

ACTION RESEARCH PARTNERSHIP CASE STUDY

Early Findings From Three States Working to Strengthen ECE Workforce Compensation

Yujin Lee, Anne Douglass, Lindsay Beatty, Da Hei Ku, Catherine Huddleston-Casas, Shannan Smith, Sherri Castle & Laura Lessard



Using Action Research Partnerships to Strengthen ECE Workforce Compensation

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. Through Action Research Partnerships (ARP), the National ECE Workforce Center (the Center) offers our technical assistance and research capabilities to leaders in states, territories, Tribes, and localities who are working to improve systems affecting the ECE workforce. The ARP model is grounded in the ECE Workforce Systems Change Framework (the Change Framework), which calls for a systems approach to advancing competitive and fair compensation, clear and accessible career pathways, and positive working conditions. For more information on the Change Framework, please see the [Introduction to the ECE Workforce Systems Change Framework](#).

Within ARPs, the Center partners with state-and community-level Change Teams to identify priority levers for change, test and refine strategies, and strengthen the primary drivers that enable sustainable systems improvement. ARPs engage leaders from ECE oversight agencies alongside Change Team members—people representing multiple perspectives, experiences, and roles—to co-create and implement changes that support improvement toward the three aims identified in the Change Framework: competitive and fair compensation, clear and accessible career pathways, and positive working conditions.

This case study focuses on the work of three states (Connecticut, Maryland, and Minnesota) during the early-phase ARP. The following section summarizes activities that Connecticut, Maryland and Minnesota moved through during the period covered in this case study.

Overview of This Report

This report shares early findings from a multi-state case study examining how three states—Connecticut, Maryland, and Minnesota—are working to address ECE workforce compensation challenges. The analysis in this report is guided by two questions.

1. Who is involved in each state's ARP Change Team?

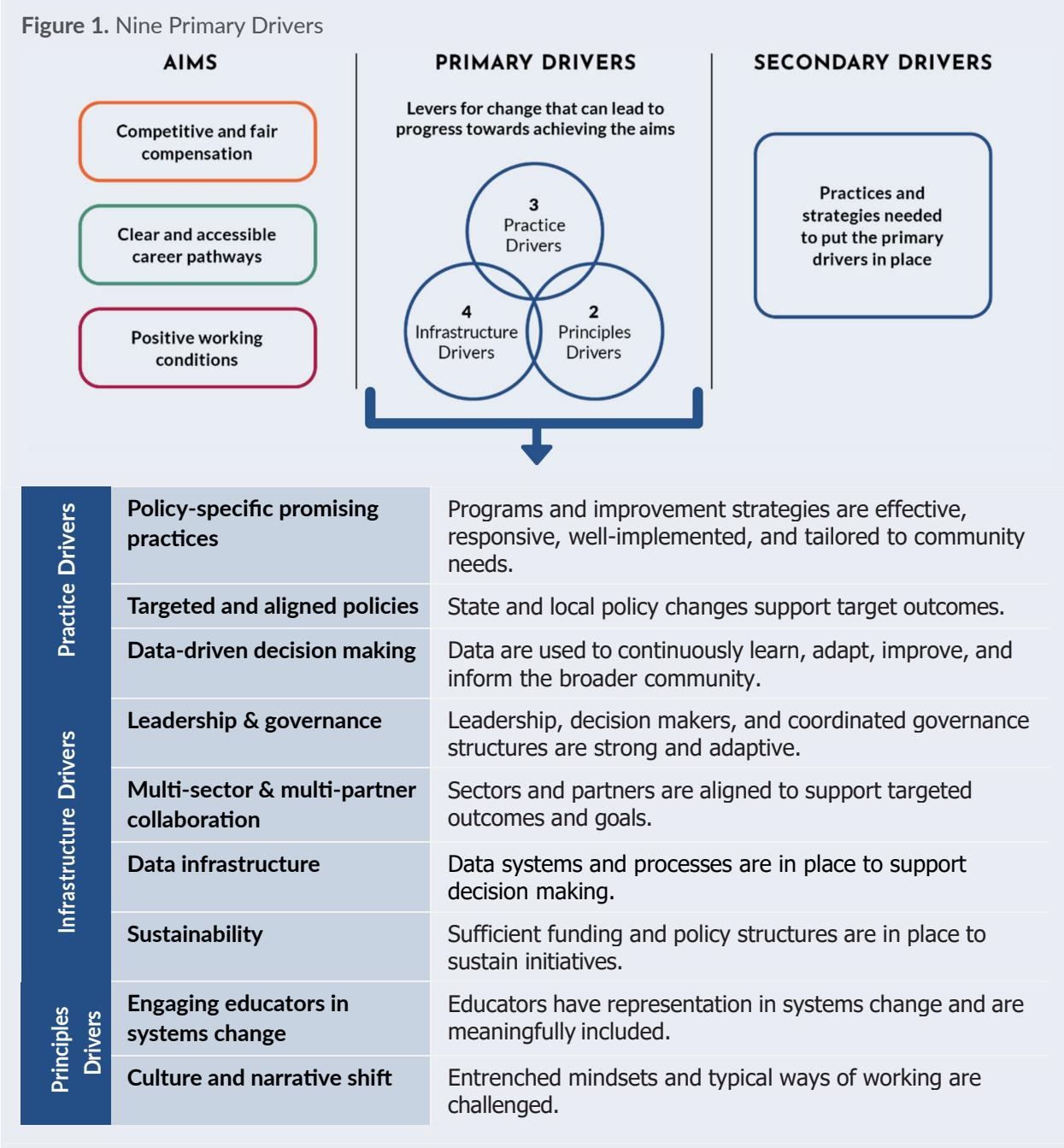
Understanding who is at the table—and the roles and experience they bring—offers insight into how states are approaching the work. The information highlights the individual perspectives that can strengthen systems change efforts and provides a practical reference for leaders considering who they may need to bring together to launch their own change efforts.

2. What similarities and differences emerge across states in the drivers for change they plan to leverage in their action plans?

To answer this question, we review each state's action plan through the lens of the Change Framework's nine primary drivers (Figure 1). This approach helps us identify which drivers states aim to leverage or strengthen and how these choices compare across the cohort. This analysis highlights both the drivers that appear across multiple states and those that are unique to each state's approach.

Taken together, these questions surface lessons that can inform how other states organize their teams and choose leverage points for strengthening ECE workforce compensation systems.

Figure 1. Nine Primary Drivers



Findings From the ARP's Early Phase: From Onboarding to Action Plan Development

1. Who is involved in each state's ARP Change Team?

Change Teams typically include 10-20 people who represent a wide range of perspectives and experiences, such as system/administrative oversight leaders and educators with expertise working directly with children in center- and home-based settings. The stakeholders consisted of state administrators, center directors/leadership, educators (center- and/or home-based), higher education, other state employees, and advocacy organization staff. State administrators are those in leadership positions at the state level, such as the Director of Quality Improvement at the Connecticut Office of Early Childhood and Assistant State Superintendent of Division of Early Childhood at the Maryland State Department of Education. Center directors/leadership are the leaders responsible for overseeing the overall operation, quality, and compliance of an early childhood education program (such as a childcare center, preschool, or early learning service). Educators are professionals who support the learning, development, and well-being of young children—typically from birth to around age eight in child and/or home-based centers. Other state employees are those who work at the state level, but not in leadership positions, such as a Professional Learning and Training Approval Specialist. Finally, advocacy organizations are those who work at advocacy groups focused on early education and care, such as a Family Child Care Trainer at United Way.

Understanding who is at the table helps clarify what kinds of expertise are informing decisions and whose experiences are being centered as states work to address ECE workforce compensation challenges.

Table 1. Composition of ARP change teams by state

Type of stakeholder	Connecticut	Maryland	Minnesota
State administrator	6	5	1
Directors, administrators, and educators (centers and family child care)	2	2	2
Higher education	1	0	0
Other state employee	1	4	9
Advocacy organization	6	7	1
Total number of change team members	16	17	13

Connecticut's Change Team

Connecticut's Change Team consists of 16 people ranging from Connecticut's state government and Connecticut-based community organizations.

Government: Director of Quality Improvement at the CT Office of Early Childhood; Project Manager at the CT Office of Early Childhood; Workforce Manager at the CT Office of Early Childhood; Director of Head Start State Collaboration Office; Director of Strategic Initiatives and Cross Agency Planning at the CT Office of Early Childhood; Director of Systems and Policy Planning at the CT Office of Early Childhood; Data Scientist at the CT Office of Early Childhood

Community Organizations: Executive Director of Trinity College Community Child Center; Director of the Connecticut Early Childhood Alliance; Senior Director of Early Childhood Initiative at United Way; Family Child Care Trainer at United Way; Senior Manager of Community Impact and Engagement at United Way; Director of The Connecticut Project; Director of Family Child Care for Connecticut State Employees Association (CSEA) Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 2001; Public Policy Associate of CT Business and Industry Association

Higher Education: Dean of School of Liberal Arts and Education at Connecticut State Community College

Maryland's Change Team

Maryland's Change Team consists of 17 people ranging from Maryland's state government, Maryland-based community organizations, and educators.

Government: Assistant State Superintendent of Division of Early Childhood at the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE); Director of Quality Improvement Initiatives/Division of Early Childhood at MSDE; Program Quality & Improvement Coordinator; Section Chief of Early Childhood at MSDE; Head Start Collaboration & Family Support Specialist at MSDE; Deputy Director of the Office of Child Care-Licensing; Lead Professional Learning and Training Approval at MDSE; Professional Learning and Training Approval Specialist at MDSE; Administration of Policy and Specialist Project and Child Care Development Fund Co-Administrator at MDSE; Accreditation Manager at MDSE

Community Organizations: Director for the Baltimore City Child Care Resource Center, Director of Child Care Resource Network, Executive Director of Maryland State Child Care Association, Director of Education at the Community Action Council of Howard Country, Executive Director of Latino Early Care and Education Coalition Inc., President of Maryland Association for the Education of Young Children (MDAEYC) and Adjunct Faculty of the Maryland Early Childhood Leadership Program (MECLP) at University of Maryland- Baltimore County; Workforce Programs Manager at Howard Community College's Division of Workforce, Career & Community Education

Educators: Early Educator/Licensed Family Child Care Provider; Maryland State Family Child Care Association President and Family Child Care Educator

Minnesota's Change Team

Minnesota's Change Team consists of 13 people ranging from Minnesota's state government, Minnesota-based community organizations, and educators.

Government: State Program Administrator-Grants and Workforce Initiatives of MN Office of Higher Education; Manager of Grants and Workforce Initiatives of MN Office of Higher Education; Minnesota Dual-Training Pipeline Consultant of MN Dept. of Labor and Industry; Professional Development Specialist

of MN Dept. of Children, Youth, and Families; Early Childhood Workforce Collaboration Specialist of MN Dept. of Children, Youth, and Families; Office of Child Care Community Partnerships Program Manager of MN Dept. of Employment and Economic Development; Child Care Wage Specialist of MN Dept. of Children, Youth, and Families; Program Manager for MN Tribal Resources for ECE MN Tribal Resources for Early Childhood Care (MNTRECC); Provider and Workforce Supports Unit Manager for MN Dept. of Children, Youth, and Families; Research and Data Analyst for MN Dept. of Children, Youth, and Families

Community Organizations: Child Care Aware of MN

Educator: Community Educator Director of Mankato Area Public Schools; Director of the Child Development Laboratory School at the University of Minnesota and Instructor at the University of Minnesota

2a. What similarities emerge across states in the drivers for change they plan to leverage in their action plans?

Across three states, several priority areas emerge consistently. Even though each state entered the ARP from a different starting point, they share a set of drivers that reflect what the field broadly understands as necessary for strengthening the ECE workforce system.

One of the most common themes is the central role of educator voice. All three states are intentionally designing processes that elevate the perspectives of early educators. Connecticut is broadening opportunities for meaningful input through multilingual listening sessions, providing supports like dinner and child care, and strengthening feedback loops so educators can see how their perspectives shape decisions. Minnesota is incorporating educator leadership directly into governance by requiring that practicing educators hold at least 30% of the decision-making seats on its cross-sector coalition. Maryland is conducting educator-led focus groups with at least 100 early childhood professionals to guide the design and testing of its career lattice. This strong emphasis on educator voice reflects a shared understanding that past reforms often fell short precisely because they did not reflect the realities faced by the workforce. In every state, educator expertise is treated as essential to defining problems, shaping strategies, and refining solutions.

A second common pattern is that states use multi-sector and multi-partner collaboration as a deliberate strategy to drive and coordinate the work. Across all three states' action plans, Change Teams are building cross-agency and cross partner structures that bring together community organizations, advocates, state leaders, and educators. This reflects a shared understanding that ECE workforce compensation challenges are complex, and meaningful systems change requires multiple perspectives working together. The action plans also show what this collaboration looks like in practice. Each state has built in intentional strategies to ensure that diverse voices and experiences collectively shape priorities and approaches. These strategies include defining clear roles and responsibilities, establishing shared decision-making processes, and setting up ongoing meetings or working routines to keep partners aligned over time. In doing so, states acknowledge that compensation, qualifications, and career advancement intersect with multiple agencies and policy levers; no single entity can move this work forward alone.

A third shared driver is the effort to connect compensation, qualifications, and career progression in more coherent ways. While the specifics differ across states, all three are working toward pathways that are easier to understand and navigate—and that create clearer links between educational attainment and compensation. Connecticut is aligning wage scale levels with qualifications and clearly defined teaching roles. Minnesota is explicitly tying wage increases to higher credentials and updating the state's Career Lattice to reflect this alignment. Maryland is building a career lattice that clarifies advancement

opportunities across the birth–5 workforce and integrates related workforce initiatives. Collectively, these efforts reflect a common fieldwide belief: educators need transparent, predictable, and fair pathways that connect what they learn to how they grow in their careers.

2b. What differences emerge across states in the drivers for change they plan to leverage in their action plans?

Although all three states share the same ultimate goal—fair and competitive compensation for the ECE workforce—there is meaningful variation in the secondary drivers they chose to prioritize. These differences reflect what is feasible in their current policy and infrastructure landscape, what parts of the system are already in place, and where the ARP work can build most effectively on existing momentum.

To be specific, across plans, we found distinct but logical priority areas. Some plans center on strengthening and sustaining compensation structures because a wage scale or related policy foundation already exists, making compensation the most feasible and impactful leverage point. Others prioritize qualifications and career advancement because recent policy shifts have created momentum there and making career pathways the most practical leverage point for action.

Two cross-state factors seem to help explain these differences. First, states are starting from different places, so their priorities reflect what is already established in their system and what still needs to be built. Second, states are leaning into their existing strengths as entry points for change. For example, when a wage scale or compensation structure is already in place, plans build outward from that foundation, while states with relatively robust but fragmented workforce data systems elevate data infrastructure as a priority driver. Together, these variations show that states are selecting priorities that align with their policy histories, their existing infrastructure, and the opportunities currently available to them. Each state is building on what is already in motion, choosing the part of the system that is most primed for progress, and laying a foundation for long-term, sustainable workforce change.

Key Takeaways

The early findings from the ARP's early phase highlight key takeaways that can support other states and communities undertaking similar efforts to strengthen ECE workforce compensation systems.

A first takeaway is the value of building on existing structures. Across the cohort, states are making progress by strengthening tools and systems already in place. Connecticut is refining its legislated wage scale, Minnesota is improving long-standing data systems, and Maryland is expanding a recently established Pre-K career ladder into a broader career lattice. These examples show how state's strengths in areas within the CF can serve as practical starting points for systems change.

The findings also underscore the value of multi-sector and educator engagement. Effective systems change work requires perspectives from different roles and settings—state administrators, community partners, higher education, ECE program directors, and educators with direct classroom and family child care experience. The composition of the Change Teams and the design of the action plans reflect the value of integrating both technical expertise and lived experience to produce strategies that are practical, equitable, and grounded in real conditions.

Finally, although the three states are taking different approaches, their efforts are aligned toward a shared goal: building a more competitive and fair compensation system for the ECE workforce. These varied approaches demonstrate that there is no single pathway to compensation reform. Instead, states can

pursue different paths that reflect their history and context while moving the field toward a more coherent and equitable system.

What's Next for the Case Study Report Series

While this report focused on the early progress of three ARP states, the National ECE Workforce Center is also partnering with other states to reach their unique goals related to career pathways. We will continue to provide updates on additional Action Research Partnerships and teams participating in our Communities for Action. Future reports will share progress made by Connecticut, Maryland and Minnesota as well as showcase the progress and strengths of other state and community partners.

Acknowledgements

This work is supported by Grant Number 90TA000004-01-00 from the Administration for Children and Families, a division of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Neither the Administration for Children and Families nor any of its components operate, control, are responsible for, or necessarily endorse this website (including, without limitation, its content, technical infrastructure and policies, and any services or tools provided). The opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Administration for Children and Families, including the Office of Early Childhood Development; the Office of Head Start; the Office of Child Care; and the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation.

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. To learn more about the center, please visit our website <https://www.nationaleceworkforcecenter.org/>.

We thank Kristen Harper, Brent Franklin, Jasmine Henderson, Audrey Franchett, and Ria Shelton for their help with brief preparation, design, and review.

Suggested citation: Lee, Y., Douglass, A., Beatty, L., Ku, D. H., Huddleston-Casas, C., Smith, S., Castle, S., & Lessard, L. (2025). *Early findings from a case study of three states working to strengthen ECE workforce compensation*. National Early Care and Education Workforce Center.