

# Grow Your Own ECE: An Introduction

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## What is Grow Your Own?

Grow Your Own is an umbrella term that describes the many dynamic, community-driven, equity-centered, and holistic approaches designed to help communities support, strengthen, and sustain a well-qualified, experienced, diverse early care and education (ECE) workforce. These initiatives recognize that talent exists within the current workforce and among individuals who may not have considered a career in ECE. Talent in this context refers not only to the skills, knowledge, and expertise that individuals possess but also to their unique life experiences, cultural backgrounds, and connections to the communities they serve. Grow Your Own approaches aim to nurture and develop this talent by providing opportunities for professional growth, removing barriers to entering and staying in the field, and creating pathways for career advancement.

By attracting people new to ECE (e.g., high school students, career changers, parents of young children, non-classroom program staff) and supporting the existing ECE workforce in fulfilling their career aspirations, Grow Your Own initiatives tap into a diverse pool of talent that can enrich the quality and effectiveness of early childhood programs. These approaches help participants earn credentials and degrees through various strategies, including apprenticeship programs, cohort models, tuition assistance and scholarships, mentorship and leadership development, and prior learning assessment and credit for work experiences.

By investing in the development of local talent and creating supportive environments for professional growth, Grow Your Own initiatives not only strengthen the ECE workforce but contribute to the overall well-being and resilience of the communities they serve.

## Essential Elements

In 2022, New America launched a toolkit, "Grow Your Own Educators: A Toolkit for Program Design and Development,"<sup>3</sup> to support practitioners and policymakers in planning, developing, and advocating for local Grow Your Own initiatives to fill gaps in the K-12 educator workforce. The toolkit identified five essential elements for high-quality Grow Your Own programs: strong partnerships, community-based recruitment,

### The ECE Workforce Shortage

The nationwide ECE workforce shortage impacts all ECE programs (home-, center-, and school-based; private; and publicly funded) and reaches up to leadership roles. It includes educators, Early Intervention/ECE special education personnel, and directors. A 2020 survey by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) found that 81% of respondents reported a staffing shortage, and 47% identified job openings for leadership roles that were difficult to fill.<sup>1</sup> This crisis extends to higher education, where programs are closing due to low enrollment, and aging ECE faculty are retiring.<sup>2</sup> The shortage raises concerns about who will become the future leaders of the ECE workforce.

Grow Your Own ECE initiatives can help address this issue by developing new leaders for tomorrow while simultaneously tackling current enrollment challenges. The ECE workforce has been undervalued and has faced historically low compensation and challenging work environments for too long. The supply of qualified professionals has diminished over time, prompting ECE program directors to seek innovative strategies to continue operating.



wraparound supports, paid work-based experience, and structured pathways to earn required credentials and certification. We have expanded upon these and organized them into three phases to support state and local ECE leaders and other community members in their Grow Your Own ECE initiatives: **design, program delivery, and sustainability.**

## Design

Strong community partnerships are at the heart of successful Grow Your Own initiatives, including local entities that can provide expertise, resources, and networks to support efforts. The list of potential partners is endless, but Grow Your Own efforts should include these five elements:

- 1. Representative and inclusive leadership from within the community:** Successful Grow Your Own efforts are guided by the voices, perspectives, and leadership of the communities they serve. This includes intentional efforts to elevate the expertise and experiences of current and aspiring ECE educators, parents, and community leaders in shaping the vision, design, and implementation of Grow Your Own programs. This could include engaging cultural organizations, parent associations, local Head Start and Early Head Start programs, child care resource and referral agencies, workforce development boards, faith-based organizations, local philanthropies, chambers of commerce, and local businesses.
- 2. Institutions of higher education:** Higher education partners are critical in providing accessible, high-quality pathways for Grow Your Own participants to gain the knowledge, skills, and credentials needed to succeed as ECE professionals. This includes developing responsive coursework and degree programs using, for example, stackable credentials, courses offered in preferred languages, online or in community settings, peer learning opportunities, and student-centered learning designs, and providing mentorship, advice, and support services, all of which must be culturally responsive and tailored to the needs of Grow Your Own learners. Additionally, higher education partners should prioritize providing pathways and support for emerging bilingual educators and those whose home language is not English, as research has shown the benefits of having a linguistically diverse educator workforce.<sup>4</sup>
- 3. ECE programs:** ECE programs are at the heart of Grow Your Own efforts as both partners and beneficiaries. They serve as critical sites for practicum experiences, job placement, and ongoing professional development for Grow Your Own participants while reaping the benefits of a more diverse, well-prepared, stable workforce. Engaging local ECE professional associations and labor unions is essential to ensuring that Grow Your Own efforts are aligned with the needs and priorities of the ECE workforce. Additionally, partnering with allied professions and sectors that intersect with and support the work of ECE can bring valuable expertise and resources to Grow Your Own initiatives. Allied partners might include:
  - a. Health care providers, such as pediatricians, nurses, mental health professionals, and home visitors, who can offer insights and support on child development, family well-being, and trauma-informed care
  - b. Social service agencies, such as family support programs, community mental health organizations, housing assistance providers, and child welfare organizations, which can help address the holistic needs of children and families served by ECE programs
  - c. Early Intervention and special education services, which can provide guidance and resources for supporting children with disabilities and developmental delays in ECE settings



4. **Grow Your Own program participants:** Aspiring and current ECE educators who participate in Grow Your Own programs are not just beneficiaries but essential partners in shaping these initiatives. Their insights, experiences, mentorship, and leadership should be actively sought out and valued in the design, implementation, and continuous improvement of Grow Your Own efforts.
5. **Start-up funding:** Adequate start-up funding is critical for launching and sustaining Grow Your Own partnerships. This includes program design, staffing, participant support, and evaluation resources. Collaborative partnerships can help to leverage and align funding streams from multiple sources, including public agencies, private foundations, and corporate sponsors.

## Program Delivery

High-quality Grow Your Own initiatives that address and remove barriers to entering and staying in the ECE field share standard features that include:

1. **Community-based recruitment:** Leveraging local organizations and networks is crucial for identifying and engaging potential participants who are rooted in the community and committed to serving as ECE educators.
2. **Structured and culturally responsive pathways:** Designing clear, accessible, affordable, and culturally relevant pathways to credentials and degrees is essential to supporting participants' educational and professional growth, ensuring they can successfully navigate the program and achieve their goals. Providing access for future educators whose preferred language is one other than English and promoting linguistic diversity in the early educator workforce is critical—nationally, one in three young children from birth to age five are dual language learners.<sup>5</sup> Research has shown that children benefit from having educators who speak their home language and share their cultural background.<sup>6</sup>
3. **Paid work experience:** Offering compensated opportunities for hands-on experience in ECE settings is a critical component. It allows participants to advance practical skills and build professional networks while supporting their financial stability and realizing gains in pay once they attain new professional qualifications, credentials, and degrees.
4. **Financial incentives and supports:** Providing scholarships, stipends, and wage increases during and upon program completion is vital to ensuring participants can focus on their studies and progress in their careers without undue financial burden.
5. **Comprehensive wraparound services:** Delivering tailored support services, such as academic advising, mentoring, and assistance with transportation or child care, is crucial in helping participants overcome barriers and complete the program successfully.
6. **Career advancement and increased compensation:** Creating pathways for ongoing education, professional development, leadership roles, and increased compensation when participants attain

### Ninderjit Gill, North Seattle College Faculty

“What we have found is that wraparound support and high-touch instruction is really important in recruiting and retaining our teachers and students in our program. The key to that is also funding. At North Seattle, we've made sure that folks supporting students—the instructors, the advisors, and the navigators—are paid.”



new credentials and degrees is essential to supporting their long-term growth and retaining a skilled, committed ECE workforce.

These essential elements related to program delivery empower aspiring and seasoned educators to access the education and training necessary for meaningful career advancement.

## Sustainability

Ensuring Grow Your Own initiatives' long-term sustainability and impact requires an approach beyond the initial design and implementation phase. To create lasting change for the ECE workforce and communities, Grow Your Own partnerships must prioritize several essential elements contributing to program sustainability and effectiveness over time. These include promoting policies that create an environment conducive to Grow Your Own initiatives, robust data collection and evaluation that informs continuous improvement, ongoing feedback mechanisms to ensure program responsiveness, and longstanding community partnerships to foster shared ownership and investment.

Grow Your Own initiatives can build a strong foundation for long-term success and impact only if:

- They are grounded in a deep commitment to addressing historic and present inequities in the ECE workforce and ensuring that all children and families have access to high-quality, culturally responsive care and education in their communities.
- They focus on five essential elements:
  1. **Policy:** Engaging in policy discussions is crucial for creating an enabling environment for Grow Your Own initiatives. This includes working with policymakers and stakeholders at the local, state, and federal levels to identify and address systemic barriers and promote policies and funding streams that support the development and sustainability of Grow Your Own programs.
  2. **Data collection:** Robust data collection is essential for understanding the impact and effectiveness of Grow Your Own initiatives. This includes establishing systems and processes for regularly collecting and analyzing data on participant demographics, program outcomes (e.g., degree and credential attainment), and workforce trends (e.g., reduced staffing shortages and increased language and cultural match between educators and children and families). By using data to inform decision-making and continuous improvement efforts, Grow Your Own program leaders can ensure that they are responsive to the needs of participants and communities.
  3. **Ongoing feedback:** Creating mechanisms for regular feedback and input from participants, partners, and stakeholders is critical for ensuring the relevance and responsiveness of Grow Your Own programs. This could include surveys, focus groups, advisory committees, and other forums for gathering insights and suggestions. By fostering a culture of openness and responsiveness to feedback, Grow Your Own partnerships can continuously improve and adapt to changing needs and contexts.
  4. **Evaluation:** Rigorous and ongoing evaluation is crucial for understanding the impact and effectiveness of Grow Your Own initiatives. This involves conducting regular assessments of program outcomes, participant experiences, and partnership dynamics. It is essential to view evaluation as an opportunity to learn more about what is working well and identify areas that require improvement or adjustment. Rather than viewing less-than-ideal results as a reason to stop or pause the program, partners should use evaluation findings to inform decision-making and guide continuous improvement efforts. Grow Your Own initiatives should embrace an iterative process, acknowledging that success may not be immediate or follow a predetermined path. By maintaining a commitment to evaluation and adaptation, Grow Your Own partnerships can optimize their strategies, maximize their impact, and ensure long-term sustainability. Ultimately, a culture of



ongoing evaluation and improvement will enable Grow Your Own programs to effectively address local needs and support the development of a diverse, well-prepared educator workforce.

5. **Longstanding community partnerships:** Building and maintaining strong, collaborative relationships with community partners is essential for the success and sustainability of Grow Your Own initiatives. This includes engaging diverse stakeholders, such as ECE providers, schools, community organizations, local businesses, local government, and families, in designing, implementing, and evaluating Grow Your Own programs. By fostering a sense of shared ownership and investment among community partners, Grow Your Own initiatives can become deeply rooted in the fabric of local communities and achieve lasting impact.

### Colleen Bowman, Navajo Technical University

“What I’m hoping for the future is to have many of our Zuni people go into early childhood education to guide our children so that they can become confident and achieve what they set out to do. I would like for our teachers to teach our culture and our native language so that they will know their identity.”

## Grow Your Own in Action: Head Start

Head Start has long been committed to a Grow Your Own model. Many Head Start and Early Head Start programs offer a substitute training program to parents (and sometimes other community members) as an initial entry point. This provides the programs with a substitute pool and parents with the opportunity to explore whether a career in early childhood is something they would find fulfilling. Parents are actively encouraged to explore careers in ECE. Head Start funds can be used to support their pursuit of relevant degrees, certificates, and credentials, such as the Child Development Associate (CDA). After their training and education, parents engage in field experiences within the Head Start system and are hired as employees, fostering a seamless transition into the workforce. This approach benefits the parents-turned-educators and enhances children’s learning experiences by providing them with teachers who share their backgrounds, language, and cultural understanding.

## Centering Equity

Grow Your Own initiatives welcome individuals from diverse backgrounds and languages, career stages, and life experiences, as well as all members of the ECE workforce. They recognize the unique value of everyone’s perspective and contributions to the ECE workforce. This includes high school students, parents of young children, career changers, retirees, home- and center-based educators of programs big and small, Early Head Start and Head Start educators, and educators of state-funded pre-K programs. Grow Your Own initiatives can create pathways for anyone with genuine interest and commitment to becoming a qualified educator. Participants receive comprehensive resources and support, including mentorship, financial assistance, and professional development opportunities.

Grow Your Own initiatives must avoid perpetuating cycles of low wages and limited mobility for marginalized communities. In recruiting people of color and communities impacted by systemic economic injustice into this workforce, Grow Your Own initiatives (and any solution to the ECE workforce shortage) must intentionally center equity through specific policies that empower participants and confront injustice, including:

- Establishing and mandating respectful wages, salary minimums, and pay parity benchmarks that counter the current national reality of poverty-level ECE workforce pay



- Covering 100 percent of training, tuition, and credentialing costs to eliminate financial barriers to entry and ensure teaching candidates are not burdened by debt to access jobs
- Building clear wage/promotion ladders and career advancement structures that combat historical occupational segregation and mobility ceilings
- Rebalancing decision-making power by including existing ECE staff and union members in designing and monitoring the success of Grow Your Own programs

Unless Grow Your Own initiatives couple their diversity recruitment aims with anti-poverty and anti-discrimination worker protections, they risk encouraging occupational stratification without giving participants power, viability, and mobility as highly skilled educators.<sup>7</sup> Grow Your Own initiatives must proactively implement policies that combat inequality.

## Addressing the Nationwide ECE Workforce Shortage

Grow Your Own initiatives fundamentally recognize early educators for their expertise and their critical role in the lives of children, families, and communities. By nurturing talent from within communities, prioritizing diversity and equity, and fostering long-term sustainability, these initiatives ensure that all children have access to high-quality ECE programs.

- **The impact of well-trained educators:** High-quality early childhood education programs rely on well-trained and experienced educators to effectively support children's learning and development. Educators who possess the necessary knowledge, skills, and expertise in early childhood education are better equipped to create nurturing, stimulating, and developmentally appropriate learning environments. Well-trained educators understand the importance of implementing evidence-based practices, engaging children in meaningful interactions, and promoting social-emotional, cognitive, and language development.<sup>8</sup> They are also better prepared to identify and address individual children's needs, collaborate with families, and contribute to the overall quality and effectiveness of early childhood programs.
- **The impact of racially and linguistically diverse educators:** Research demonstrates that children benefit significantly when their educators share their backgrounds, language, and cultural understanding.<sup>9</sup> A diverse educator workforce that reflects the children and families they serve can foster a sense of belonging, cultural pride, and positive identity development among young learners. This is especially crucial for emerging bilingual children, who thrive when supported by educators who can effectively facilitate their language development in both English and their home language.<sup>10</sup> Educators who share cultural and linguistic backgrounds with children can provide culturally responsive and affirming learning experiences, build stronger connections with families, and serve as positive role models. Nurturing a diverse educator workforce not only benefits children but also enhances the overall quality and inclusivity of early childhood programs.
- **Long-term sustainability:** Grow Your Own initiatives provide sustainable solutions to workforce shortages. By engaging the community in recruitment, training, and retention, these initiatives foster a sense of ownership and investment in the success of ECE programs and contribute to continuous improvement of program quality and educator retention.
- **Addressing disparities in access:** Grow Your Own initiatives aim to increase equitable advancement for leadership by providing opportunities for individuals from diverse backgrounds to enter and advance in the field. These initiatives promote cultural responsiveness and inclusivity in ECE by recruiting educators who reflect their communities.



The value of these Grow Your Own initiatives extends beyond addressing the workforce shortage. They play a role in ensuring that all children have access to high-quality ECE programs. By supporting, strengthening, and sustaining a qualified, experienced, and diverse ECE workforce, these initiatives contribute to the long-term benefits of quality early learning experiences for children, families, and society.

## Supporting Families and Communities

Access to reliable, high-quality child care is essential for families. When communities prioritize the well-being and success of young children and those who care for them, they create a ripple effect that benefits everyone. Grow Your Own initiatives play a critical role in supporting families by:

- Increasing the supply of educators who represent and come from within the communities in which they work, which in turn expands options for families seeking care for their children
- Providing culturally and linguistically responsive experiences in ECE settings responsive to the needs of families
- Setting children up for long-term success in life benefits the entire family and the communities in which they live
- Providing families with the resources and support to strengthen their parenting skills and overall well-being
- Offering opportunities for families to connect and build supportive social networks
- Enabling parents to enter or stay in the workforce, knowing their children are in good hands, which improves families' overall well-being

Grow Your Own initiatives are an investment in the ECE workforce and a critical strategy for supporting families, strengthening communities, and building a vibrant economy. By developing a strong, sustainable ECE workforce, these initiatives ensure that families have access to the high-quality child care they need to thrive—and that all communities have a solid foundation for a vibrant future.

## Cultivating Partnerships

Grow Your Own initiatives are a compelling solution for ECE programs struggling with recruitment and retention challenges and for organizations invested in high-quality ECE and workforce development. Typically, larger organizations with existing resources or the capacity to operate Grow Your Own efforts—such as a large ECE center, nonprofit organization serving multiple ECE programs, or school system—are well positioned to launch Grow Your Own efforts.

Regardless of an organization's size, those interested in starting or contributing to Grow Your Own efforts must collaborate with other programs and engage within their community to set forth a vision and coordinate activities and resources effectively. Engaging with a diverse set of local organizations—such as a child care resource and referral agency, workforce development board, community foundation, professional association, cultural center, local college or university, and local government agency—can leverage a broad range of resources, expertise, and support to effectively recruit, train, and retain ECE educators within the community.

### Pamm Shaw, YMCA of the East Bay

“I always tell people to just do it. Don't be afraid. Go out there, make friends within the community, colleges, the workforce, with your parents groups, and figure out ways to do this. It's not that hard. You have to be committed.”



State and local ECE systems leaders are critical in creating the conditions and infrastructure Grow Your Own initiatives need to thrive. Here are some key actions that systems leaders can take to support Grow Your Own efforts:

- 1. Develop a comprehensive ECE workforce strategy that prioritizes Grow Your Own initiatives:** Systems leaders should work with community leaders to develop a coordinated, long-term plan for strengthening the ECE workforce, with Grow Your Own initiatives as a central component. This strategy should be grounded in data on workforce needs and gaps and set clear goals and targets for increasing the diversity, qualifications, and retention of the ECE workforce.
- 2. Allocate dedicated funding and resources for Grow Your Own programs:** Systems leaders should identify and allocate sustainable funding streams to support the start-up and ongoing costs of Grow Your Own initiatives, such as scholarships, stipends, and wraparound supports for participants. This may involve braiding and blending funds from multiple sources, such as the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and state and local general revenue.
- 3. Build partnerships with higher education and other key stakeholders:** Systems leaders should foster strong partnerships between ECE programs, higher education, and other key stakeholders to support the design and implementation of Grow Your Own initiatives. This may involve convening regular meetings or working groups, developing shared data and accountability systems, and providing technical assistance and support for collaboration.
- 4. Align policies and regulations to support Grow Your Own efforts:** Systems leaders should review and align state and local policies and regulations to remove barriers and create incentives for Grow Your Own participation. This may include strategies such as:
  - Offering alternative pathways to ECE certification or placement on career ladders recognizing prior learning and work experience,
  - Providing bonus points or incentives in state quality improvement systems (QIS) for programs participating in Grow Your Own initiatives,
  - Encouraging state-funded pre-K and other publicly funded ECE programs to have a certain percentage of staff who are Grow Your Own graduates, and
  - Offering tax credits or other financial incentives for ECE programs that invest in Grow Your Own efforts.
- 5. Provide technical assistance and capacity-building support:** Systems leaders should provide ongoing technical assistance and capacity-building support to ECE programs and other partners involved in Grow Your Own initiatives. This may include training on best practices for recruiting, advising, and retaining Grow Your Own participants, peer learning and networking opportunities, and data collection and evaluation support.
- 6. Elevate and champion Grow Your Own Initiatives:** Systems leaders should use their platform and influence to raise awareness and build public will for investment in Grow Your Own efforts. This may involve strategies such as:
  - Highlighting success stories and impact data from Grow Your Own programs in public speeches, media interviews, and other communications;
  - Engaging business, philanthropic, and other community leaders as champions and funders of Grow Your Own initiatives; and
  - Advocating for increased state and federal funding and policy support for Grow Your Own efforts.





# Tending to Your Grow Your Own Vision

ECE systems leaders, programs, intermediary organizations, institutions of higher education, and others interested in starting or contributing to Grow Your Own efforts in your community can consider the following:

- Approach Grow Your Own efforts with the belief that everyone has the potential to learn, grow, and succeed as an early educator. This mindset shift is essential for creating a supportive, inclusive environment that values continuous learning.
- Engage within your community: Contact local organizations that can inform your efforts and help with recruitment, training, and support. Foster a collaborative mindset that recognizes each partner's strengths, contributions, and value.
- Assess your community's strengths and resources: Identify your program or community's specific workforce needs and the existing strengths and opportunities that can be leveraged to support Grow Your Own efforts. Approach this assessment with a solutions-oriented perspective focused on opportunities rather than obstacles.

The benefits of Grow Your Own extend far beyond the ECE sector. When communities invest in the ECE workforce, they invest in the well-being of children, families, and communities. Grow Your Own creates opportunities for individuals to pursue meaningful careers, support working families, and lay the foundation for a thriving society. Success depends on the commitment and collaboration of ECE programs, community organizations, policymakers, funders, and individuals who recognize and value the vital work of the ECE workforce.

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