



Building a Qualified and Supported Early Care and Education Workforce

A Primer for Legislators

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Introduction

Extensive research on early brain development underscores the importance of the first few years of a child's life. Decades of research shows that positive relationships between young children and their caregivers are critical for supporting healthy social, emotional and cognitive development.¹ While parents play the most essential role in supporting their child's development, most families must also entrust the care of their children to early care providers and educators while they work.² Because children learn and grow wherever they are and every interaction with a caregiver affects their development, a well-qualified and supported workforce is essential to ensure early learners are set up for success in school, work and beyond.

An estimated 10 million children from birth to age 5 spend time in center- or home-based early care and education (ECE) settings each day.³ Parents responding to the 2012 National Survey of Early Care and Education (NSECE) reported using some type of non-parental care for children from birth to age 2 for an average of 34.9 hours a week and 31.6 hours a week for children aged 3 to 5 years.⁴

Research links high-quality early care and education to positive child outcomes, including school readiness, reduced spending on remedial education, positive social behaviors and increased earnings over a lifetime.⁵ This is especially true for children from low-income neighborhoods and for dual-language learners.⁶ For many families, however, high-quality early care and education is financially out of reach and difficult to access due to a lack of providers—particularly in rural areas and for parents with non-standard work hours—and limited enrollment opportunities.

Enrollment fees are the primary source of revenue for ECE providers. Parents pay an average of \$9,000 to \$9,600 per year for child care for just one child, accounting for nearly 11 percent of the median income for married parents with children younger than 18. The average cost of care is much higher in some states and higher still for infant care.⁷ While these fees stretch many families' budgets to the brink, most providers are barely making ends meet. The mostly female workforce typically earns low wages, has little or no access to benefits and often relies on public assistance to support themselves and their families.⁸ Moreover, low compensation for ECE workers does not align with research that shows an effective workforce is the "single most important factor" in providing high-quality early care and education.⁹

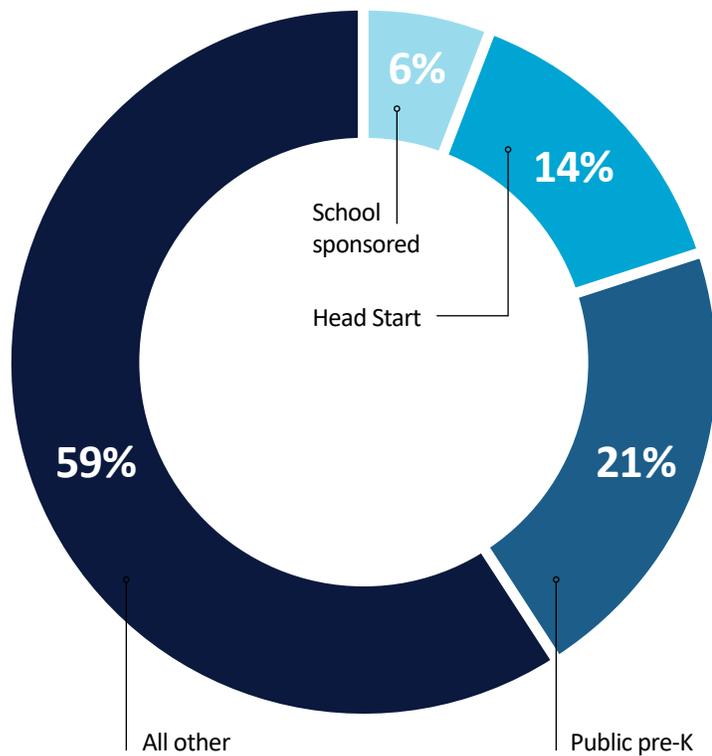
Federal, state and local dollars are used in a variety of ways to improve quality and expand access to early care and education, including preparing and supporting the ECE workforce. As some states increase their investments in state-funded prekindergarten, they are also considering the preparation, support and retention of ECE workers. The Child Care Development Fund (CCDF), the largest federal funding stream for child care, is administered by states and provides financial assistance to low-income families to access child care so parents can work or attend a job training or educational program. A 2017 increase of \$5.8 billion to the CCDF provides new opportunities for states to further invest in high-quality early care and education and the ECE workforce.

State legislators, in partnership with their state's leaders in early childhood, higher education, K-12 education and workforce development, play an important role in supporting the workforce that cares for and teaches early learners. Increases in state and federal funding, combined with a shortage in teachers nationwide, a decline in home-based child care, and the expected increased demand for 600,000 additional ECE workers by 2024,¹⁰ are prompting legislators in Illinois and other states to take a deeper look at the challenges of growing, retaining and compensating a high-quality ECE workforce.

“Despite research recognizing the importance of high-quality early education to healthy child development, and research that indicates that high-quality providers and educators are the single most important factors in these early experiences, too many individuals within the early learning workforce earn low wages—sometimes at or near the federal poverty line—even when they obtain credentials and higher levels of education.”

—“High-Quality Early Learning Settings Depend on a High-Quality Workforce: Low Compensation Undermines Quality”,
U.S. Department of Human Services and
U.S. Department of Education

Center-based Workforce by Setting



Source: National Survey of Early Care and Education

What do we know about the ECE workforce?

The ECE workforce cares for children birth to age 5 in center-based for-profit and non-profit programs, home-based care settings, Head Start classrooms, and publicly funded and school-sponsored prekindergarten classrooms. All settings—whether a classroom, home or center—are part of the ECE system.

ECE workers include caregivers, teachers, classroom aids and administrators. They meet children’s most basic needs (e.g., diapering, feeding and bathing), implement age-appropriate curriculum, and manage and administer programs. Altogether, an estimated 4.8 million workers are employed in ECE roles in the United States.¹¹ The majority, 3.8 million, are home-based providers and may be either licensed or unlicensed, as well as paid or unpaid. About 1 million are center-based, which includes private and community-based programs, and school-sponsored, Head Start and public prekindergarten classrooms. This report refers only to the paid ECE workforce.

The ECE workforce is predominately female and is more racially and linguistically diverse than the U.S. workforce at large. Forty percent of ECE workers are people of color and 27 percent speak a language other than English.¹²

Wages vary across settings and funding sources but almost always are extremely low and sometimes at or below the federal poverty level.¹³ ECE workers are generally paid hourly and earn a median \$10.72 per hour, or \$22,290 a year. Center-based providers working with infants and toddlers typically earn the lowest wages while workers in school-sponsored prekindergarten classrooms typically earn the highest wages. As shown in the table below, these wages are well below the median for educators of older children and workers in other occupations.¹⁴

Employment conditions vary across ECE settings but often include long hours, particularly for home-based workers, and un dependable schedules. ECE workers are generally not paid for planning or professional development as is common for educators of older children. About three-fourths of ECE workers report having

Median Hourly Wages by Occupation, 2017

Child care workers, all settings	Self-employed home care providers	Preschool teachers, all settings	Preschool teachers in schools only	Preschool/child care center directors, all settings	Kindergarten teachers	Elementary teachers	All occupations
\$10.72	\$10.35	\$13.94	\$26.88	\$22.54	\$31.29	\$32.98	\$18.12

Note: All teacher estimates exclude special education teachers. Hourly wages for preschool teachers in schools only; kindergarten and elementary school teachers were calculated by dividing the annual salary by 40 hours per week, 10 months per year, in order to take into account standards school schedules. All other occupations assume 40 hours per week, 12 months per year.

Source: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment

Workforce Data

Nearly every state has an ECE workforce registry that collects data such as worker demographics, place of employment and role, benefits and wages, training and education, as well as turnover and retention. Although the types of data captured vary from state to state, the overarching purpose of collecting data is to help administrators, funders and policymakers understand the status and needs of the ECE workforce and is critical to inform policy and quality initiatives.

In some states, data is limited because participation is voluntary or does not include workers in unlicensed settings unlicensed settings, according to the [Center for the Study of Child Care Employment Workforce Data Deficit Report](#). [Illinois](#) and [Oregon](#) use registry data to evaluate and report on trends in their ECE workforce annually. Data collected through workforce registries may also be used by administrators and workers to track professional development, qualifications for licensing, accreditation and quality rating improvement systems (QRIS).

Additionally, more than half of all states have conducted ECE worker surveys. Recent surveys in [Colorado](#) and [Nebraska](#) were used to identify challenges and opportunities to support, grow and retain ECE workers in their states.

some form of health insurance, either through their employer, a spouse or purchased individually.¹⁵ Surveys in four states—Iowa, Illinois, North Carolina and Virginia—found that 59 percent to 72 percent of ECE workers in centers have paid sick leave.¹⁶ Home-based workers, who often work alone, are less likely to receive employment benefits.¹⁷

As a result of low wages, 46 percent of the ECE workforce is enrolled in at least one public support program—for example, federal Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), Medicaid and Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)—compared to 34 percent of preschool and kindergarten teachers and 13 percent of elementary and middle school teachers. The estimated cost of public benefits for ECE workers and their families is \$1.5 billion a year.¹⁸

Preparing and Supporting the ECE Workforce

Unlike educators of older children, there is no widely accepted preparation standard or minimum education requirement for the workers caring for and teaching children younger than 5. Although research underscores the importance of a child’s first years in establishing a solid foundation for learning, preparation requirements for ECE workers are inconsistent and vary by age of children served, setting, and within and across state lines. An estimated 9 percent to 17 percent have earned an associate degree, and 15 percent to 35 percent have a bachelor’s degree or higher.¹⁹

Higher education and formal training typically do not pay off financially for ECE workers the way they do for employees in other sectors. While higher educational attainment is indeed linked to higher earnings for ECE workers, they are still paid significantly less than educators working with older children or workers in other fields with comparable education levels. When comparing the mean annual salary of an ECE worker with a bachelor’s degree to that of other educators and workers in the civilian labor force with equivalent educations, it becomes clear that a bachelor’s degree in early childhood education has “the lowest lifetime earnings projection of all college majors.”²⁰

Mean Annual Salary of Teachers with a Bachelor’s or Higher Degree by Occupation and for the Civilian Labor Force, 2012

All other ECE teachers working with ages 0-3	All other ECE teachers working with ages 3-5	Head Start teachers	Other public pre-K teachers	School-sponsored pre-K teachers	Kindergarten teachers	Elementary teachers	Civilian labor force, women	Civilian labor force, men
\$27,248	\$28,912	\$33,072	\$33,696	\$42,848	\$53,030	\$56,130	\$56,174	\$88,509

Note: “All other” includes teachers working in center- and home-based settings.

Source: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment

Where do states currently stand on preparation standards for ECE workers?

Many ECE workers do not complete preservice education and may not complete formal training or education until they are on the job.²¹ Education requirements for ECE workers vary among roles and settings, resulting in a wide range of competencies among workers. Although specialized trainings and early childhood credentials are offered in all 50 states, Washington, D.C., and Puerto Rico,²² most states require no more than a high school diploma to work with infants and toddlers. Nearly half of all states require bachelor’s degrees for teachers in state-funded prekindergarten classrooms. Another four states require at least an associate degree to teach in state-funded prekindergarten classrooms, according to the [National Institute for Early Education Research](#).

Similarly, at least 50 percent of Head Start classrooms, with children ages 3 to 5 years, are required to have a lead teacher with a bachelor’s degree. Head Start assistant teachers must have at least a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential or earn the credential within two years of their start date.²³ ECE workers in [Washington, D.C.](#), and [Connecticut](#) face the most rigorous requirements. A recently enacted policy from the Washington, D.C., superintendent of education will require lead teachers across all ECE settings to have at least an associate degree by December of 2023 and all assistant teachers and home-based providers to have at least a CDA by December of 2019.²⁴

Lawmakers in Connecticut approved a measure to require that by 2020, at least one ECE worker in each classroom across all settings have at least a CDA and 12 credits in early childhood education or development. Programs receiving state funds will require all lead teachers to have a bachelor’s degree by 2023, according to the [Connecticut Office of Early Childhood](#).

Nearly all states (47), as well as D.C. and Puerto Rico, have established core competencies for the ECE workforce that include child growth, development, family engagement, health and safety. These competencies usually are developed by a state agency or partnership of agencies or an early childhood advisory council. Colorado’s [Competencies for Early Childhood Educators and Administrators](#), put forth by the state’s Early Childhood Leadership Commission, outline the knowledge and skills ECE workers should have to provide high-quality care and education. There is concern in the field that core competencies for ECE workers are often not enforced, well-integrated into ECE systems, or even well-communicated to the ECE workforce or those hiring and training ECE workers.²⁵

What are the barriers to attaining additional education for ECE workers?

While almost all experts agree that more needs to be done to prepare ECE workers and support their ongoing professional development, there is debate among academics, policymakers and practitioners about the optimal level of ECE worker preparation to ensure positive outcomes for children. A recent consensus

How do states use their Quality Rating Improvement System to support the ECE workforce?

All states, plus Washington, D.C., and Puerto Rico, have implemented or are in the planning stages of establishing a Quality Rating Improvement System (QRIS) to evaluate and support quality in early care and education in centers and homes. Providers are evaluated in several categories, including learning environment, child safety, family engagement, administration and workforce qualifications. Nearly all systems evaluate and award points based on the training and educational attainment of ECE workers. Other worker-related QRIS criteria include:

- Workers' use of a state's ECE career pathway (also referred to as career ladders or lattices)
- Years of experience
- Membership in a professional organization
- Providing benefits, paid planning time, evaluations and other supports to workers

Additionally, many QRIS offer bonuses or scholarships for ECE workers to improve their program's rating through increased education or training.

Source: National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance

study report argues the standards for early childhood educators should be elevated to those of educators working with older children by increasing minimum education requirements for lead early childhood educators to a bachelor's degree.²⁶ Other researchers have found that on-the-job training or coaching have greater impacts on positive child outcomes.²⁷ There is also debate about the ages when children most benefit from teachers having advanced training or degrees.

ECE workers pursuing additional education face significant barriers, perhaps the greatest being the cost of higher education. Because ECE workers typically earn poverty-level wages, they likely must work while attending classes. This may pose scheduling challenges and impede their ability to take out student loans. Also, some current ECE workers are "nontraditional students" and require remedial education and other supports, including English language support and academic and career counseling from a counselor familiar with the ECE field.²⁸ In addition, variations in standards and training requirements among providers, programs and states pose challenges for ECE workers moving or changing employers.

Finally, variation in pay across ECE settings means workers who obtain additional education might leave their roles for higher paying positions, further fueling the already high turnover in the ECE field. For example, a worker in an infant and toddler room who earns a bachelor's degree could then seek a position working with older children in a prekindergarten room where she can earn higher wages. There is concern among some in the field that this type of turnover may make employers less likely to support or offer incentives to workers to pursue higher education.²⁹ Bright Horizons, an ECE provider with locations across the country, has a plan of its own. The company [announced](#) it will provide free college tuition to workers pursuing an associate or bachelor's degree.

What are states doing to prepare ECE workers? And how are they funding these efforts?

Preparation and training for ECE workers comes in many forms and often those participating are already working in the field. Policymakers looking to build a well-qualified ECE workforce must therefore support the training and educational advancement of both current and future workers. States are doing this by investing in scholarships, apprenticeships and coaching, offering credit for prior learning, and improving articulation among institutions of higher education.

SCHOLARSHIPS

Nearly all states offer scholarships to support the preparation of ECE workers, many of them through the [T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood® Program](#). T.E.A.C.H. partners with organizations in 20 states and Washington D.C., and is funded with private and public dollars. States use CCDF funds to invest in high-quality early care and education by building the skills and qualifications of the workforce through T.E.A.C.H. scholarships. Recipients pursue additional education, receive support from career and academic counselors, earn bonuses or raises upon completion of credits, and agree to remain with their employer for a certain amount of time.³⁰

Virginia uses CCDF dollars to support the [Virginia Child Care Provider Scholarship Program \(VCCPSP\)](#). Undergraduate students who currently work in the ECE field, or intend to upon graduation, can use the VCCPSP scholarship to pay for classes that lead to a certificate or degree in early childhood education. The state also funds scholarships through [Project Pathways](#), which awards scholarships to current ECE workers pursuing an early childhood credential or degree at one of Virginia's community colleges. Priority is given to ECE workers working with at-risk children. In Maine, students enrolled in one or more early childhood education or development courses at an accredited higher education institution are eligible for the state-funded [Quality Child Care Education Scholarship](#). Legislatures in both [Maine](#) and [Pennsylvania](#) extend student loan forgiveness to child care providers.

ARTICULATION AGREEMENTS

At least four states, including Connecticut, Indiana, New Mexico and Pennsylvania, have implemented statewide articulation agreements to enable students to easily transfer credits between higher education institutions.³¹ Indiana's legislature tasked its higher education leaders with developing the [Transfer Single Articulation Pathway](#), which creates a formal partnership between the state's public two-year and four-year colleges. Students with up to 60 credits from a community college can now enroll in one of Indiana's state universities to complete their Bachelor of Science in early education without losing any credits. At least three states, including Oregon, New Jersey and Wisconsin, ensure credit for prior learning. ECE workers pursuing a child development associate certificate at a community college in these states can receive credit for their work experience if they demonstrate proficiency and meet other requirements.

APPRENTICESHIPS

Helping current ECE workers further their education while continuing to work creates a more qualified workforce while reducing turnover and instability in the field. This approach has led policymakers in some states to expand apprenticeship opportunities in which ECE workers get on-the-job training while completing related coursework. State dollars are used to fund ECE apprenticeship programs in [Vermont](#), [Virginia](#) and [West Virginia](#).

COACHING

Many ECE programs offer coaching to their employees, especially those new to the field. Coaching involves an experienced educator, often with an advanced degree, who conducts observational assessments in the classroom and provides individualized feedback to the worker. Research demonstrates that coaching produces positive outcomes for both ECE workers and the young children they serve.³² State dollars in [New Jersey](#) and [North Carolina](#) are used for coaching in public prekindergarten classrooms. In [Washington](#) and [Michigan](#), ECE workers in state-funded prekindergarten classrooms and child care centers, and participating in the state's QRIS, receive coaching.³³

What are the barriers to increasing compensation for ECE workers?

For child care programs, one factor contributing to low wages is the below-market rate states offer to early care providers serving families receiving child care assistance. States use federal CCDF funds and state dollars to fund child care assistance for low-income families who qualify. Rates vary by location; however, all states calculate their provider payment rate as a percentage of the market rate. The fed-

Department of Defense and Head Start

Two national ECE programs use a combination of training, education, coaching and credentialing to attain highly qualified workers. The Department of Defense's [child care system](#) moves ECE workers through a professional pathway that ties incremental steps to compensation. The path includes basic training, Child Development Associate (CDA) credential, associate degree and then bachelor's degree. Education is coupled with requirements to demonstrate competencies, continued training and coaching.

Head Start teachers have access to continuous coaching and professional development opportunities. Seventy-three percent of [Head Start's](#) lead teachers have a bachelor's degree or higher and 96 percent have an associate degree or higher.

erally recommended reimbursement rate is 75 percent of the market rate; however, only two states, South Dakota and West Virginia, pay at this recommended level. The remaining states are below or significantly below the federally recommended level. In some states, this means low-income families may have to pay the difference or another amount as a co-pay. Payment rates impact not only providers' income, but also their ability to hire and adequately compensate high-quality staff.³⁴ Furthermore, long hours and low adult-to-child ratio requirements mean high labor costs, particularly for workers serving the youngest children.³⁵

Most early care and education is unsubsidized, meaning parents shoulder the cost. And although the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services defines "affordable child care" as 7 percent of a family's income, many families pay much more than this standard nationwide; 1 in 3 families spend 20 percent of their income on child care while 1 in 5 spend a quarter.³⁶ Single parent families pay an average of 35 percent.³⁷ Raising wages for ECE workers would likely mean shifting the cost to parents who cannot afford to pay any more.

What are states doing to address compensation issues for ECE workers?

Researchers contend that low wages contribute to high turnover, economic instability and stress for ECE workers, which in turn negatively impacts the quality of care they provide and outcomes for children. As part of their efforts to improve early care and education, some states are looking at what can be done to address compensation issues for this critical workforce.

FINANCIAL INCENTIVES

ECE workers in some states receive financial supplements in the form of bonuses, stipends or tax credits upon obtaining additional education or training and increasing their tenure in the ECE field. Thirty-three states provide bonuses for ECE workers, often in the form of a one-time payment for completing an ECE certification or degree. Bonuses are often tied to a state's scholarship program. ECE workers in 12 states are eligible for stipends for continuing to stay in their position or completing additional ECE coursework.³⁸

The five states (Delaware, Florida, Iowa, North Carolina and Washington, D.C) with the [WAGE\\$](#) stipend program, for example, are placed on a "salary supplement scale" that rewards workers for obtaining higher levels of education and for remaining in the same child care setting.³⁹ Like T.E.A.C.H. scholarships, WAGE\$ is a project of the Child Care Services Association but is administered by state-level organizations and funded through federal, state and local dollars.⁴⁰ Similarly, an eligible ECE worker in Wisconsin could receive a stipend of \$100 to \$900 through the state's [REWARD](#) program funded by the Legislature. Georgia's [INCENTIVES](#) program distributes a limited number of payments of \$250 to \$1,250 to ECE workers who meet education and tenure requirements.



Legislatures in [Louisiana](#) and [Nebraska](#) provide tax credits for qualifying ECE workers who meet certain education or training requirements. In both states the tax credits increase as a worker’s education level increases. In 2014, more than 3,500 directors and staff used Louisiana’s tax credit. The cost to the state was \$8 million.⁴¹

PAY PARITY

In some states, preschool educators who work with 3- to 5-year-olds in center-based classrooms can earn different wages than their peers working in school-based classrooms, even though both may receive public funding. Similarly, preschool educators in school-based classrooms can earn different wages and receive different benefits than their colleagues down the hall who teach older children. Policymakers are attempting to address these variations in compensation across settings by implementing pay parity policies.⁴²

At least 18 states have established some level of pay parity for preschool teachers. If and how benefits, salary schedules and prorating of wages to account for differences in the number of hours in the classroom (e.g., preschool teachers working 12 months a year vs. 10 months for teachers of older students) are included in their pay parity policies varies state to state. Still, earnings for preschool teachers in these states are higher than in states without pay parity policies.⁴³

Pay parity policies often are set by school districts or administrative codes; however, legislators can also play a role. Lawmakers in Georgia and Alabama approved budget increases to fund salary supplements or increases to further align the salaries of prekindergarten teachers with public K-12 teachers.⁴⁴ In 2015, Oregon’s [HB 3380](#) directed the state’s Early Learning Council to create target salary requirements “comparable to lead kindergarten teacher salaries in public schools” for preschool teachers in state-funded classrooms. The language was later changed to, “target salary guidelines shall be, to the extent practicable, comparable to lead kindergarten teacher salaries in public schools.”⁴⁵

No states have extended pay parity to prekindergarten teachers within private settings⁴⁶ or to other ECE workers beyond prekindergarten teachers. Researchers at the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment report that Delaware and Washington D.C., are the only states with compensation guidelines for ECE workers outside of public prekindergarten, although 13 states have plans to establish compensation guidelines.⁴⁷

Compensation also includes benefits such as health insurance, retirement and paid time off. Researchers studying pay parity for ECE workers also include paid planning time, paid training time and a dependable schedule in their definition of employment benefits. Using this more comprehensive definition of compensation parity (wages, benefits and paid time for additional responsibilities), researchers found that at least 10 states offered complete compensation parity for some prekindergarten teachers.⁴⁸

Conclusion

Well-prepared and supported workers are critical to providing high-quality early learning experiences that prepare young children to thrive in school and life. Legislators can address preparation and compensation for the ECE workforce in a variety of ways, and a variety of funding mechanisms are available to pay for these efforts. Increased federal funding in the CCDF and the Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five and, state investment in prekindergarten, are new opportunities for states to raise the quality of early learning by investing in ECE workers.

Legislative options to consider

Convene stakeholders to understand the issues in your state.

- California: [Blue Ribbon Commission on Early Childhood Education](#)
- Massachusetts: [Early Education and Care Workforce Council](#)

Compile useful information on your state's ECE workforce.

- Illinois: [Workforce Study](#)

Create a comprehensive plan to elevate the ECE workforce.

- Colorado: [Early Childhood Workforce Plan 2020](#)

Invest in professional development for the ECE workforce.

Allocate funds for high-quality trainings.

- California: [California Child Care Initiative Project](#)

Provide funds for coaching, mentoring and other forms of individual support.

- Washington: [Early Achievers Coach Model](#)
- New Jersey: [Coaching for prekindergarten teachers](#)

Build a highly qualified ECE workforce through higher education.

Ensure articulation agreements between higher education institutions.

- Indiana: [Transfer Single Articulation Pathway](#)

Fund scholarships for current and future ECE workers.

- Maine: [Quality Child Care Education Scholarship](#)
- California: [Child Development Staff Retention Program](#)

Allow for loan forgiveness for ECE workers who have completed higher education.

- Pennsylvania: [Early Childhood Education Professional Loan Forgiveness Act](#)

Address compensation for the ECE workforce.

Allocate funds for wage supplements.

- North Carolina: [Child Care WAGE\\$ program](#)

Provide tax credits for eligible workers.

- Louisiana: [School Readiness Directors and Staff Tax Credits](#)

Encourage parity in pay for ECE workers in settings receiving state funds.

- New Jersey: [Salary parity with K-12 teachers](#)
- Georgia: Parity among prekindergarten teachers in public and private settings.

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