

# Grow Your Own ECE: ECE Program Leader Guidance

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## Introduction

As an early care and education (ECE) program leader, you play a vital role in shaping the future of the ECE workforce. Partnering with Grow Your Own initiatives can be a powerful way to cultivate a diverse, well-qualified, sustainable pipeline of ECE professionals for your program and community. Investing in the talents and aspirations of individuals from within your community can help address the persistent challenges of recruitment, retention, and representation in the ECE field.

The nationwide ECE workforce shortage underscores the urgent need for sustained support and investment in the ECE workforce, not just to address the immediate crisis but to build a stronger, more equitable, and sustainable system for the future.<sup>1</sup> As an ECE program leader, you are crucial in shaping the solutions and strategies that will make a meaningful difference in your program, for your staff, and within the communities you serve. And although your resilience in navigating these pressures is immense, you cannot solve the root issues of the workforce shortage on your own.

This brief builds upon the ideas presented in "[Grow Your Own ECE: Cultivating Community Partnerships](#)" to provide practical guidance for ECE program leaders considering Grow Your Own partnerships. This brief and the corresponding [reflection guide](#) will help you assess your program's readiness and capacity to engage in these collaborations and offer strategies for building strong, mutually beneficial partnerships to support your program's goals and values.

## 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 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. Read "[Grow Your Own ECE: An Introduction](#)," to learn more about the essential elements to building and sustaining a successful Grow Your Own effort.



### PLANTING A SEED REFLECTION QUESTION:

*What are our program's and community's unique strengths and assets that can be leveraged to support Grow Your Own partnerships?*

# Why Partner for Grow Your Own ECE?

Grow Your Own initiatives can positively impact the overall operations and success of ECE programs by developing a pipeline of qualified and committed educators deeply rooted in their communities.<sup>2</sup> Grow Your Own initiatives help address some of the most pressing challenges faced by ECE programs today and can:

- **Reduce turnover costs:** High staff turnover leads to significant burdens associated with constantly recruiting, hiring, and training new staff.<sup>3</sup> Grow Your Own initiatives' commitment to creating career advancement opportunities and providing financial incentives helps to develop a more stable staff who are more likely to remain with the program long-term and contribute to a more cohesive, effective learning environment for children.<sup>4</sup>
- **Improve program quality and consistency:** Educators are the backbone of high-quality ECE programs. By retaining skilled, knowledgeable staff, Grow Your Own initiatives help maintain consistency in children's care and learning and strengthen family connections.<sup>5</sup>
- **Strengthen family engagement:** Effective family engagement is a hallmark of successful ECE programs. Grow Your Own initiatives promote family involvement by employing educators from the same communities as the families they serve.<sup>6</sup> Educators who share cultural and linguistic backgrounds with families facilitate communication, trust, and understanding.<sup>7</sup>
- **Develop program leadership:** Grow Your Own initiatives provide professional growth and advancement opportunities. By investing in the development of their own employees, ECE programs can cultivate a pipeline of future leaders who bring a wealth of institutional knowledge, community connections, and a vested interest in the program's long-term success. By promoting from within, ECE programs can ensure a smooth transition of leadership and maintain the continuity of their vision, purpose, and role in the community.
- **Strengthen morale:** Grow Your Own initiatives demonstrate a program's commitment to its employees' professional growth and well-being. By providing opportunities for career advancement and increased compensation, these initiatives boost staff morale and overall job satisfaction.<sup>8</sup> When staff feel valued and supported, they are more likely to be engaged and motivated. This positive organizational culture benefits the staff and the children and families they serve, creating a nurturing and responsive environment for everyone.



## PLANTING A SEED REFLECTION QUESTION:

*What are the most pressing challenges facing our workforce regarding recruitment, retention, and development, and how can Grow Your Own partnerships help address these challenges?*

Grow Your Own initiatives offer many benefits that can profoundly influence the overall functioning, quality, and success of ECE programs. Engaging in Grow Your Own partnerships can position your program as a leader in workforce development and community collaboration. It can open doors to new funding streams, partnerships, and opportunities to pilot innovative approaches to supporting your staff and serving your community. In the face of the current ECE workforce crisis, programs need sustainable solutions that address the root causes of staff shortages and turnover. By partnering on Grow Your Own efforts, you can be a part of a solution to tackle the immediate challenges you're facing and lay the foundation for long-term success.



# Your Role in Grow Your Own

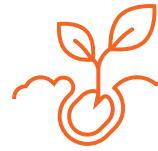
Grow Your Own initiatives are deeply rooted in the community. As such, it is essential to draw upon the wisdom and experiences of your staff and program community when addressing workforce challenges. Before pursuing a Grow Your Own partnership, you can take the time to engage in a thoughtful assessment of your program's unique strengths, the goals and aspirations of your staff, and the challenges they experience in pursuing these goals—and to reflect on your own experiences recruiting, hiring, training, and retaining staff. This process should be approached with an open mind and a genuine curiosity to learn from the diverse perspectives within the organization.

## From Scarcity to Abundance

One of the biggest challenges to consider when weighing the possibility of starting or participating in a Grow Your Own partnership is the sense of scarcity—a belief that there are insufficient resources, time, or energy to invest in workforce development initiatives. This mindset is understandable given the chronic underfunding and undervaluing of the ECE field, which can leave programs struggling to meet their most basic needs.

However, engaging in Grow Your Own partnerships helps facilitate a shift from a scarcity mindset to an abundance mindset—a belief that by collaborating and leveraging shared resources, we can create new opportunities and possibilities for our programs and communities. Some strategies for overcoming scarcity mindsets include:

- 1. Reframe challenges as opportunities:** Instead of focusing on what your program lacks, consider how engaging in a Grow Your Own partnership could help you address longstanding challenges in new and creative ways. For example, partnering with a community college could provide access to new funding streams, professional development resources, or classroom space that your program might struggle to secure.
- 2. Start small and build over time:** Engaging in a Grow Your Own partnership doesn't have to mean taking on a massive new initiative simultaneously. Consider starting with a small pilot program or collaboration and building on your successes over time. This can help build momentum, trust, and capacity for more extensive partnerships.
- 3. Leverage existing resources and relationships:** Take stock of your program's assets and relationships and consider how you might leverage them to support a Grow Your Own partnership. This might include tapping into the skills and expertise of your staff, engaging families and community members as advocates and partners, or connecting with local funders or policymakers who share your commitment to the ECE workforce.
- 4. Partner with existing efforts for systems-level change:** While engaging in Grow Your Own partnerships can help address workforce challenges at the program level, it's also important to advocate for broader systems-level changes to create a more supportive environment for these initiatives. This might include advocating for increased public funding for ECE, more equitable compensation and benefits for the workforce, or policies that support career pathways and professional development.



### PLANTING A SEED REFLECTION QUESTION:

*How can we ensure that our partnership is grounded in principles of equity, diversity, and inclusion and that it advances our goals of creating a representative and culturally responsive workforce?*



By intentionally shifting towards an abundance mindset and embracing strategies for overcoming scarcity, you can position yourself to engage in Grow Your Own partnerships with creativity, resourcefulness, and a sense of possibility.

## Establishing Partnerships

Grow Your Own initiatives rely on **solid and reciprocal relationships** between ECE programs, intermediaries (professional associations, workforce development boards, or community-based organizations that can facilitate connections, provide technical assistance, and leverage resources to support partnerships), local education agencies (for high school dual enrollment and career and technical education [CTE]), and local institutions of higher education (IHEs) (post-secondary technical schools, community colleges, and four-year colleges). These partnerships facilitate initiatives such as high school dual enrollment, parent training programs, CTE programs, apprenticeships, and other efforts.

IHEs are critical partners for this work and are necessary for aspiring and existing ECE workforce members to gain the qualifications they need to pursue their professional goals. IHEs and ECE programs can work together to reimagine recruitment strategies and practices to reduce barriers to entering and remaining in the ECE workforce. **Shifting how individuals access higher education does not have to compromise the standards of education or the quality of the ECE workforce.** Instead, it necessitates an equity-centered process that recognizes and values the lived experiences of the ECE workforce.



### PLANTING A SEED REFLECTION QUESTION:

*How can you build trust and foster open communication with higher education partners to ensure that collaboration is mutually beneficial and responsive to the needs of staff and your program?*

## Identifying the Right Higher Education Partner

When seeking to establish partnerships with IHEs, ECE program leaders should consider the following factors:

- **Accreditation:** Look for accredited institutions that offer transferable credits recognized by certification boards and employers. Accreditation guarantees academic standards and provides the opportunity for federal financial aid. To check if a school is accredited, visit the [Council for Higher Education Accreditation](#) website and search their [directory](#).
- **Alignment with Grow Your Own essential elements:** Seek out institutions that demonstrate a commitment to the [essential elements of Grow Your Own initiatives](#), such as equity, community engagement, and flexible pathways for learning. Look for partners who understand and value the unique needs and experiences of the ECE workforce.
- **Willingness to innovate:** Identify institutions that are open to exploring new approaches and models for delivering education and training to the ECE workforce. Partners should be willing to think creatively about adapting their programs and services better to meet the needs of working adults and non-traditional students.
- **Capacity for collaboration:** Assess potential partners' capacity for and interest in cooperation. Successful partnerships require open communication, shared decision-making, and a willingness to work together to overcome challenges and achieve common goals.



# Strategies for Flexible Learning

Grow Your Own strategies often support innovative approaches to strengthening the ECE workforce. The fictional examples below highlight a few strategies that can be implemented in partnership with IHEs to enable people who work with young children to pursue degrees, credentials, and certificates more flexibly.

- **Articulation agreements bridging credentials and degree programs:** Maria pursues a credit-bearing Child Development Associate (CDA) credential. Thanks to an articulation agreement between her CDA provider and local college, Maria seamlessly transitions to a part-time course of study to earn an associate degree, aligning her academic pursuits with her professional goals. Upon completion of her associate degree, Maria will have the option to further her education even more. The local college has additional articulation agreements with four-year universities, offering a pathway to a bachelor's degree in early childhood education, which Maria is considering for her long-term career growth.
- **Coursework offered in communities (or offered remotely/online):** Eva wants to pursue a degree, but the local college is too far away for her to travel to after work. The college arranges to teach one or two courses each semester in the community at a centrally located ECE program, community center, or local library, making it easier for Eva and several of her colleagues in her center and other centers in the neighborhood to get to class after a work day.
- **Flexible scheduling:** Juan has been interested in pursuing a degree to consider a promotion to lead teacher. He wants to earn his degree while he works, but the local college does not offer evening and weekend classes. Some of the community-based early childhood leaders have encountered this before; they approach the college to request a course that encourages part-time study and incorporates evenings, weekends, and online courses, making it possible for Juan and others like him to pursue degrees.
- **Paid work experience:** Ola is making significant progress in her part-time course of study while she is working but now it is time for her to do her student teaching. This ordinarily means that she will have to leave her job or take a leave of absence, if her employer will allow it, to complete her student teaching. Neither option is acceptable. She finds that the college allows students to complete their required field experience at their work site, so they can continue to be paid while earning a degree.

## What can ECE program directors do to support staff earn credentials, certificates, and degrees?

ECE program directors can empower their staff to thrive academically and professionally, and ultimately enhance the quality of ECE services provided to children and families.

- **Hire tutors or establish another partnership:** Provide resources such as writing tutors to assist participants in honing their academic skills
- **Support cohort models:** Establish support networks by organizing cohorts of teachers from the same site, fostering collaboration and mutual encouragement
- **Establish on-site professional libraries:** Create on-site libraries equipped with educational resources, eliminating barriers to accessing materials required for coursework
- **Adopt flexible work schedules:** Adjust work schedules to accommodate class attendance, ensuring participants can effectively balance work and academic commitments
- **Provide support:** Consider providing food and offering child care for individuals to attend classes at child care sites





### PLANTING A SEED REFLECTION QUESTION:

*What steps can be taken to create a culture of continuous learning and improvement within your program, and how might a Grow Your Own partnership support this goal?*

## Conclusion

Engaging in Grow Your Own partnerships is a powerful way for ECE program leaders to invest in their workforce and communities' future. By taking the time to assess your program's readiness, build strong relationships with mission-aligned partners, and center the voices and leadership of current and aspiring educators, you can create transformative opportunities for professional growth and advancement within your program.

As you embark on this journey, remember that building effective partnerships takes time, trust, and a willingness to learn and adapt. By embracing the strategies and considerations outlined in this brief, you can position your program to reap the many benefits of Grow Your Own initiatives while contributing to a more equitable, sustainable ECE workforce for future generations.

## Acknowledgements

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<sup>1</sup> National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) Commission on the Accreditation of Early Childhood Higher Education Programs. 2021. *Ensuring Quality Early Childhood Education Professional Preparation Programs: NAEYC's Early Childhood Higher Education Accreditation Standards*. Washington, D.C.: NAEYC.

<sup>2</sup> Espinoza, D., Saunders, R., Kini, T., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2020). *Taking the long view: State efforts to solve teacher shortages by strengthening the profession*. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute.



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<sup>3</sup> Totenhagen, C. J., Hawkins, S. A., Casper, D. M., Bosch, L. A., Hawkey, K. R., & Borden, L. M. (2016). Retaining Early Childhood Education Workers: A Review of the Empirical Literature. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 30(4), 585–599. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02568543.2016.1214652>

<sup>4</sup> Espinoza, D., Saunders, R., Kini, T., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2020). *Taking the long view: State efforts to solve teacher shortages by strengthening the profession*. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute.

<sup>5</sup> Whitebook, M., McLean, C., & Austin, L.J.E. (2019). *Strategies in pursuit of pre-K teacher compensation parity: Lessons from seven states and cities*. Berkeley, CA: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley.

<sup>6</sup> Espinoza, D., Saunders, R., Kini, T., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2020). *Taking the long view: State efforts to solve teacher shortages by strengthening the profession*. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute.

<sup>7</sup> Halgunseth, L. C., Peterson, A., Stark, D. R., & Moodie, S. (2009). *Family engagement, diverse families, and early childhood education programs: An integrated review of the literature*. Washington, DC: NAEYC

<sup>8</sup> Totenhagen, C. J., Hawkins, S. A., Casper, D. M., Bosch, L. A., Hawkey, K. R., & Borden, L. M. (2016). Retaining Early Childhood Education Workers: A Review of the Empirical Literature. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 30(4), 585–599. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02568543.2016.1214652>

