How Staffing Patterns Shape Work Environments for Early Educators

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National ECE Workforce Center Research Highlights provide a focused look at research evidence related to topics relevant to the ECE workforce. These topics emerge from the Center's scan of the research and policy landscapes and technical assistance activities with States and programs.

Educators in early care and education (ECE) settings play a key role in creating safe, high-quality learning environments for children and supporting their healthy growth and development. But these learning environments are also *work* environments for educators. A key part of that work environment is staffing – who is available to cover breaks, provide support, or share responsibilities. Early educators report facing long hours without relief, limited time for planning or collaboration, and greater physical and emotional demands without enough staff to cover them. Work environments with inadequate staffing can contribute to stress and burnout for early educators, and make it harder for programs to retain a stable workforce.

This piece highlights two sets of key learnings from the research literature about how staffing patterns are a critical part of the work environment that shapes early educators' well-being and decisions to stay in the field.

1 Staffing patterns vary by setting and location

Staffing patterns refer to the policies and practices that impact what an early educator's work day looks like. This includes elements such as work schedules, breaks, availability of support staff, sufficient staff coverage, availability of float or substitute staff (or staff who can be used flexibly throughout the day or across classrooms), and paid planning time for early educators.

Overview of work environment research

A growing body of research shows how positive work environments can lead to improved job satisfaction and reduced turnover for ECE educators. Stressful environments and demanding workloads may reduce job satisfaction and increase turnover.[1, 2, 3] For example, one study found that educators who reported poorer working conditions were more likely to intend to leave their job or the ECE field entirely.[4]

On the other hand, supportive working environments may improve well-being and decrease turnover. For example, some research shows that educators who hold more positive views of their work environment are less likely to leave.[5] Lower levels of stress among educators may also be connected to positive outcomes for children,[6] including greater learning motivation.

Many factors influence staffing patterns, including location and program type. For example, child care licensing regulations, like those for group size or ratios, vary by state. Quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS), Head Start, and state or local pre-K systems also set standards that influence staffing patterns. Other staffing patterns are left up to individual programs to decide. While this highlight focuses on the policies and practices that shape staffing patterns, it's also important to recognize that broader workforce and economic conditions also play a role. The ability to recruit and retain qualified early educators affects how well staffing patterns work in practice. Staffing patterns often differ for center-based programs and family child care (FCC) homes. For example, in FCC homes, educators are often the only adults caring for children. They may not have access to substitutes for breaks or other coverage.[7] Research suggests that FCC providers experience greater staffing challenges than center-based educators. For example, one study in Oregon found that 66 percent of FCC providers surveyed did not have reliable access to substitutes.[8] These difficult working conditions, including working long hours alone, contribute to FCC educators leaving the field.[9]

Compared to all workers, more **early educators** report there **aren't enough staff to get everything done.**
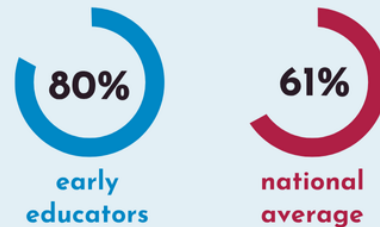
80% early educators

61% national average

Source: Job Demands and Resources Experienced by the ECE Workforce Serving High-Need Populations (2022)

The Model Work Standards, developed by the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (CSCCE), outline research-informed guidelines for creating supportive work environments for early educators.[10] For center-based programs, the Model Work Standards recommend ensuring access to trained substitutes or float staff, maintaining group sizes and ratios that support individualized attention, and providing staff with paid and unpaid breaks as well as paid planning time.[11] For FCC programs, the Model Work Standards recommend access to qualified substitute or respite providers, work schedules that allow for paid and unpaid breaks, and dedicated paid planning time.[12]

2 Programs face challenges offering adequate staffing to support breaks and paid planning time for early educators

Educators and program administrators consistently report the need for more support related to staffing. In interviews conducted by the National ECE Workforce Center[a], early educators discussed some of the challenges they faced and shared their vision for ideal working conditions.

In these interviews, we asked what kinds of support early educators felt were most important to help them stay in their current workplace and in the ECE field more broadly. Key supports mentioned included maintaining smaller group sizes, ensuring adequate breaks, and hiring enough educators so that support staff aren't spread thin. Educators told us:

- "Just keeping the ratio numbers low. So you have those 10 kids, not adding any more kids."

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[a] The Center conducted virtual interviews with 19 center- and home-based early educators across six states in the fall of 2023. The goal of these interviews was to incorporate the perspectives and experiences of early educators into our research goals and activities. We specifically asked about work environment supports, qualifications and educational supports, and compensation.

- "We're missing four teachers that we need to hire right now. We actually have a guy that will be doing behavioral support, like coming into classrooms…but he can't do that until we have a teacher in every room that we need. He's filling in as a teacher right now."
- "Sometimes things get a little overwhelming. They made it where we can take a break and come out of the room and just have a little time to ourselves and go back in. Last year we didn't have enough staff [to cover for us] but this year we do."

Other research echoes these findings. For example, one study surveyed early educators and directors about mental health, stress and burnout. They found that while directors wanted to support teachers' well-being, they were limited by staffing shortages and other resource constraints. In open-ended survey responses, one teacher described how she didn't have any options for coverage if she was sick or needed a break: "We don't really have any support staff at our work. Like we have a director and she's a halftime director and halftime teacher. And so there's nobody."[13] Another study interviewed center-based teachers and found that nearly half of them talked about needing breaks: "Because we do not have a designated break and cannot go to the bathroom, I always have to hold. We cannot get out of [teacher–child] ratio and often have staff shortages to cover me even for the bathroom break. So, I don't drink water and often feel dehydrated."[14] Interviews with center-based administrators in a different study echoed these concerns, finding that they often lack float staff or have limited financial resources to keep class sizes below the maximum allowed by licensing requirements.[15] When basic needs like breaks or planning time go unmet, it becomes harder for staff to focus on the deeper parts of their work. Yet these elements—like reflective practice, curriculum development, and collaboration with colleagues—are essential for improving the quality of teaching and learning for the children in their care.[16] There is not research that directly connects staffing patterns to workforce well-being, and then to quality. However, studies do show that aspects of workforce well-being—such as stress and depression—are linked to teacher-child relationships and quality.[17, 18] This suggests that staffing patterns may influence quality by affecting educator stress.
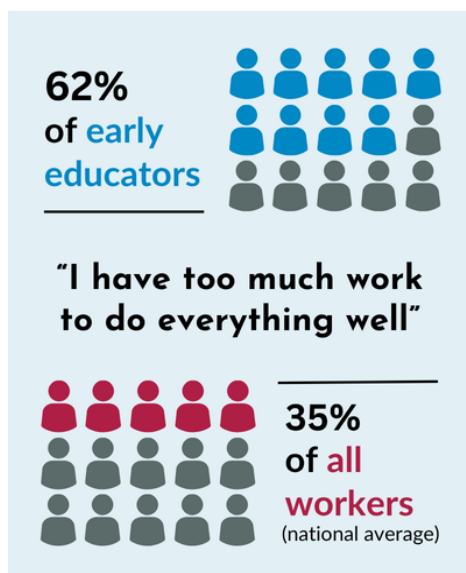
62%
of early educators

"I have too much work to do everything well"

35%
of all workers
(national average)

Source: Job Demands and Resources Experienced by the ECE Workforce Serving High-Need Populations (2022)

In general, staff recruitment and retention challenges have made it harder for programs to offer flexibility for things like breaks or paid planning time. For instance, one study of center-based educators found that nearly half reported no daily breaks.[19] In another survey, more than 80 percent of early educators said that there were not enough staff to get all the work done—a rate significantly higher than the national average across all fields.[20] Nearly two thirds also agreed that they had too much work to do everything well, which is substantially above the national average.[21]

Across multiple fields, including early childhood, studies show that people with more personal and professional resources tend to feel more engaged and committed to their work.[22] Emerging research is beginning to explore how policies and practices related to staffing might support early educators in similar ways. One study looked at a variety of job resources, including access to substitute teachers, finding that these resources were significantly related to efficacy, job commitment, and physical well-being.[23] Another study found that early educators who reported more job resources and professional supports (e.g.,

mentorship, peer learning communities, paid planning time, support from administrators for taking breaks) were more engaged in their work.[24] Researchers also found that early educators who reported more staffing supports were more likely to want to stay in their current jobs.[25] When early educators feel more engaged and are more committed to their jobs, they may be better able to promote children's learning and development. For example, research suggests that educator turnover disrupts child-teacher relationships[26] and can negatively impact children's cognitive and behavioral outcomes.[27]

How can more research support action?

Research shows that early educators are stretched thin due to ongoing staffing challenges. At the same time, there is evidence that stronger supports for staffing can improve working conditions and promote early educator well-being and retention. While there is strong evidence that working conditions influence educator well-being—and that well-being in turn affects turnover, teacher-child relationships, and overall quality—we know less about which specific aspects of working conditions and staffing supports matter most, and for which outcomes (i.e., educator well-being, teacher and classroom quality, child outcomes, program quality, financial stability).

Policy solutions aimed at addressing longstanding challenges in the ECE field—like workforce shortages and affordability—should be grounded in research. Future research can build on what we already know to answer more targeted questions. For example, many states have implemented new policies or initiatives to address staffing challenges. We need to understand which approaches are most effective, what infrastructure is needed to support implementation, and how new investments can be used most effectively to improve working conditions and ultimately strengthen care for children. Specifically, future research can address the following questions:

- What are the impacts of specific staffing supports (e.g., use of float staff, reduced ratios) on educator well-being, job satisfaction, and retention? How might adequate or robust staffing buffer against other workplace stressors?
- How do existing efforts to improve staffing conditions compare in terms of outcomes, cost-effectiveness, and implementation? What lessons can be used to guide future policy and investment decisions?
- Which policy levers (e.g., licensing regulations, QRIS standards, subsidy requirements) are most effective for driving improvements in staffing? Which policies might limit or restrict opportunities for improvement?
- What infrastructure is needed to support changes in staffing policies? Which sectors and partners should be involved? What are sustainable sources of funding?
- What are early educators' own perspectives on which staffing supports are most helpful and feasible? How do these perspectives vary across program types?
- How do improvements in staffing supports and working conditions affect children's experiences and outcomes like continuity of care and quality educator-child relationships?

As the research evidence on staffing patterns continues to grow, researchers should clearly communicate the context of their studies—such as which educators were included, the settings examined, and relevant policies in place—to ensure findings are actionable. Learning more about how all these pieces fit together can help inform policy and programmatic solutions that support both young children and the educators who care for them.

Who Are We?

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 center uses a research-to-practice model to advance compensation and career advancement for early educators.

Learn more and get in touch with us at our website: www.nationaleceworkforcecenter.org

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