



Qualifications & Educational Support

Promising Career Pathway Approaches: Registered Apprenticeships

Research-to-practice brief series

The National Early Care and Education (ECE) Workforce Center is a joint research and technical assistance center that equips state and local leaders to drive change in ECE workforce policy.

This brief is based upon a large-scale scan of existing literature and resources conducted in the first year of the Center; it also incorporates findings from primary data collection.

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Intended audience: Early childhood system leaders & researchers

This brief describes key considerations for system leaders and researchers interested in developing, strengthening, and/or studying registered apprenticeships for current early educators and those entering the field.

Top Line Takeaways

Registered apprenticeships (RAs) are structured career pathways that include paid employment, on-the-job-training, coursework, and a recognized credential upon completion.

- **RAs are a promising approach to increase early educators' qualifications** and strengthen the early care and education (ECE) industry because:
 - RAs in a variety of industries have been linked to increases in employees' skills, retention, and recruitment.¹
 - Emerging evidence in the ECE field indicates benefits for ECE apprentices' knowledge, skills, and intent to stay in the field.²
- **RAs have the potential to address barriers** faced by current ECE educators and many of those entering the field by:
 - Removing cost and time barriers by providing “earn and learn” credential pathways.
 - Covering tuition so that apprentices do not have to incur debt.
 - Offering a degree pathway to individuals who may not have felt welcomed in higher education.
 - Building an ECE workforce that better reflects the children and families in the community (provided that RAs recruit from the communities they serve).
- **Key considerations for system leaders implementing RAs** include the following:
 - Develop strong cross-organizational partnerships.
 - Blend and/or braid public and private funding.
 - Focus on the current ECE workforce and those facing barriers to participating in RAs.
- **Remaining research-to-practice gaps** include the need to:
 - Gather better information on RA participation and completion.
 - Strengthen the evidence about how RAs support early educators personally and professionally (e.g., skill development, personal and economic well-being, retention in the field).

Background

The Office of Apprenticeship in the Employment & Training Administration of the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) and state apprenticeship agencies (SAA) oversee and specify required components for RAs across a variety of



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industries (see “Required Components of RAs” text box).³ Many studies show that RAs across industries are associated with increases in employment, skills, and earnings for apprentices and with greater retention and recruitment of skilled staff for employers and the broader economy.³

RAs are newer in the ECE field and have expanded in recent years.⁴ ECE RAs have the potential to reduce barriers to career advancement by providing apprentices with financial assistance to cover costs related to earning a credential or degree, on-the-job training while earning a wage, and wage increases when completing RA milestones (see “Required Components of RAs” text box). RAs have the potential to benefit ECE employers and the ECE industry by recruiting new ECE educators and supporting the current ECE workforce, many of whom are highly experienced but also face barriers to increasing their qualifications (see “Characteristics of the ECE Workforce” text box).^{5,6,7} Further, because RAs require increases in compensation for milestones reached and credentials earned, they may help address the chronic under-compensation of the ECE workforce.⁸

Emerging evidence on ECE RAs indicates their promise. For example, in studies of ECE apprenticeships, apprentices reported increased knowledge of children's development and family engagement strategies; greater confidence and job satisfaction; increased responsibility and career advancement; and increased well-being.^{9,10} Another study found that classroom quality improved in ECE apprentices' classrooms over a six-month period during the apprenticeship.¹¹ In one study, over 95 percent of apprentices reported that participating in the program made them more likely to remain in the ECE field.¹²

Required Components of RAs Overseen by the DOL or SAA:

- Paid job with, during, and following the RA
- On-the-job coaching or mentorship
- Instruction at a community college or other approved training setting
- A recognized credential earned upon completing the RA

Characteristics of the Current ECE Workforce That Inform Strategies for Supporting Increased Qualifications:

- More than 90 percent of the ECE workforce are women.¹³
- As of 2022, preschool teachers nationwide earned a median wage of \$13.74 per hour, teaching assistants earned \$11.88 per hour, and child care workers earned \$11.81 per hour. About 13 percent of ECE educators earn below the federal poverty line.⁸
- Nearly 50 percent of center-based educators and 40 percent of home-based educators hold an associate, bachelor's, or higher degree.⁸
- More than 70 percent of home-based educators, 50 percent of center-based teachers, and 30 percent of center-based assistant teachers report at least 10 years of experience.^{14,15}
- ECE educators aged 30-49 account for approximately 40 percent of the workforce; home-based educators tend to be older than educators in center-based settings.⁸
- Among center-based educators, 17 percent are Black, 17 percent are Latina, 3 percent are Asian, and 60 percent are White. Among listed home-based educators, 19 percent are Black, 22 percent are Latina, 3 percent are Asian, and 51 percent are White.⁸
- The ECE workforce includes those who speak a language other than English, with 25 percent of center-based and 32 percent of home-based educators speaking a language other than English.⁸

³ In this brief, we focus on *registered* apprenticeships because they must meet minimum requirements set by the DOL or SAA. These requirements ensure a minimum, consistent standard across programs. Unregistered apprenticeship programs do not have this level of oversight and may not meet all the requirements of an RA.



Key Considerations

Research on implementation of RAs and examples from the field highlight a few key considerations for state, county, and local leaders seeking to establish, implement, or expand ECE RAs.

1. Develop cross-organizational partnerships and ensure coordination and alignment.

Research on RAs in and outside ECE highlights the need for strong alignment among RA partners.^{16,17} Partners should discuss their goals and vision for the RA, create clear roles and responsibilities, and plan for communication and coordination. Studies of RAs in ECE and in other industries indicate that RAs often involve four or more partners, including:^{18,19,20}

- A federal or state agency that provides oversight for the RA
- A sponsor who registers and manages the operations of the RA, such as a state or county workforce board, a community-based organization, an ECE employer, or another organization
- An institute of higher education, such as a community college, or other education program that offers related technical instruction
- An employer who employs the apprentice for their on-the-job-training, and who may receive money from the funding agencies to compensate the apprentice and pay for their tuition
- Additional partners who may offer training, expertise, and or/support (e.g., mental health provider)

2. Identify, blend, and/or braid financial resources to establish and sustain the RA.

System leaders should recognize that there is no single “funding formula” for RAs. RA partners typically blend and/or braid^b public and philanthropic funding to cover costs associated with RAs, which include apprentices’ tuition, their compensation during and following completion of the RA,^c and compensation for staff who support the administration and implementation of the RA.^{21,22}

Specific funding sources vary from RA to RA and depend on a variety of factors, including availability of funding, geographic location, and other eligibility criteria that determine who can apply for and receive funding. Some RAs have been able to use public funding sources such as state Child Care and Development Fund allocations for child care quality improvement, state Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five funds, Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act funds from the DOL, and other state or regional grant programs (e.g., California Apprenticeship Initiative). RAs also have leveraged Head Start^d training funds for educators or T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood scholarships to cover training/tuition costs.²³ Most RAs rely on philanthropic foundations to complement funds from public sources.

3. Focus on the current ECE workforce and those facing barriers to participation in RAs.

To ensure that RAs support training and career pathways for all early educators, system leaders should design RAs around the strengths and needs of the current ECE workforce and include educators’ voices during this process. The current ECE workforce is composed mostly of women, whose median wages range

^b “Blending” involves combining multiple funding sources into a single pool of funds and using that pool to support various aspects of the RA. “Braiding” involves obtaining funding from different sources (which cannot be or are not combined) and using each source for a different, specific purpose. We use the phrase “blend and/or braid funding” because there are many funding streams that cannot be blended or that require authorization to be blended.

^c A major challenge in the ECE field is that early educators experience low compensation nationwide.⁸ Even when they receive increased compensation when completing RA milestones, they might not experience increased compensation as they continue in their career.

^d The term Head Start includes Head Start Preschool, Early Head Start, Migrant and Seasonal, and American Indian Alaska Native programs.



between \$11.81 and \$13.74²⁴ (see “Characteristics of the Current ECE Workforce” text box on page 2). Many early educators juggle work, family responsibilities, and finances due to the chronically low compensation of ECE educators.²⁵ Research indicates that these early educators often face financial and logistical barriers to furthering their education and obtaining additional credentials.^{26,27} Policy changes that raise minimum qualifications without providing the supports educators need to attend classes and complete coursework could unintentionally drive out current educators.²⁸

Research highlights a few promising strategies to support the current ECE workforce and those facing barriers to participation in RAs, including ensuring that recruitment materials, instruction, and mentorship are available in multiple languages, offering flexible course schedules, offering courses in community-based locations in addition to community colleges, providing academic and peer supports, and matching apprentices with mentors who speak the same primary language or share the same racial-ethnic background.^{29,30} Furthermore, recruiting apprentices from the communities they serve can result in ECE programs that better meet the needs and reflect the experiences and backgrounds of the children and families they serve.³¹

Examples From the Field

As of 2023, ECE RAs existed in 35 states and were in development in another seven states.^{32,33} Below, we highlight a few examples of RAs that illustrate the key considerations above in practice.



Early Childhood Educator Apprenticeship (Wisconsin): Develop cross-organizational partnerships

The Early Childhood Educator Apprenticeship operating in Wisconsin involves several partners: The Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development provides support and resources to apprentices and employers. The Wisconsin Technical College system offers instruction at six campuses in different parts of the state where apprentices earn an associate degree and are eligible for Wisconsin Registry Level 12. T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood® facilitates scholarships to support apprentices in their educational coursework. ECE providers in different parts of the state (most of which are in major metropolitan areas in Wisconsin) serve as host sites and employ apprentices. Additionally, the technical college system has articulation agreements with many bachelor’s degree granting institutes in Wisconsin, creating further education opportunities.

For more information, see <https://dwd.wisconsin.gov/apprenticeship/occupations/early-childhood-educator.htm>.



Neighborhood Villages (Massachusetts): Identify, blend, and/or braid financial resources

In Massachusetts, Neighborhood Villages sponsors two RAs: the Child Development Associate (CDA) Apprenticeship program for new early educators and the Early Childhood Emerging Leaders (ECEL) Registered Apprenticeship program for experienced educators on their way to becoming center-based administrators. The RAs have been supported by philanthropic support from the Wellington Management Foundation, the Lynch Foundation, and the Highland Street Foundation, as well as public support from the City of Boston and grant funding from the Massachusetts Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development (EOLWD).

For more information, see <https://www.neighborhoodvillages.org/careeradvancement/>.





YMCA of the East Bay (California): Focus on the existing ECE workforce and those facing barriers

In California, the Early Educator Apprenticeship Program (EEAP) comprises three RAs in Alameda County operated by YMCA of the East Bay, a large ECE provider with multiple center-based ECE programs. Believing that everyone can succeed, they just need the right supports to do so, the program offers holistic supports to remove barriers to success. Supports include in-course tutoring, a cohort model, success coordinators, academic and career advisors, contextualized curriculum, Saturday tutoring with child care provided, computers, and technology training, among others. To fund this holistic approach, the EEAP utilizes a unique funding model for some of their apprentices, blending and/or braiding Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) with other public and philanthropic sources.

For more information, see <https://teachymca.org/> and Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (forthcoming).

Remaining Research-to-Practice Gaps

There is a need for more research on RAs for the ECE workforce within the following categories to inform policy and practice.

Participation and completion rates, by demographic characteristics

Data reporting to the Office of Apprenticeship and/or the State Apprenticeship Agency is part of a RA's accountability measures, and there are some localized efforts to collect comprehensive data. However, state and federal agencies do not collect uniform data across all RAs, limiting the field's understanding of the number of ECE apprentices and information about them that might inform ongoing RA implementation, including their location, work setting (i.e., center-based, home-based), role, age, educational background, level of experience, racial and ethnic background, primary languages, and other characteristics. We know little about national completion rates and post-RA employment rates among ECE apprentices—overall and disaggregated by key characteristics. There is also limited information on access to RAs for educators working in home-based settings.

Outcomes for early educators, ECE programs, and the ECE market

With some promising results linking ECE RAs to increases in educators' knowledge, skills, and intent to remain in the ECE field (see Background section above), research is limited beyond a few initial studies regarding early educator outcomes associated with RAs. Benefits for ECE employers and the broader ECE industry have been documented in a limited number of studies. Furthermore, when benefits are observed, little is known about the key components of RAs that might be responsible for those benefits (e.g., the skills and supports that coaches and mentors need³⁴)—information that could be especially helpful for state and local leaders as they develop, implement, or refine RAs for ECE educators.



Where to Go From Here

When **planning** an apprenticeship program, consider:

- Have you engaged the right mix of partners (e.g., workforce board, institute of higher education, ECE employer)?
- Do you have the necessary funding to launch and sustain the apprenticeship?
- Have you hired and trained the necessary staff to administer the apprenticeship program?
- Do participating programs have sufficient staff to mentor apprentices?
- What skills, qualities, and support do mentors need to be effective?
- Have you set up robust data systems to monitor the apprenticeship program?
- Have you engaged early educators in the design of the apprenticeship program?
- Who will you recruit to be apprentices, and how will you recruit them?

When **doing** an apprenticeship program, consider:

- Have you established effective lines of communication and feedback loops so that staff can continuously improve the apprenticeship program?
- Are you hearing directly from early educators about how things are going?
- Are you collecting high-quality information/data on program participation and completion?
- Can you disaggregate your data by educator characteristics, state or locality, and setting type (e.g., center, family child care home)?

For Further Reading:

- [APPRENTICESHIP USA](#)
- [National Center for Grow Your Own](#)
- [Early Care & Education Pathways to Success](#)
- [Apprenticeships: The Fastest Growing Strategy for Child Care Workforce Development](#)
- [Realizing the Promise of Early Educator Apprenticeships](#)

When **studying** an apprenticeship program, consider:

- Who participates in the apprenticeship program, what contributes to their success, and what challenges do they face?
- Have you obtained information about the apprenticeship from all the partners, including early educators who are participating?
- How (and how often) will you share back the study findings with system leaders as well as with participating programs and apprentices?



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