

Driving Systems Change in the ECE Workforce via Early Educator Engagement and Leadership

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Aims

Primary
drivers

Secondary
drivers

The Change Framework brief series takes a closer look at drivers of the National ECE Workforce Center's Systems Change Framework to present strategies for state and local ECE leaders to improve their ECE workforce systems. This brief series provides more details about specific primary drivers, including why they are important, what it looks like when they are being leveraged effectively for systems change, strategies for strengthening them, and examples from states and communities to illustrate the driver in practice. Leaders can use recommendations from this brief separately or in combination with the overall framework. Check out the other briefs in the series at our [website](#).

Top-Line Takeaways

Systems change is needed to achieve competitive and fair compensation, establish clear and accessible career pathways, and strengthen positive working conditions for the early care and education (ECE) workforce.¹ Early educators play a key role in ECE workforce systems change because they have insight into the challenges, opportunities, and practical solutions that work in the real world. Educators are already engaging as leaders in ECE workforce systems change from the field (see “Educator-led example: Carolina Reyes in Maryland” below). Many systems change efforts *want* to engage early educators but may struggle to *authentically* engage them in their work. This can prevent systems change efforts from having their desired impact because those closest to the problem are left out of the solution. Systems change initiatives require authentic educator engagement and leadership, which ensures that educators contribute in multiple ways and have meaningful influence and decision-making power in shaping and guiding change efforts.

Our definition of state and community leaders includes educators, program administrators, higher education partners, advocacy organizations, researchers, and other changemakers involved in ECE workforce systems change.

In this brief, we describe:

- What authentic engagement means and why it is important for systems change
- Actions that state and community leaders can take to strengthen educator engagement and leadership
- State-led and educator-led examples that illustrate how educator engagement is being leveraged to drive systems change

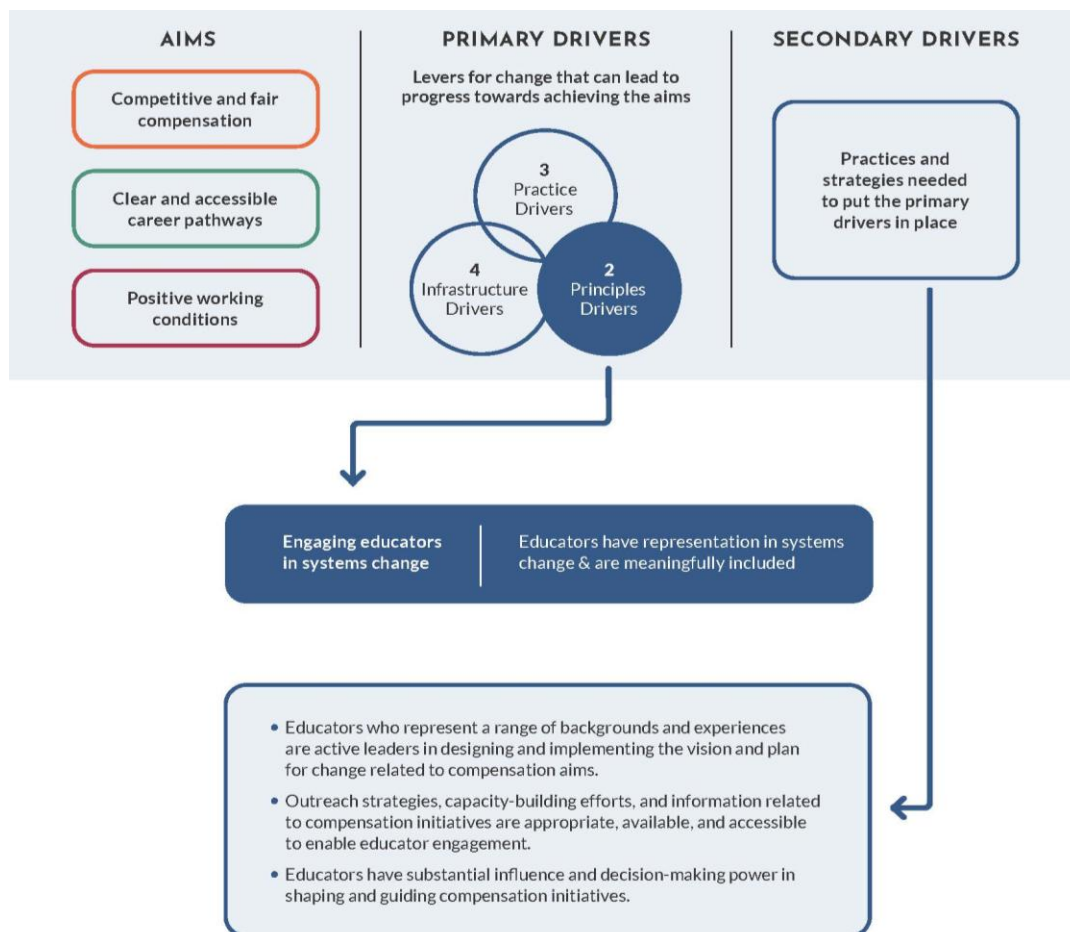
Engaging Educators in Systems Change

Drawing on research and policy evidence from the ECE field and other disciplines, the National ECE Workforce Center (“the Center”) created the ECE Workforce Systems Change Framework (“Change Framework”) to help state and community leaders approach workforce issues with a strategy that recognizes and addresses the interconnected parts of early childhood systems.²

As shown in Figure 1, the Change Framework addresses three overarching aims for improving ECE workforce systems, including 1) competitive and fair compensation; 2) clear and accessible career pathways; and 3) positive working conditions.³ To make progress toward these aims, the Change Framework identifies nine primary drivers organized into three types of drivers—principles, practices, and infrastructure.⁴ These primary drivers serve as key levers for change that can move systems toward achieving the aims. Each primary driver includes a set of secondary drivers that describe the specific practices and strategies needed to strengthen the primary driver in systems change efforts.

In this brief, we take a closer look at **Engaging Educators in Systems Change**, one of the primary drivers in the principles category. This driver emphasizes that educators must have meaningful representation and decision-making power in shaping systems change efforts. It includes three secondary drivers that describe key strategies for strengthening educator engagement to advance systems change.

Figure 1. Secondary drivers that support educator engagement in systems change



For more information, please see the [Introduction to the ECE Workforce Systems Change Framework](#).

Authentically engaging educators for systems change

Within the ECE sector, there is growing recognition of the assets, expertise, and experiences that early educators bring to systems change efforts. Educators hold unique insights that make them vital partners in shaping effective solutions because they live the realities of the profession every day. Many well-meaning ECE workforce system leaders believe they are adequately engaging educators by asking them to complete surveys, share feedback at community meetings or through social media, or inviting them to advisory roles without real influence. However, if engagement is transactional or tokenized, this can be demoralizing for educators, especially when educator feedback is collected but does not contribute to visible change.

Authentic engagement means that educators are not only consulted but are also active partners, co-creators, and decision makers. This ensures that policies and practices reflect the real needs and experiences of the workforce. It also shifts the role of educators from being the objects of change to the agents of change. Authentic engagement

"Authentic engagement means that educators are not only consulted but are also active partners, co-creators, and decision makers in ECE workforce systems change initiatives."

matters because systems change to improve compensation, career pathways, and work environments is fundamentally about early educators. Their authentic engagement and leadership in ECE workforce systems change leads to:

- Solutions grounded in the realities of practice
- Stronger implementation through early problem-solving
- Greater investment in reforms educators helped design
- Decision-making that prioritizes those most impacted
- Strong and respected educator leadership within the ECE workforce

Strategies for promoting meaningful educator engagement

Experience from past initiatives confirms that when early educators are authentically engaged, change efforts are more successful, sustainable, and impactful.^{5,6,7,8,9} Building on this foundation, the Change Framework identifies three secondary drivers that strengthen the educator engagement driver. Each describes a key strategy that enables authentic early educator engagement. The following sections outline actions that state and community leaders can take to strengthen authentic educator engagement and leadership.

1

Educators who represent a range of backgrounds and experiences are active leaders in designing and implementing the vision and plan for change related to compensation, career pathways, and working conditions.

A critical part of this work is establishing the shared understanding among all stakeholders that effective systems change is not possible without educator leadership. Educators must be recognized as central actors in shaping the policies and structures that affect their daily work and professional growth. Their insights are vital for ensuring that change efforts are both relevant and sustainable.

It is also important to reinforce the shared value that educators' knowledge and classroom-based experiences hold equal weight to research and administrative expertise. By elevating practitioner knowledge alongside academic and policy perspectives, state and community leaders can create more balanced, informed decision-making processes that truly reflect the complexity of the ECE field.

Equipped with these shared understandings and values, state and community leaders should identify educator-led systems change initiatives already taking place within their state or local early childhood education (ECE) system (see "Educator-led example: Carolina Reyes in Maryland"). Learning from these existing efforts provides a valuable foundation for understanding what has worked, what challenges remain, and how to build upon the progress educators have already made. Early educators and state/system leaders can join forces, based on mutual respect for one another's expertise and perspectives. This can help create alignment across initiatives, rather than duplicating or fragmenting efforts.

Rather than state leaders inviting educators into initiatives with predetermined goals and agendas, leaders at all level—including educators—can engage together in a collaborative visioning process grounded in authentic dialogue to ensure the vision reflects the variety of perspectives and experiences of those most directly affected by ECE systems.¹⁰ This approach helps create shared ownership of the systems change work.

Finally, state and community leaders should intentionally include educators with a wide range of backgrounds and experiences to participate in systems change initiatives. Representation should span different geographical regions, program sectors (such as family child care, center-based programs, Head Start, and public pre-K), roles (including lead teachers and teaching assistants), program sizes, and years of experience. A variety of backgrounds and experiences enriches the process and ensures that resulting policies and systems work effectively for the full spectrum of the ECE workforce.⁷

2

Outreach strategies, capacity-building efforts, and information related to compensation, career pathways, and working conditions initiatives are appropriate, available, and accessible to enable educator engagement.

One way state and community leaders can put this driver into place is by offering information sessions about compensation, career pathways, and working conditions initiatives on-site at ECE programs or community venues, which makes their involvement more accessible. Educators should be fairly compensated for their time and contributions, including stipends for time, mileage, and technology. State and community leaders can provide practical supports such as childcare, substitute coverage, and technology assistance—like Wi-Fi access or Zoom tutorials—to remove barriers to participation. Scheduling meetings at times that align with educators' work hours and personal commitments also enables consistent engagement. To the furthest extent possible, engagement opportunities should be built into educators' paid roles rather than being added on as extra, uncompensated work.

Language access and communication clarity are equally critical. State and community leaders should make all materials available in the languages educators speak and ensure interpreters—preferably simultaneous—are present during meetings. Written and verbal information should be presented in plain language, and acronyms and technical terms should be spelled out and defined. Providing meeting minutes and other materials in ways that are easy to find, timely, and easy to understand keeps all participants informed and able to meaningfully contribute.⁸

Establishing and sustaining educator leadership development programs is a vital step toward ensuring that early childhood educators can actively shape the policies and systems that impact their work. These programs should provide training and clear pathways for leadership related to ECE compensation, career advancement, and working conditions. These programs can also help educators understand the systems, policies, and organizations driving change, how policies apply to their daily work, and how to lead change and use their voice effectively. By investing in educator leadership development, state and ECE leaders can strengthen the field's capacity for long-term, educator-informed change.

Strong partnerships are required for broadening access to these opportunities. State and community leaders can collaborate with community-based organizations, professional networks, and associations to reach and recruit educators from a variety of backgrounds, experiences, and program types. Community-based ECE leaders may have access to local and professional networks for outreach and recruitment. Partnerships with family child care organizations/networks are particularly important for ensuring the participation of FCC educators. Such partnerships help ensure that systems change outreach and engagement efforts reach the full range of perspectives across the early childhood education (ECE) workforce.

Once educators are engaged, it is important to provide spaces for collective growth and support. State, community, and ECE leaders can develop professional cohorts and mentoring networks where educators can come together to learn, share experiences, and problem-solve around workforce systems change. Peer learning communities and networks foster collaboration, confidence, impact, and sustained engagement.⁵

To deepen educators' leadership expertise, state and community leaders can ensure educators have access to ongoing supports in areas such as public speaking, policy and data literacy, story telling, and systems change methods. Pairing experienced educators with policy or research leaders to co-present or co-facilitate can also serve as a powerful model for collaborative leadership development.

Finally, state and community leaders should recognize that educators, like all systems change partners, communicate and lead in many ways. By offering multiple modes of contribution- spoken, written, visual, or storytelling- all participants can engage in ways that reflect their strengths and preferences. By intentionally designing outreach strategies, capacity-building efforts, and information in ways that are appropriate, available, and accessible, state and community leaders can ensure that educators are not only at the table but fully equipped to drive progress from the very beginning of every change effort.

3 Educators have substantial influence and decision-making power in shaping and guiding compensation, career pathways, and working conditions initiatives.

Authentic educator engagement requires rethinking how systems value expertise and sharing power across roles and sectors. State and community leaders must establish clear processes that define how and when educator voices are included in decision-making.⁹ Transparent structures such as defined roles, timelines, and mechanisms for input help ensure educator engagement is not tokenistic but integral to the process. Educators' participation should be embedded from the earliest stages of planning through implementation and evaluation, rather than limited to feedback after decisions have already been made.¹⁰

Real influence can be formalized through various structures and policies. State and community leaders can institutionalize educator leadership by granting voting rights on advisory councils, appointing educators as co-chairs or co-leads on committees, and guaranteeing educator representation on all decision-making

bodies. Early educators can advocate for these formal roles and procedures. These roles signal trust in educators' expertise and establish them as equal partners in shaping system priorities and outcomes.

Early educators can share stories and examples about how compensation, career pathways, and working conditions affect their daily lives and professional well-being. State and community leaders can create opportunities to elicit and listen to educators' experiences. These firsthand accounts provide powerful context for understanding the real-world implications of policy decisions and help keep system reforms grounded in the lived experiences of practitioners.

To sustain authentic participation, systems must include mechanisms for ongoing evaluation of educator involvement. State and community leaders should regularly assess the degree to which educators feel valued and included in decision-making and use this feedback to refine processes.¹¹ Gathering educator perspectives on how their input has been incorporated and communicating those impacts back to them builds trust and accountability. Additionally, all collaborators should be able to clearly articulate how educators' contributions have improved outcomes, processes, or understanding within the initiative.

Intentional facilitation practices are also essential. Using structured facilitation protocols ensures that all voices are heard and that discussions are not dominated by a few perspectives. Developing a shared glossary of key terms and definitions can further support cross-sector collaboration by helping policymakers, researchers, and educators understand one another's language. Tools such as AI-assisted transcript analysis can identify jargon or sector-specific terms that may need clarification, promoting clearer, more effective communication.

State and community leaders must also be intentional in identifying and addressing biases that undervalue practitioner knowledge and experience. By helping all collaborators recognize the unique expertise educators bring such as a deep understanding of child development, family engagement, and teaching, leaders can design activities that leverage educators' strengths in shaping solutions. Opportunities for state and community leaders to visit and observe in ECE programs, collaborative exercises, and reflection can help non-educator stakeholders appreciate the skill, adaptability, and insight educators contribute to systems change efforts.

Finally, state and community leaders should ensure that educators' intellectual and professional contributions are publicly acknowledged. This includes naming educators as co-authors on reports, journal articles, presentations, and other products emerging from the work, and clearly describing their roles and contributions. Employing participatory decision-making methods such as consensus building, collaborative design, deliberative dialogues, and appreciative inquiry further embeds educator leadership into the fabric of systems transformation.

Examples of Authentic Engagement

State-led example: New Mexico's development of a unified wage scale

New Mexico

Several state-led systems change initiatives have worked to authentically engage educators by leveraging the three educator engagement drivers and recommended actions for strengthening educator engagement and leadership in ECE workforce systems change. New Mexico's development of a unified wage scale is one such example.

The New Mexico Early Childhood Education and Care Department (ECECD) led a statewide systems change initiative to design a new wage scale for early educators.¹² Recognizing that authentic educator engagement is necessary for effective and sustainable policy design, the department intentionally included educators as co-designers from the very beginning. Working within the state's existing advisory structure, ECECD convened a cross-sector task force that included state agency leaders, Head Start representatives, higher education partners, advocates, and program directors. Importantly, the group also included family child care (FCC) providers—voices often missing from state-level policy discussions.

How New Mexico's actions align with the secondary drivers

New Mexico's approach to developing its unified wage scale illustrates how state-led efforts can activate the secondary drivers that strengthen Educator Engagement and Leadership in Systems Change.

Secondary driver	Educator engagement and leadership in systems change in New Mexico
Educators who represent a range of backgrounds and experiences are active leaders in designing and implementing the vision and plan for change related to compensation, career pathways, and working conditions.	The task force intentionally included family child care providers and center-based program administrators, bringing in perspectives from educators who are often underrepresented in state policy work. Additionally, stipends were provided for task force members whose participation was not compensated for within their typical job responsibilities. These educators served as co-designers, not just advisors, ensuring that the resulting framework reflected the lived realities of the workforce. Their participation also broadened the focus beyond degree attainment to recognize competencies as a valued form of professional expertise.
Outreach strategies, capacity-building efforts, and information related to compensation, career pathways, and working conditions initiatives are appropriate, available, and accessible to enable educator engagement.	ECECD created multiple entry points for engagement by combining regular task force meetings with ten co-facilitated focus groups that reached direct-service educators across a variety of settings. The department also provided stipends to compensate educators for their time, ensuring participation was financially feasible. Also, to make participation feasible, focus groups were held at times that accommodated educators' work schedule. Some sessions were built into existing educator meetings, offered virtually, and conducted in Spanish to support broader participation. These intentional supports—along with ongoing communication and facilitation—made it possible for educators to remain engaged over time and for a variety of perspectives to inform policy design.
Educators have substantial influence and decision-making power in shaping and guiding compensation, career pathways, and working conditions initiatives.	ECECD demonstrated a strong commitment to power-sharing by empowering the task force to co-design the wage scale rather than merely advise. Educators' perspectives directly shaped policy decisions, leading to a hybrid wage scale that maintains degree-based progression while also introducing a competency-based equivalency to recognize experience.

What changed because educators were at the table

Educator participation directly influenced the content and structure of New Mexico's wage scale. Initially, the department's focus was primarily on degree attainment as the key measure of advancement. Through sustained dialogue, family child care and ECE program leaders emphasized the need to also value professional experience. This collaboration led to a co-constructed framework that:

- Maintains degree pathways to incentivize higher education, and
- Introduces a competency-based equivalency to recognize the expertise gained through professional experience.

The resulting wage scale reflects both state policy priorities and educators' lived realities, demonstrating how authentic educator engagement can produce policy solutions that are both practical and transformative.

Educator-led example: Carolina Reyes in Maryland



Important and impactful ECE workforce systems change work can also be driven by the ECE field, and does not need to come exclusively from state-led initiatives. As previously mentioned, early educators are already engaged leaders in ECE workforce systems change. State and community leaders can learn from existing efforts, such as the one described below, and build upon the progress educators have already made.

Carolina Reyes exemplifies authentic educator leadership in advancing compensation and systems change within Maryland's early care and education (ECE) workforce.¹³ As a bilingual educator, child-care center owner, and community advocate, she was part of the inaugural cohort of the Maryland Early Childhood Leadership Program (MECLP), a program designed to equip early childhood professionals with the skills, confidence, and networks to influence systems-level change. MECLP was launched at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC), with funding from the Maryland State Department of Education's Division of Early Childhood and philanthropic partners such as the Trust for Learning.¹⁴ It is implemented in partnership with the Early Education Leaders Institute at University of Massachusetts Boston (formerly the Institute for Early Education Leadership and Innovation), who designed and teaches the core leadership content with its Leading for Change in ECE curriculum.^{15,16} Participation in MECLP provided Reyes with structured opportunities to deepen her understanding of policy, strengthen her leadership voice, and connect her on-the-ground experience to statewide advocacy. This kind of leadership development not only amplified her individual advocacy but also modeled how intentional investment in educator capacity can foster genuine educator engagement and lasting impact. Her work demonstrates how educators can lead, influence, and shape policies when given real authority and access to information, networks, and support structures. Her leadership aligns closely with the secondary drivers that emphasize educator leadership, engagement, and decision-making power.

Through her dual roles as a practitioner deeply rooted in the community and as an advocate engaged in systems-level work, Reyes illustrates how educators can serve as agents of change rather than objects of reform.

How Carolina Reyes's actions align with the secondary drivers

Secondary driver	Educator leadership in systems change in Maryland
Educators who represent a range of backgrounds and experiences are active leaders in designing and implementing the vision and plan for change related to compensation, career pathways, and working conditions.	<p>Through testimony to the Maryland General Assembly and participation in the Maryland Early Childhood Leadership Program (MECLP), Reyes helped articulate the realities of compensation challenges and proposed solutions grounded in practice. Her experience as an educator and small business owner shaped the implementation of strategies to sustain early learning programs during COVID-19 crisis recovery, demonstrating how educators can drive the vision for systems change when given the opportunity to lead.</p> <p>In addition, Reyes shows how building stronger relationships can support effective change. Through her collaborations with families, advocacy organizations, and fellow educators, she helped to create a sense of unity and increases the visibility of the ECE workforce. By fostering these networks, she supports a shared system where educators can work together to solve problems.</p>
Outreach strategies, capacity-building efforts, and information related to compensation, career pathways, and working conditions initiatives are appropriate, available, and accessible to enable educator engagement.	<p>Reyes's engagement through Maryland Early Childhood Leadership Program (MECLP) underscores the importance of access to leadership development. MECLP's partnership with UMass Boston's Leading for Change in ECE curriculum and cohort model capacity-building opportunities that enabled Reyes and other educators to translate classroom expertise into policy influence.^{15,16} By offering training and peer support in advocacy, systems thinking, and leadership, MECLP made policy engagement feasible for educators who might otherwise face barriers. Reyes's journey through this program illustrates how leadership development can empower educators from a variety of backgrounds to effectively shape workforce policies.</p>
Educators have substantial influence and decision-making power in shaping and guiding compensation, career pathways, and working conditions initiatives.	<p>Reyes's advocacy demonstrates that when educators are decision-makers, the outcomes are more grounded and sustainable. Her testimony before state legislators and storytelling partnerships—such as through StoryCorps and Every Family Forward—brought educator voices directly into spaces where decisions are made. Most notably, Reyes advocated for the successful passage of HB1441, a landmark Maryland bill that creates a career ladder for child care providers and ensures that college coursework is made available in educators' native languages.</p>

What changed because of educator leadership

Reyes's leadership contributed to a transformative policy shift in Maryland's early education system. The passage of HB1441 institutionalized a career ladder and multilingual access to coursework, addressing long-standing barriers to professional advancement for bilingual and nontraditional educators whose pathways differ from the traditional full-time college student. Her work also elevated the visibility of educator-led advocacy in state policymaking—demonstrating how leadership development, meaningful opportunities, and power-sharing can result in tangible systems change. Her story challenges tokenistic approaches to educator participation and shows that authentic engagement occurs when educators have both the opportunity and the authority to lead. By bridging classroom practice and policy action, Reyes models how

authentic educator engagement produces policies that are both responsive to community realities and grounded in educator expertise.

Guide for Taking Action

Authentic educator engagement should be built in from the start and carried through every stage—goal setting, reflecting on strengths and gaps, designing strategies, implementation, reflection, and evaluation. The following prompts are for state and system leaders and educators to support their reflection and action around each secondary driver.

1 Educators who represent a range of backgrounds and experiences are active leaders in designing and implementing the vision and plan for change related to compensation, career pathways, and working conditions.

For state and system leaders

- Have we made it clear that educator leadership is essential to the success of this initiative?
- Have we ensured that educators' ECE knowledge is treated with equal weight to research and administrative expertise?
- In what ways are educators helping set goals or shape priorities from the outset?
- In what ways do the educators involved reflect the variety of the ECE workforce across roles, settings, and lived experiences, and how are their varied perspectives intentionally valued and incorporated into decision-making processes?

For educators

- Does my state or community have formal channels for educator input, such as surveys or public comment opportunities—and am I using them to make our voices heard?
- How can I help ensure that a variety of educators' voices and experiences are reflected in decisions that affect our field?

2 Outreach strategies, capacity-building efforts, and information related to compensation, career pathways, and working conditions initiatives are appropriate, available, and accessible to enable educator engagement.

For state and system leaders

- How are we ensuring that opportunities to participate in systems change are visible and accessible to all educators, not just those already connected to formal systems?
- What barriers—such as time, pay, language, or geography—limit educator participation, and how are we addressing them?
- In what ways are we building structures that make educator participation feasible, rewarding, and sustained over time?
- How are we creating conditions that enable educators to lead and influence systems change with knowledge, skills, and confidence?

For educators

- What opportunities exist to participate in leadership development programs or fellowships that prepare educators to lead systems change?
- What opportunities can I find to participate in initiatives, committees, or working groups focused on workforce development or systems improvement?
- Are there professional associations, advocacy groups, or community networks I can join to stay informed and connected?

3 Educators have substantial influence and decision-making power in shaping and guiding compensation, career pathways, and working conditions initiatives.

For state and system leaders

- Are we addressing biases or assumptions that may undervalue educator expertise in decision-making spaces?
- Do educators have roles with real decision-making power (e.g., voting rights, co-chair positions)?
- How are we recognizing and elevating educator contributions (e.g., co-authorship on reports, public acknowledgment, or storytelling in communications) and how are we using their feedback to continually refine and strengthen participatory processes?

For educators

- How can I use my experience to challenge assumptions and advocate for meaningful recognition of educator expertise?
- How can I connect with other educators to identify shared priorities and take collective action to improve ECE workforce systems?
- What opportunities exist to co-author, co-present, or share stories that elevate educator voices in broader workforce conversations?

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