



Qualifications & Educational Support

Five Strategies for Supporting ECE Educators Through Career Advancement

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 feedback and quotes from the Center's interviews with educators.

Intended audience

This brief describes key considerations for systems leaders, institutions of higher education, and professional development agencies delivering professional learning with the early care and education workforce.

Top Line Takeaways

This brief outlines key implementation strategies that early education systems leaders, institutions of higher education (IHEs), and professional development (PD) agencies can adopt to help the current early care and education (ECE) workforce advance their educational qualifications (e.g., requirements, credentials, degrees).

Educational supports can be tailored to meet the needs of the current workforce and aligned with the strengths and needs of the community. Based on research, we recommend the following supportive practices to increase early educators' successful completion of degree and qualification programs:

- Deliver coursework through a cohort model, providing peer collaboration and support.
- Integrate job-embedded coaching into instructional practice.
- Offer content in flexible ways (e.g., weekends, evenings, online).
- Provide instruction in multiple languages.
- Offer responsive advising (e.g., academic planning, career guidance, balancing coursework with outside responsibilities, connecting to tutoring or technology resources).

Background

Many center-based early educators and family child care educators enter the field with a passion for caring for young children, often bringing valuable hands-on experience before pursuing formal training, specific ECE qualifications, or degrees.¹ Degree attainment varies within the field, with a lower percentage of family child care providers holding degrees compared to center-based educators, and Latina educators being the least likely to hold a degree.² After entering an ECE setting, many pursue educational opportunities to deepen their knowledge and skills as they advance their careers.¹

However, maneuvering through higher education and professional development systems can be complex, and educators often encounter barriers to accessing and completing traditional degree and credential programs.^{1,3-5} Navigating course selection, registration, financial aid, and available resources can be especially challenging for individuals who work full-time and also often balance family responsibilities.^{1,3-5} Educators often describe these circumstances as barriers to engaging in professional



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learning and advancing their qualifications.^{6,7,8} Additionally, fragmented systems across state oversight agencies, IHEs, and PD agencies can make career advancement especially difficult.^{9,10}

Building a strong, high-quality ECE workforce requires supporting educators through career pathways while acknowledging the variability and needs of the workforce.^{6,11} Informed by a literature review and interviews with ECE educators, this brief highlights recommended practices for IHEs and PD agencies to deliver instruction that effectively supports the ECE workforce, sustaining the profession.

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

- More than 90 percent of the ECE workforce are women.²
- Nearly 50 percent of center-based educators and 39 percent of family child care educators hold an associate, bachelor's, or higher degree.²
 - Of center-based educators, 81 percent of Asian educators, 50 percent of White educators, 43 percent of Black educators, and 43 percent of Latina educators hold an associate degree or higher.²
 - Of family child care educators, 55 percent of Asian educators, 39 percent of White educators, 39 percent of Black educators, and 30 percent of Latina educators hold an associate degree or higher.²
- Seventy-one percent of family child care educators, 51 percent of center-based teachers, and 30 percent of center-based assistant teachers report at least 10 years of experience.^{5,12}
- Early educators aged 30-49 account for approximately 40 percent of the workforce across all settings; family child care educators tend to be older than educators in center-based settings.²
- The ECE workforce includes those who speak a language other than English, with 25 percent of center-based educators and 32 percent of family child care educators speaking a language other than English.²

Recommendations Based on Best Practices

To best support ECE educators in completing degrees and qualifications, IHEs and PD agencies can:

1. Deliver coursework through a cohort model, promoting peer collaboration and support.

Research highlights the vital role of social support in fostering educator success in high-quality ECE professional learning programs.^{3,13,14} Both IHEs and community-based PD settings can cultivate a sense of belonging and promote valuable peer collaboration and support—elements educators frequently highlight as critical to their success^{1,15}—by delivering coursework through a cohort model.^{3,13,14}

In a cohort model, a group of educators engages in shared learning, progressing together through a structured series of courses or PD experiences. Both center-based and family child care educators report that forming connections with peers in a cohort builds a sense of community, increases confidence, and strengthens professional growth.¹ For family child care educators in particular, a cohort approach helps to counteract their often isolated work environments by providing a network of peer support. A cohort model designed for family child care educators is also able to acknowledge the multiple roles they balance, providing opportunities to connect with others who also hold responsibilities as educators, caregivers, business owners, and administrators.¹⁵⁻¹⁸



By fostering these shared experiences, a cohort model enhances professional learning while strengthening support systems within the ECE workforce.

2. Integrate job-embedded coaching into instructional practice as part of coursework and professional development learning experiences.

ECE professional learning is strengthened through practical, hands-on experiences that allow educators the opportunity to observe, practice, and refine their skills in real-world settings.^{10,19,20} Job-embedded coaching provides individualized, on-the-job guidance from experienced coaches or mentors. This approach enables educators to apply the new skills and strategies they are learning directly within their work environments. Coaches can observe classroom practices, offer immediate feedback, and collaboratively problem-solve with educators to enhance instructional techniques, classroom management, and child engagement.^{10,19,20}

Implementing job-embedded coaching requires trained coaches with ECE expertise, structured coaching sessions aligned with professional development goals, and opportunities for ongoing reflection and feedback.

3. Offer content in flexible ways, such as weekend, evening, and online instruction.

Early educators face numerous barriers to advancing their qualifications. They must balance educational opportunities against demanding work schedules, family responsibilities, potentially limited local offerings, and varying degrees of comfort with technology. Delivering content through varied, flexible learning modalities is essential for supporting the ECE workforce in their professional learning and career advancement.^{1,14} Offering coursework at more convenient times (e.g., weekends, evenings) and in more convenient locations (e.g., community-based settings) helps remove barriers to participation and ensures that more educators are able to engage in meaningful learning opportunities.³

Offering coursework online also increases access to educational opportunities for more people.³ One educator shared, “The biggest thing that has made me able to be able to do it, is it being solely online. I have five children, a farm, I work full time—there’s not much downtime, so being solely online has made the biggest difference. That was my biggest thing—I was like, well, if it’s not online, I can’t do it. And through [community college], everything is solely online.”¹

To maximize the effectiveness of online learning, programs can ensure high-quality content and instructional design, robust technical support, and opportunities for virtual interaction to promote a sense of community. Programs that proactively address participation barriers are better positioned to meet the needs of the ECE workforce, especially family child care educators^{15,21} and educators in rural and underserved areas.²

4. Provide instruction in multiple languages.

More than one quarter of ECE educators speak a language other than English, and the rates of ECE educators who speak a primary language other than English vary between 2-51 percent across states.² Therefore, offering multilingual instruction is essential.¹

As one family child care provider shared, “Doing college in a language that is not your own, it’s really hard.”¹ Providing coursework, training, and resources in educators’ home languages recognizes the value of linguistic ability within the workforce and ensures that all educators have access to learning experiences that enhance their skills and qualifications.²² This approach not only supports educators but also strengthens their ability to serve dual language learners, fostering teaching practices that honor and incorporate children’s home languages.⁷ Programs implementing this strategy should prioritize recruiting



multilingual instructors, providing translated materials, and integrating relevant examples to ensure meaningful engagement.²²

5. Offer responsive advising.

Acknowledging the varied circumstances and demands that ECE educators are facing, responsive advising ensures that educators receive guidance that aligns with their individual goals, backgrounds, and contexts. Advisors provide support on a wide variety of academic, professional, and personal topics, such as academic planning and career guidance, balancing coursework with outside responsibilities, accessing educational services and supports, interacting with instructors, and strengthening job search and interviewing skills.^{13,23} They can help map out clear pathways to achieve degrees or qualifications, assist with overcoming logistical barriers, and connect educators to additional supports such as tutoring or technology resources.¹³

Effective responsive advising requires advisors who are knowledgeable on IHE articulation agreements and career pathways as well as trained to be responsive to the needs of individual educators from a variety of backgrounds and experiences.^{3,4,6,7,9,22} To ensure meaningful support, advisors can maintain small caseloads and be available through flexible options, such as online or evening sessions.¹³ IHE programs can further strengthen support systems by recruiting and retaining faculty with similar backgrounds and lived experiences as the workforce they serve.^{3,22}

Examples From the Field



New York: City University of New York's (CUNY's) Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP)^{13,24}

Launched in 2007, ASAP is a comprehensive system of supports addressing barriers to academic success for students enrolled in a variety of associate degree programs at nine CUNY colleges. Students receive financial assistance for tuition, textbooks, and transportation. ASAP **offers courses in flexible ways**, ensuring that students can enroll in courses scheduled back-to-back, which minimizes the time working students need to be on campus and ensures that ASAP students can take classes with other ASAP students, promoting academic momentum and **building a peer support community**. ASAP also incorporates direct student services, including **responsive advising** and career development support and tutoring. Evaluations show that ASAP retains students at higher rates, moves students through developmental coursework faster, and graduates students at rates more than double that of similar students not enrolled in ASAP.

CUNY has now partnered with community colleges across seven states (California, Ohio, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, and West Virginia) to expand and replicate the model.

For more information, see <https://www.cuny.edu/about/administration/offices/student-success-initiatives/asap/>





EDvance College: BA Degree Program in Early Childhood Studies

EDvance's BA in Early Childhood Studies was designed for early childhood education professionals working full-time. **Offering content in flexible ways**, courses are delivered through a mix of instructor-led remote sessions, offered at convenient times, and include independent learning activities. An earn-and-learn model allows students to earn college credit for paid employment and use their workplace to practice skills learned in the classroom. Students are paired with a student success advocate who **provides responsive advising**, helping students navigate degree requirements and providing guidance in academic, professional, and personal areas. Data shows more than 90 percent of alumni are employed in the early childhood field a year after graduation.

For more information, see <https://www.edvance.edu/ba-in-ecs>



Massachusetts: The Early Childhood Fellowship Program at the University of Massachusetts, Boston

The Early Childhood Fellowship program at the University of Massachusetts Boston is a bachelor's degree completion program for early educators that covers full tuition and fees, a stipend each semester, and comprehensive supports including **responsive advising**, mentoring, **coaching to support teaching practices in ECE settings**, leadership development, and an earn-and-learn component for the teaching experience courses. The program is delivered using a **cohort model** and also includes social convenings and network activities. Over 80 fellows from a wide range of backgrounds have been admitted to date. The Fellowship Program is part of an innovative ECE BA degree program at the university that serves 300 students each year. Coursework is **offered in flexible ways**, including day, evening, online, Saturday, and weeklong intensive options. The Fellowship is funded through a partnership with the City of Boston and private foundations to create a pipeline of BA degreed Boston early educators to work in community ECE programs serving children birth to five. The program is conducting a rigorous program evaluation to study outcomes and inform replication and scaling of the model in other BA degree programs. Results show high GPAs, graduation rates, and ECE employment.

For more information: <https://blogs.umb.edu/earlyed/2025/04/04/building-the-future-of-early-education-inside-the-early-childhood-fellowship/>

Remaining Research-to-Practice Gaps

While this brief outlines effective and promising strategies, gaps in the research literature remain.

Much of the literature is descriptive in nature, with fewer studies examining the outcomes and effectiveness of practices designed to support the ECE workforce. More research is needed to fully understand how specific program components impact their intended outcomes. Studying how degrees, credentials, and professional learning are delivered can strengthen existing programs and inform the development of new, innovative approaches to help educators advance their educational qualifications. A range of strategies is essential to effectively meet the needs of the ECE workforce.



Notably, as educational supports are implemented across the ECE system, it is critical to understand how the program delivery models employed by IHEs and PD agencies coordinate with ECE program-level working conditions (e.g., flexible scheduling, paid substitutes) and system-level supports (e.g., accessible career pathways, increased compensation, financial assistance). Examining educational supports holistically can inform the design of policy and practice models.

Additionally, most of the existing literature does not include a focus on the needs of early childhood professionals from populations with fewer resources. Current research tends to focus on center-based classroom educators in preschool-aged settings, with limited attention on the unique contexts of family child care educators and educators in infant-toddler classrooms. Similarly, very few studies address Tribal communities or U.S. territories, leaving a significant gap in understanding the strengths and needs within these communities. Future work designing and evaluating professional learning and career advancement opportunities for the ECE workforce should incorporate the voices and experiences of ECE educators with a variety of backgrounds and experiences, including those in Tribal communities and territories, educators whose primary language is not English, family child care providers, and infant-toddler educators.

Where to Go From Here

When **planning** to implement one or more of these five recommended practices for the current workforce, consider:

- Have you engaged current educators and students in ECE, across educational backgrounds and employment settings, to understand their needs?
- Have you engaged the right mix of implementation partners (e.g., IHEs, PD agencies, state administrators)?
- Do IHEs and PD agencies have faculty and instructors trained to implement the identified practices (e.g., trained coaches with ECE expertise to provide job-embedded coaching, instructors and coaches who can deliver content in multiple languages)?
- Is there a clear outline of career pathways and articulation agreements, along with an understanding of available system-level educational supports, to help professionals provide responsive advising?
- How will you market the educational supports to promote awareness with the ECE workforce?
- How will you collect data across stakeholders (e.g., participating educators, instructors, coaches, IHEs, PD agencies) to monitor implementation and track outcomes?

When **implementing** one or more of these five recommended practices for the current workforce, consider:

- Have you established effective lines of communication and feedback loops to monitor and improve the practices? Are you hearing directly from ECE educators about their experiences?
- Is the cohort model structured with educators in mind (e.g., family child care-specific cohort)?
- How regularly are coaches discussing professional development goals with educators, observing classroom practices, and providing opportunities for reflection and feedback?
- What community-based settings would educators find convenient to access professional learning?
- How are you enabling early educators to use their work settings when completing field experience courses?
- What technical supports are needed to support online learning?
- How are advisors staying up to date on available resources and supports?

When **studying** one or more of these five recommended practices for the current workforce, consider:

- Who is engaging with the identified support strategies?



- Are there differences in participation or outcomes across employment settings (e.g., center-based, family child care home), location, or participant demographics?
- What are facilitators to educators' success? How might they be capitalized on?
- What are barriers to educators' success? How might they be addressed?
- How will you share findings across IHEs, PD agencies, and systems leaders, as well as with current and future participating educators? Have you set up a plan for findings to impact policy and regulatory change?

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Citations

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