EDUCATION COMMISSION OF THE STATES

POLICY BRIEF

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Strengthening the Early Childhood Education Workforce

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> ***The science of early childhood development makes clear that the early years, from birth through age 8, are a time of unparalleled human growth and development — and that healthy development during these pivotal early years requires reliable, positive and consistent interactions between the developing child and familiar, caring adults.***
>
> — Nebraska's Early Childhood Workforce Commission

Most children in the U.S. spend time in some form of early childhood education (ECE) program (i.e., child care or pre-K) prior to entering kindergarten. In fact, children spend an average of 25 hours per week in nonparental care, including center-based care and informal family, friend and neighbor care. Children develop a foundation for learning during these early years, so access to high-quality child care and pre-K programs has a significant impact on their future outcomes, including school readiness.

Recognizing this connection, states and the federal government continue to increase investment in ECE programs. Increasingly, state policymakers are exploring ways to strengthen the quality of publicly funded ECE programs for all students. Research tells us that educator knowledge and training are two of the strongest indicators of quality in an ECE program — as is the case with K-12 education — so efforts to strengthen the workforce are a critical strategy.

Initial and ongoing professional support for the ECE workforce are limited compared with K-12 educators, leading to challenges in recruiting and retaining staff. Lack of access to high-quality ECE programs with qualified staff may make it difficult to realize the positive outcomes and return on investment that policymakers hope for when investing in ECE.

Who is in the ECE workforce?

The ECE workforce includes individuals working in a variety of settings who serve children prior to kindergarten, including home- and center-based child care, private pre-K, Head Start and Early Head Start, and public pre-K. Within those programs, individuals may be program administrators, lead teachers, assistant teachers or aides.

According to the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, which publishes a biennial Early Childhood Workforce Index, the ECE workforce is made up of about 2 million mostly female, racially diverse adults who are more than twice as likely to participate in public support and health programs than K-12 teachers and all U.S. workers in other occupations. However, the workforce composition can vary even within the field, depending on the type of setting, geographic location and state demographics.

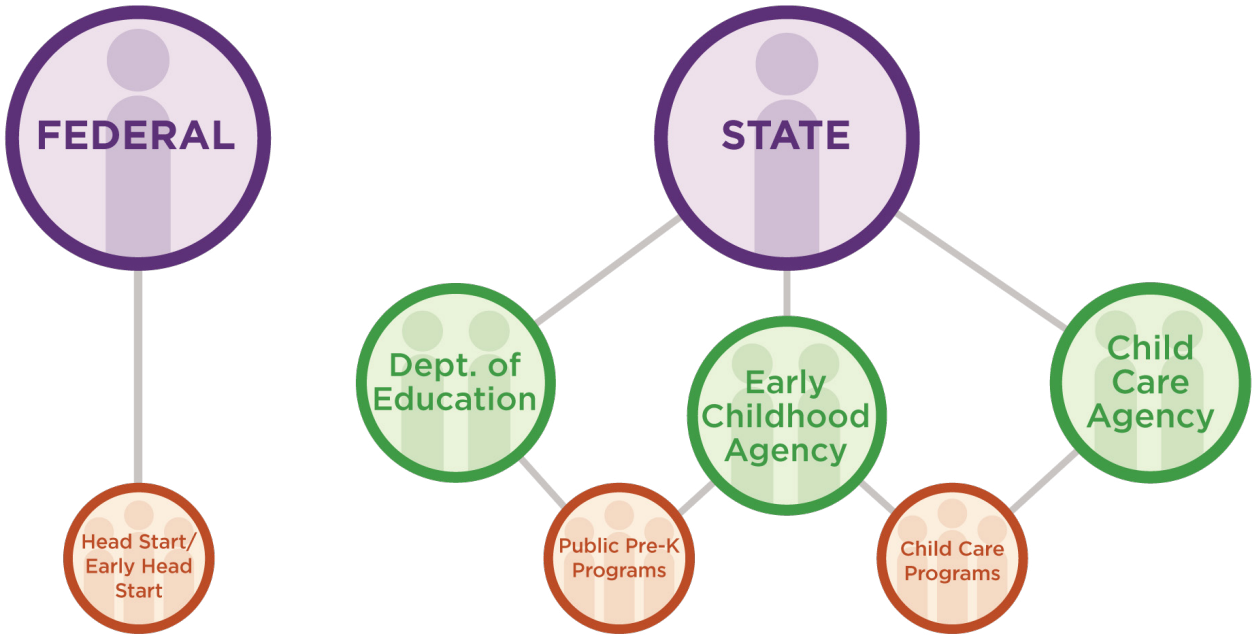
Policy Levers to Strengthen the ECE Workforce

State policymakers have enacted policies and directed funding to strengthen the ECE workforce. Generally, these actions fall into five categories:

- Alignment and collaboration.
- Preparation pathways.
- Licensure and certification requirements.
- Ongoing support and professional development.
- Retention.

Alignment and collaboration

Because oversight of ECE programs falls to more than one agency in most states, there may be multiple entities responsible for oversight of the ECE workforce.



This lack of alignment across multiple systems can create a confusing web of requirements, credentials and professional supports; and state policymakers may consider increasing alignment and collaboration efforts across agencies and systems. One user of statewide alignment is **Alabama**, which houses multiple ECE services — including the Head Start collaboration office, office of early learning and family support (home visiting), office of early childhood development and professional support, and office of school readiness (public pre-K) — in a single agency, the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education.

Alignment of preparation pathways can help existing or prospective ECE workers

attempting to navigate the multiple education and training options and variety of required certifications. In **Massachusetts**, the department of higher education, the department of early education and care, and faculty from public postsecondary institutions across the state worked together to align foundational curriculum, providing the opportunity for individuals to complete a two-year ECE degree at a community college and the option to transfer all credits toward a four-year degree.

Broad, statewide stakeholder engagement is another strategy that states may consider to increase coordination across the ECE system. **Nebraska**'s Early Childhood Workforce Commission convened 40 public- and private-sector ECE professionals to review and provide recommendations about ECE quality in Nebraska. In 2020, after three years of examining the ECE system and workforce, the commission released its final report, which laid out a comprehensive plan to achieve its vision to "elevate the early childhood workforce to a priority profession benefiting all children from birth through Grade 3."

Power to the Profession

Over the past three years, 15 national organizations have collaborated under the banner of the Power to the Profession initiative in order to "define the early childhood profession by establishing a unifying framework for career pathways, knowledge and competencies, qualifications, standards, and compensation." The resulting framework recommends distinguishing three designations of ECE professionals, each with a defined scope of practice and clear preparation expectations.

Preparation pathways

Preparation requirements for ECE workers vary depending on the ECE setting. For child care center staff and family child care providers in the vast majority of states, the minimum age to teach is somewhere between 18-21. Many states require a high school diploma or equivalent. In addition to these minimum age and education requirements, states may impose preservice and ongoing training requirements.

For the pre-K workforce, minimum education requirements beyond high school are usually prerequisite to employment. Head Start requires that 50% of teachers nationally have a bachelor's degree in early childhood education or an equivalent degree with experience teaching pre-K-age children. The federal Preschool Development Grant program also requires pre-K teachers in classrooms supported by PDG funds to have a bachelor's degree in ECE. In addition to these federal requirements, 25 states require that pre-K teachers in both public and private pre-K programs have at least a bachelor's degree.

Because state and federal policy changes have led to increasing minimum preparation requirements over the past two decades, some current ECE workers lack the required formal preparation. However, they may have valuable experience and can demonstrate the competencies that ensure a high-quality experience for the children in their care. To address this, a few states have developed competency-based education pathways and prior-learning assessments that allow candidates to shorten their time to receiving a degree while still ensuring they have the knowledge, skills and abilities to be effective. Through the state's Higher Education

Innovation Fund, the **Massachusetts** Department of Higher Education provided grants to several institutions with ECE programs to develop competency-based pathways and align foundational courses across institutions.

Registered apprenticeships are another alternative preparation option for individuals currently in the field or those looking to pursue a degree or credential while working. The U.S. Department of Labor defines apprenticeship as an "industry-driven, high-quality career pathway where employers can develop and prepare their future workforce, and individuals can obtain paid work experience, classroom instruction, and a portable, nationally recognized credential." In the case of ECE apprenticeships, the related instruction is commonly offered by a postsecondary institution, giving apprentices the opportunity to obtain academic credit toward a degree, in addition to earning a nationally recognized apprenticeship credential and a wage for their on-the-job training hours. Participants in **Montana's** Early Childhood Registered Apprenticeship Program receive 24 ECE college credits, two years of work experience and a mentor to guide them in their professional growth.

Licensure and certification requirements

Beyond minimum education requirements, states also set additional requirements for ECE teacher licenses and certifications.

In 2019, **Connecticut** enacted legislation (S.B. 932) to phase in higher staffing qualifications for ECE programs accepting state funds for infant, toddler and pre-K programs. By 2029, all lead teachers must hold either a teaching certificate with an endorsement in early childhood education or early childhood special education; an early childhood teacher credential; a bachelor's degree with a concentration in early childhood education; or an associate or bachelor's degree with at least 12 credits of early childhood education or child development.

States have also considered policies that offer more flexibility for potential ECE workers to earn credentials while working in an ECE program. In 2018, **Illinois** enacted legislation (S.B. 3536) that allows an alternative provisional educator endorsement to be valid for two years of teaching in a pre-K educational program while the candidate completes the Alternative Educator Licensure Program for Teachers.

QRIS Impact on Workforce

Beginning in the late 1990s, states began to implement Quality Rating and Improvement Systems. These systems enable states to evaluate ECE programs and ultimately improve quality and access. QRIS indicators and standards of quality are used to rate ECE programs, providing families and the public with information about participating programs. As ECE programs support their workforce through professional development and training, their potential ratings increase. Participation in a state QRIS also often comes with financial incentives to ECE programs.

Ongoing support and professional development

Regardless of the setting, ECE workers in child care, Early Head Start, Head Start and public pre-K programs are required to participate in ongoing training and professional development. It is particularly important for the ECE workforce, to ensure they have the skills and tools to support an increasingly diverse group of children with varied developmental, social and emotional needs. Policies that states have considered include targeted professional development requirements, development of career pathways, financial support for postsecondary coursework and flexible credential across ECE settings.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Professional development is generally intended to address the unique challenges the ECE workforce faces in teaching this age group. For instance, in 2019, **Maine** (L.D. 997) required the commissioner of education to implement a statewide voluntary early childhood consultation program to support elementary teachers, pre-K providers and child care providers with training on specific strategies to reduce challenging behaviors in children and promote social and emotional growth.

CAREER PATHWAYS

One way that states have supported the development of the ECE workforce is the creation of career and articulation pathways that allow the movement from professional certifications — such as a Child Development Associate — to associate and bachelor's degrees without losing credits or starting with remedial courses. **West Virginia**'s STARS career pathways program provides the ECE workforce with a continuum of professional development — from high school diplomas to advanced degrees. STARS includes a professional development pathway, a registry and credentialing system, ongoing training, scholarship opportunities and a supplemental-wage program to assist the ECE workforce.

SCHOLARSHIPS

Pathways may also include scholarships for ECE workers to advance their education or qualifications. Most states provide scholarships to the ECE workforce to cover tuition, supplies and/or transportation. One example of a scholarship program used nationally is the T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood® Program, which operates in 22 states and the District of Columbia. In 2019, **Minnesota** (S.F. 2415) expanded eligibility for the Workforce Development Scholarship to include students enrolled in an ECE program of study or certification.

FLEXIBLE CREDENTIALS

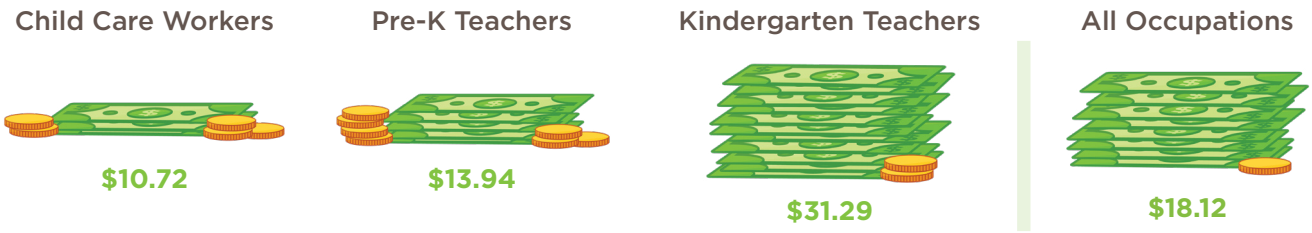
Another professional development strategy is allowing for flexibility and transferability of credentials, education and experience. States have implemented policies making credits stackable, meaning they build off one another throughout the career pathway, and portable, meaning they can be transferred across and within states. In 2019, **Florida** enacted H.B. 1027, which requires the Office of Early Learning to "identify formal and informal early learning career pathways with stackable credentials and certifications to provide early childhood teachers access to specialized professional development."

Retention

In addition to developing a well-trained and supported ECE workforce, ensuring retention of that workforce is also an area of interest for state policymakers who seek to improve the quality and effectiveness of ECE. States have sought to retain a high-quality ECE workforce through adjustments to educator compensation, student-loan forgiveness programs and tax credits.

Low compensation for ECE workers may disincentivize those with four-year degrees from entering or staying in the ECE field. It may also discourage the existing workforce from seeking additional education, particularly when doing so requires a significant investment of money and time.

AVERAGE HOURLY WAGE



AVERAGE HOURLY WAGE FOR HEAD START TEACHERS
BASED ON EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

COMPENSATION

One issue that states have sought to address is pay parity across public and private pre-K programs and between pre-K and K-3 teachers. According to the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER)'s Workforce Special Report, 24 states' starting salaries for public pre-K teachers are equal to those for K-3 teachers and eight states have starting salaries for private pre-K teachers that are equal to those for K-3 teachers.

State policymakers have recently considered aligning ECE workforce compensation schedules and teacher salaries. In 2019, **Connecticut** enacted legislation (S.B. 935) that requires its office of early childhood to develop a proposed educator compensation schedule to factor in levels of education, training, relevant experience, cost of living and certification. In 2017, **Oregon** enacted legislation (H.B. 2013) that requires the development of guidelines that encourage a minimum salary for lead pre-K teachers that is comparable to that of lead kindergarten teachers in public schools.

LOAN FORGIVENESS

In addition to compensation structures, states have sought to incentivize retention through student loan forgiveness. According to NIEER's Workforce Special Report, nine states provide loan forgiveness to public pre-K teachers, and three of those states extend loan forgiveness to private pre-K teachers. In 2019, **New Mexico** enacted legislation (H.B. 275) to amend the state's teacher loan repayment program to prioritize teachers with a degree or endorsement in ECE and other specialties. The program requires participants to teach in New Mexico for at least three years.

TAX CREDITS

In 2007, **Louisiana** became the first state to adopt a refundable School Readiness Tax Credit for ECE providers and staff members. In 2016, **Nebraska** followed suit and passed legislation (L.B. 889) adopting refundable School Readiness Tax Credits. The amount of the credit is tiered based on staff qualifications and performance ratings as defined by statute. The legislative intent in the bill states that "the Legislature finds that the benefits of quality child care and early childhood education are indisputable and that a striking connection exists between children's learning experiences well before kindergarten and their later school success."

Funding for the ECE Workforce

Just as state policies addressing the ECE workforce vary, so does the funding available to support the development of a high-quality workforce. Funding is braided together from federal, state and local sources.

FEDERAL & STATE FUNDING SOURCES

FEDERAL

- CCDBG
- Head Start and Early Head Start
- Every Student Succeeds Act
- Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act
- Preschool Development Grants

STATE/LOCAL

- General fund
- State block grants
- State K-12 funding formulas
- Local sales or soda taxes

Federal Funding

CHILD CARE AND DEVELOPMENT BLOCK GRANT/CHILD CARE AND DEVELOPMENT FUND

In 2018, Congress approved a significant increase in funding for the Child Care and Development Block Grant Act. With subsequent increases in fiscal years 2019 and 2020, CCDBG is now a $5.8 billion source of funding for states, mostly to provide access for children from low-income families to child care. CCDBG also "requires establishment of professional development and training requirements with ongoing annual training and progression to improve knowledge and skills of CCDF providers" in order to improve child care quality.

The Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF), reauthorized by CCDBG, required states to spend 7% of their appropriations on activities to improve child care quality. In fiscal year 2017, states spent $1.06 billion, or 12% of federal and state ECE expenditures activities aimed at increasing ECE program quality, including professional development and training requirements.

HEAD START AND EARLY HEAD START

In fiscal year 2020, H.R. 1865 appropriated $10.6 billion for the administration of Head Start and Early Head Start programs in states. Of that, almost $9.5 billion went directly to local agencies, programs and tribal governments to operate Head Start programs, while $235 million was directed toward training and technical assistance. Half of the training and technical assistance dollars went straight to local grantees to use toward increasing teacher qualifications, among other purposes. The other half of the training and technical assistance dollars was allocated to national and regional efforts, including regional early childhood specialists who are charged with professional development of grantee staff, among other duties.

EVERY STUDENT SUCCEEDS ACT

Title II, Part A of the Every Student Succeeds Act focuses on supporting educators and authorizes funding to state education agencies. A portion of Title II funds may be used to provide professional development support for educators in pre-K settings — both public and private— and to support joint planning between ECE providers and public schools for student transitions and school readiness.

PRESCHOOL DEVELOPMENT GRANTS

In 2014, nearly $1 billion in PDG funds were awarded to 18 states to increase access to high-quality child care for low-income families. To that end, states were able to use PDG funds to strengthen the ECE workforce.

Building off the work of the 18 PDG states, in 2015, Title IX, Part B of ESSA authorized the Preschool Development Birth Through 5 Grant program. These competitive grant awards are designed to improve coordination of birth-through-age-5 programs; more efficiently administer funds for ECE; and increase access to and quality of ECE programs in states. In December 2018, 44 states and two territories were awarded evaluation and planning grants. In December 2019, 20 states were awarded three-year implementation grants and an additional six jurisdictions were awarded planning grants. Systems-building and improvements to support the ECE workforce were a priority for this round of grants.

WORKFORCE INNOVATION AND OPPORTUNITY ACT

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, enacted in 2014, is designed to help unemployed, underemployed and disconnected workers enter or re-enter the workforce through education, training and support services. Two primary focuses of WIOA are developing career pathways and expanding work-based learning, including registered apprenticeships. While there is not WIOA funding specifically targeted to the ECE workforce, career pathways and registered apprenticeships are strategies that states have pursued to develop and support this population. In addition, WIOA requires the U.S. Department of Labor and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to conduct a study to "develop, implement, and build upon career advancement models and practices for providers of early education and childcare."

State and Local Funding

In addition to federal funding sources, states also fund pre-K programs through general fund, block grants and state funding formulas. Education Commission of the States' Special Report "How States Fund Pre-K: A Primer for Policymakers" details these funding sources. Some jurisdictions have also used local funding sources, including sales or soda taxes, to fund ECE programs. At least 35 states also appropriate state general fund monies to supplement federal funds for child care.

Final Thoughts

As states look to improve school readiness for young children and invest in ECE programs, the role of the ECE workforce in implementing high-quality programs and ultimately achieving the desired outcomes is clear. While this brief outlines a number of approaches that states have taken to strengthen the workforce, alignment is a common thread. Policymakers may consider starting with stakeholder engagement and collaboration to achieve similar alignment.

About the Authors

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