their ability to access and advance along a career pathway.
 - a. Provide access and support for professionals to obtain industry-recognized credentials that are integrated with post-secondary degrees and aligned with salary increases:** States should provide scholarships and incentivize movement along the pathway with financial rewards. Where necessary, professional preparation programs should be available in languages other than English.

b. Review preparation and credential requirements for elementary school principals and childcare center directors:

Ensure that both have the classroom experience and substantive backgrounds to provide administrative and pedagogical leadership for ECE classrooms.

- **Invest in data collection and analysis, and use the information gained to promote innovative strategies to meet the needs of the children and the businesses and professionals that serve them.** Because they are spread across different settings, and receive support through different systems and funding streams, it can be hard to get a comprehensive picture of who the ECE workforce is, what strengths they bring and what needs they have. Similarly, the loose network of public and private, school, center, and home settings makes it difficult to understand the economy of ECE. Invest in research that will define and quantify ECE workforce needs and compensation differences within their early care and education systems.

CONCLUSION

States have many potential opportunities to increase ECE worker compensation and improve working conditions, including administrative, regulatory, legislative, and budgetary options. All will require recognizing the value of ECE and its potential to interrupt the cycle of poverty and to reduce — or prevent — the achievement gap that plagues the educational system. Efforts to stabilize and strengthen the early education workforce should be built into all early childhood quality efforts. Without these improvements to the workforce, the field will continue to lose experienced, talented workers, and the ones who remain will continue to struggle to support themselves and their families.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Build worker compensation increases into initiatives to raise quality.
2. Support policy, practice, and funding that continues to professionalize the ECE workforce, which fosters high-quality ECE.
3. Enhance educational opportunities for ECE professionals by building early care and credentialing career pathways and opportunities.
4. Invest in data collection and analysis, and use the information gained to promote innovative strategies to meet the needs of the children and the businesses and professionals that serve them.

For questions about this policy brief or the Working Poor Families Project contact:
Brandon Roberts, robert3@starpower.net,
(301) 657-1480

ENDNOTES

¹ Judy Berman is the deputy director of the DC Appleseed Center for Law & Justice in Washington, DC. Melanie Kruevelis is a policy associate at DC Appleseed. The authors would like to thank the following individuals for providing background in their areas of expertise: Seth Gerson, National Governors Association; Sarah Labadie, Women Employed, Chicago; and Natalie O'Donnell Wood, Bell Policy Center, Denver. The authors would also like to acknowledge the following individuals for their assistance in reviewing this paper: Caitlin McLean and Marcy Whitebook, The Center for the Study of Child Care Employment at University of California-Berkeley, California; Erin Macey, Indiana Institute for Working Families; James Goddard, Nebraska Appleseed; Sarah Labadie, Women Employed; Natalie O'Donnell Wood, Bell Policy Center; and Ceri Jenkins and Brandon Roberts, Working Poor Families Project.

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¹⁹ Whitebook, M., McLean, C., & Austin, L.J.E. (2016). [Early Childhood Workforce Index - 2016](#). Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley. Berkeley, CA: University of California.

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²⁹ Mitchell, A. [Financial Incentives in Quality Rating and Improvement Systems: Approaches and Effects](#). QRIS National Learning Network.

³⁰ [School Readiness Tax Credit, LB 889 \(2016\)](#). Nebraska Department of Revenue.

³¹ [Tax Credits](#). Nebraska Step Up to Quality.

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³⁶ The “Shared Services” model takes many forms, from simple bulk purchasing options and shared property management services to fully integrated administration of multiple programs, including human resource management and substitute pools. The key defining feature is the transfer of administrative cost savings into support for teachers and improved pedagogy. For more information, see [Alliance for Early Childhood Finance](#).

³⁷ [Bolstering Early Growth Investment Act](#), DC Legislation#: B22-0355.

³⁸ For the purposes of this brief, pre-kindergarten is defined as early care and education programming for three- and four-year-old children that aims to prepare children for success in school. Depending on the state, pre-kindergarten can occur in either school-based settings, community-based centers, or both.

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- ⁴⁸ They are three New Jersey programs (Former Abbott, Early Launch to Learning Initiative, Early Childhood Program Aid), New Mexico Pre-K, North Carolina Pre-Kindergarten Program, and Tennessee Voluntary Pre-K.
- ⁴⁹ Whitebook, M., & McLean, C. (April 2017). *In Pursuit of Pre-K Parity: A Proposed Framework for Understanding and Advancing Policy and Practice*. Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley.
- ⁵⁰ National Conference of State Legislators. (2014, April 24). <http://www.ncsl.org/research/human-services/funding-pre-k-through-the-school-funding-formula.aspx>
- ⁵¹ Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Child Care. [*Early Childhood Systems Building Resource Guide*](#).
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- ⁵⁴ It is important to note that insofar as early childhood programs also serve as work supports, many families need care that is full-day and year-round, which school-based programs often are not. Thus, combining funding streams within the formula that can support before- and aftercare is essential to making this strategy work for children and families.
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- ⁶² Ibid.
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