

## CHANGE FRAMEWORK CASE STUDY

# Strengthening Wage Scale Development in New Mexico Through a Systems Change Approach

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Aims

Primary drivers

Secondary drivers

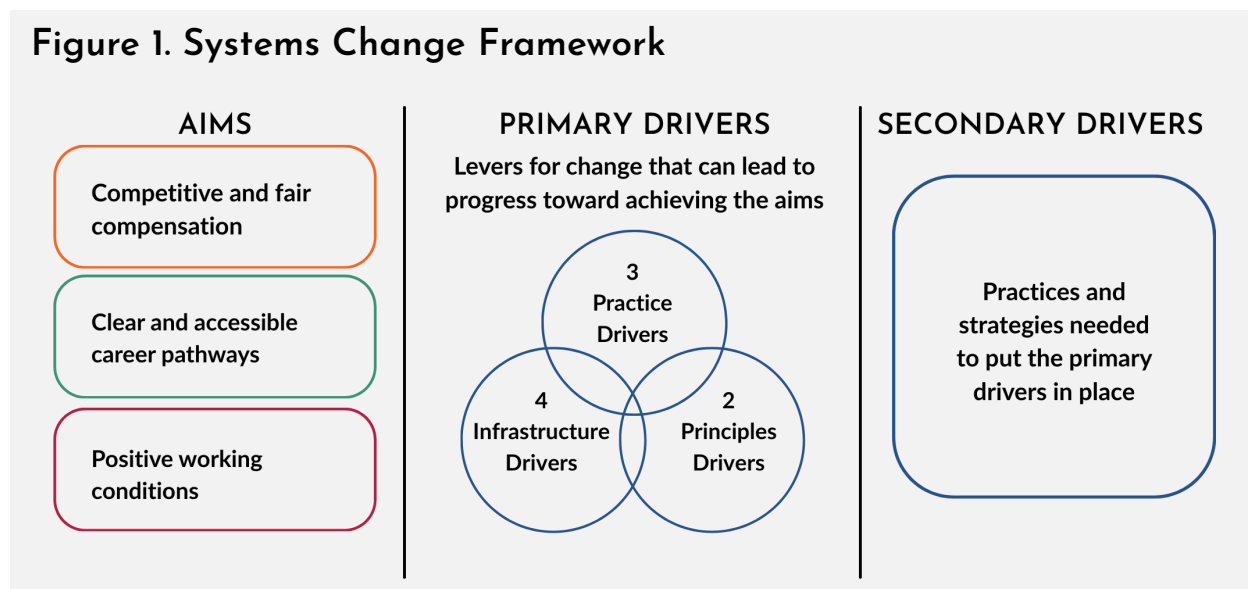
## About the National ECE Workforce Center

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, the National ECE Workforce 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. Action Research Partnerships engage leaders from ECE oversight agencies who are ready to partner with state or community-level “change teams”—at least 10-12 people who represent multiple perspectives, experiences, and roles—on specific practice and infrastructure change that will improve ECE career ladders, compensation, and workplace policies.

This case study describes the work of New Mexico’s change team from July 2024 to July 2025 with support from the National ECE Workforce Center. This and other forthcoming case studies are designed to highlight salient features of systems change to inspire and support other states and communities to take similar action with and for their local ECE workforce.

## The Change Framework

Figure 1. Systems Change Framework



The ECE workforce experiences complex and persistent challenges in compensation, career pathways, and workplace conditions that exist within multiple interconnected parts of the ECE system. Given this complexity, systems change approaches offer the potential to produce solutions that are impactful and sustainable. Drawing on research and policy evidence from the ECE field and other disciplines, the National ECE Workforce Center created the ECE Workforce Systems Change Framework (Change Framework) to help state and community leaders approach these workforce issues with a strategy that recognizes and addresses the interconnected parts of the Early Childhood system. The Change Framework identifies a set of nine primary drivers that evidence demonstrates play a key role in meaningful and sustainable systems change. For more information, please see the [Introduction to the ECE Workforce Systems Change Framework](#). To begin applying this approach in your own work, please see the Change Framework Reflection Tool.

## Application of the Change Framework in New Mexico

### Background

By the end of the 2010s, New Mexico faced the same set of early childhood challenges seen across much of the country: families struggled with affordability, providers operated on thin margins, and early educators earned wages well below a living standard. These conditions contributed to high turnover, with nearly one in four New Mexico early educators leaving their jobs each year,<sup>1</sup> and raised concerns about the stability of the workforce needed to sustain quality care. Recognizing these pressures, state leaders initiated a series of system-wide reforms beginning in 2019 that established new governance structures, sustainable funding streams, and expanded subsidy policies. These measures were intended not only to improve affordability and access for families, but also to create a stronger foundation for workforce supports.

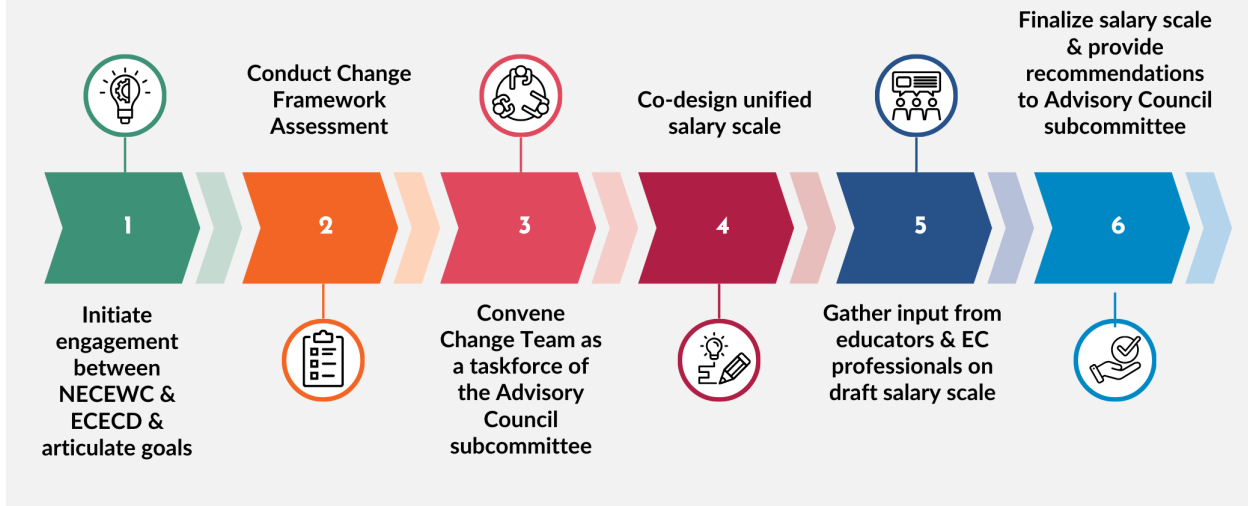
As part of these reforms, New Mexico has taken several steps to address compensation and career development for early educators. Temporary pandemic relief funding was used to provide across-the-board wage increases, and targeted supplements have offered additional support to segments of the workforce. More structurally, the state reformed its subsidy reimbursement model to reflect the true cost of care, incorporating higher compensation into rate calculations.

### Partnership with the National ECE Workforce Center

The New Mexico Early Childhood Education and Care Department (ECECD) engaged the National ECE Workforce Center for technical assistance to support their work to design and implement a unified wage scale that would include all sectors within ECECD's purview: child care, Head Start, state-funded pre-K, home visiting, and early intervention. Specifically, ECECD identified the following goals:

- Establish an **aligned wage scale and career lattice** that rewards the experience, competencies, and education of the current ECE workforce and incentivizes increased qualifications across all sectors of the ECE workforce.
- Develop an implementation plan for the **aligned wage scale and career lattice** that identifies required policy changes, maximizes funding structures, elevates educator voice, reduces barriers to implementation, and integrates the multiple compensation related initiatives underway in New Mexico.

Figure 2. National ECE Workforce Center's Support Process for NM



Once these goals were identified, the next phase of the National ECE Workforce Center's model of support included an assessment of New Mexico's current early childhood system using the Change Framework. To conduct the assessment, over 50 stakeholders representing each facet of New Mexico's early childhood system—including staff from the state agency, direct-service programs, higher education, and non-profit organizations—convened for a day-long workshop. Participants engaged in a series of interactive activities and facilitated discussions to surface strengths and gaps within New Mexico's early childhood system across workforce practices and policies, infrastructure, and principles or mindsets. Insights from the assessment process are described in the following sections, providing illustrations of how drivers function within one state's system and how specific drivers can be leveraged in systems change initiatives like New Mexico's work to design and implement a unified wage scale.

## Overview of this Report

The Change Framework provides the theory of change for all work conducted by the National ECE Workforce Center. It highlights key features of systems change, including the interdependence of components of the system, and the importance of addressing infrastructure and principles components in addition to practice- or policy-based initiatives. As the theory of change, the Change Framework provides a guide for designing and implementing meaningful and sustainable change, a feature often lacking in technical assistance.<sup>2</sup>

This report will demonstrate how the Change Framework was used to guide the Action Research Partnership with New Mexico. This case study focused on the following evaluation questions:

1. To what extent do states and communities make **progress** toward systems change and achieve improvements for the ECE workforce?
2. What are the facilitators and barriers to **progress** within each jurisdiction?

In this report, the Change Framework will be used to organize our findings across the three categories: Infrastructure Drivers, Practice Drivers, and Principles Drivers. For each of these three categories, each primary driver is briefly described, and one highlighted primary driver is emphasized with its icon and described in more detail. Information in this report includes our observations and engagement with the

ECECD and Change Team, information from publicly available reports, and perspectives shared by ECECD and Change Team members at the conclusion of the partnership. While this case study provides insight into one state's experience, this report is designed to be useful to all jurisdictions interested in advancing wage scale and career lattice goals. We include Featured Strategies throughout that might be particularly useful to others.

## Infrastructure Drivers

### Overview of Infrastructure Drivers

The Change Framework identifies Infrastructure Drivers as the structural elements necessary to achieve and sustain early childhood workforce and system-building goals. Within this set of drivers, the framework emphasizes four primary drivers. Each driver reflects a critical strategy for building a robust early childhood system and ensuring that programmatic efforts, such as wage scale and career lattice development, are supported and maintained over time.

Infrastructure Drivers	<b>Leadership &amp; Governance</b>	Leadership, decision makers, and coordinated governance structures are strong and adaptive
	<b>Multi-sector &amp; multi-partner collaboration</b>	Sectors & partners are aligned to support targeted outcomes and goals
	<b>Data Infrastructure</b>	Data systems and processes are in place to support decision making
	<b>Sustainability</b>	Sufficient funding and policy structures are in place to sustain initiatives



### Focal Driver: Multi-Sector and Multi-Partner Collaboration

New Mexico strengthened early childhood collaboration by convening the *Wage Scale and Career Lattice Change Task Force* under the Early Childhood Professionals Subcommittee of the state's Early Childhood Education and Care Advisory Council, ensuring a formal pathway for the Task Force's recommendations to move forward. The 24-member Task Force served as the initiative's change team and included representatives from child care, family child care, PreK, Head Start, home visiting, their early intervention initiative (Family Infant Toddler (FIT) program), higher education, advocacy organizations, and workforce support partners. This composition ensured that the full range of individuals affected by the wage scale helped shaped its design.

### Early Care and Education Workforce Salary Scale Playbook: Implementation Guide

Developed by the National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance (NCECQA), this [practical guide](#) provides states and early childhood systems with a structured set of essential actions and strategies to support the design and implementation of salary scales, helping improve early educators' compensation while allowing adaptation to local context.

The change team was charged with informing key decision points in the design of the Unified Wage Scale and Career Lattice, including how roles would be named and structured, how education and experience would be recognized, strategies to support entry and advancement, and which specializations should be acknowledged. Members met every other week from December 2024 through July 2025, guided by the *Early Care and Education Workforce Salary Scale Playbook: Implementation Guide* and facilitated by the National ECE Workforce Center and Prenatal to Five Fiscal Strategies. Meeting formats were adapted based on participant feedback, including small group discussions, rotating breakout groups, extended sessions, and synthesis of feedback into reviewable materials.

The process emphasized educator leadership by elevating voices across all of New Mexico's early childhood workforce, encompassing the full range of the state's geographies, sectors, languages, races, and ethnicities. Change team members came with varying familiarity across sectors, funding streams, and terminology, making cross-sector learning a central outcome. Despite the challenges inherent in such a process—including differing perspectives on the need for unification, uneven sector representation, and variable readiness across state agency departments—participants emphasized the value of the approach. Overall, they described the inclusive and structured process as helpful in identifying shared priorities while also surfacing sector-specific differences. One member reflected on what that learning looked like in practice:

*"I think that a lot of... good learning happened.... I think it helped with people seeing and understanding where the commonalities were or were not. So, you know, someone might be like, 'Well, the way it works in Early Intervention is, we don't have a degree program just dedicated to that. And this is what it means when someone gets hired to do this. And here's what their training looks like. And these are the competencies that really matter over here.' So, I just think that it was a nice unveiling so that these different sectors had a way to start to think collectively a bit more."*

Participants credited this kind of cross-sector dialogue with deepening mutual understanding, building credibility and momentum that would not have been possible within a single sector, and laying a foundation for fair and effective implementation.

Several elements of New Mexico's multi-sector approach were viewed as especially valuable. Participants noted that involving higher education partners was critical, as it illuminated sector-specific pipelines and challenges. Additionally, draft staffing models and wage scale visualizations helped make decisions concrete and surfaced tensions requiring deliberation, such as how to value prior learning and compare wage benchmarks to higher education salaries.

Task force recommendations were reviewed by the ECE Professionals Subcommittee and the full Advisory Council and await next steps to inform ECECD decision-making. The experience demonstrated that cross-

### Featured Strategy for Multi-Sector & Multi-Partner Collaboration: New Mexico's Change Team

By New Mexico housed the Wage Scale and Career Lattice Change Task Force within the existing Early Childhood Professionals Subcommittee of the Early Childhood Education and Care Advisory Council. This structure positioned the task force's recommendations to move directly through the Advisory Council to ECECD leadership for consideration and action. The 24-member team met bi-weekly over seven months, supported by facilitation partners and guided by the *Early Care and Education Workforce Salary Scale Playbook: Implementation Guide*. Through structured co-design activities, members documented shared and sector-specific priorities and translated them into unified roles, competencies, and wage targets for the state's new career lattice.

sector collaboration is both feasible and essential for advancing workforce reforms and provides a foundation for sustaining partnerships as New Mexico moves toward implementation.

## Practice Drivers

### Overview of Practice Drivers

Practice Drivers are the programmatic and policy actions taken to achieve state or local early childhood workforce and system-building goals. Within this set of drivers, three primary drivers are identified. Each of these drivers reflects a distinct but interrelated set of strategies for states to strengthen the systems that support the ECE workforce.

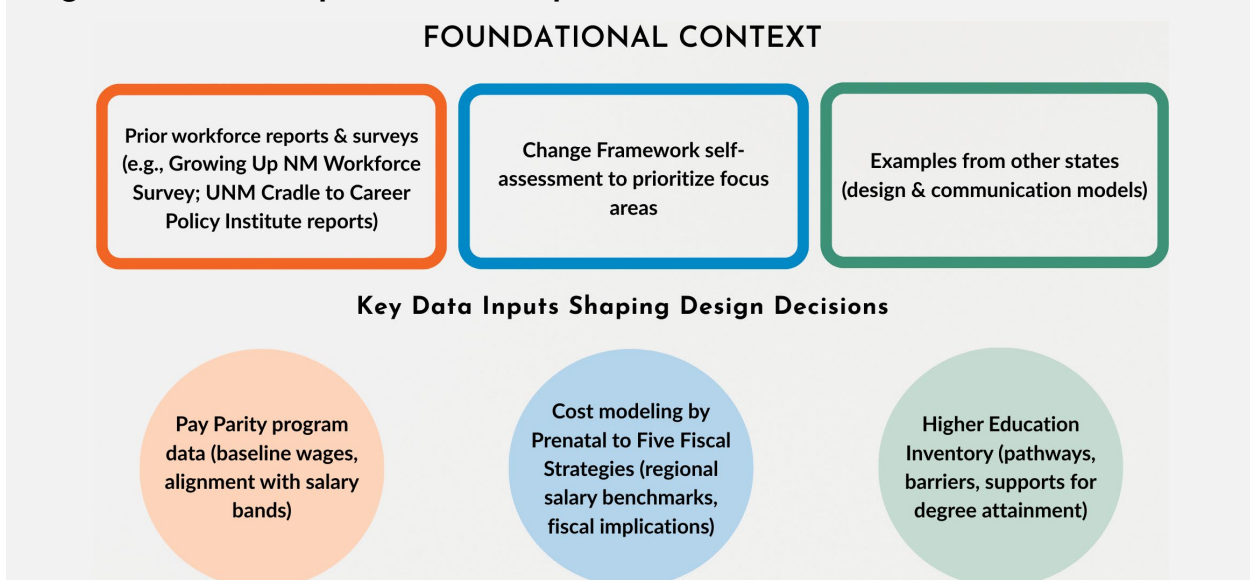
Practice Drivers	<b>Policy-specific promising practices</b>	Programs and improvement strategies are effective, responsive, well-implemented, and tailored to community needs
	<b>Targeted and aligned policies</b>	State and local policy changes support target outcomes
	<b>Data-driven decision making</b>	Data are used to continuously learn, adapt, improve, and inform the broader community



### Focal Driver: Data-Driven Decision Making

A central component of New Mexico's initiative was the intentional use of data to inform the design of the Unified Wage Scale and Career Lattice. The process drew on a variety of sources, which played different roles. Some served primarily as foundational context—acknowledging earlier work, grounding the task force in shared knowledge, and ensuring that new efforts built on prior investments. Others provided key inputs that directly shaped decisions at each step of the wage scale playbook.

**Figure 3. Data Inputs that Shaped the Initiative**



Together, these sources supported the change team as they systematically worked through the essential actions identified in the salary scale playbook, from identifying roles and defining qualifications to constructing salary bands and planning implementation. Participants noted that these data provided a strong foundation for discussion; for instance, cost modeling helped establish minimum pay levels and revealed disparities across sectors, reinforcing the need for aligned compensation.

Among these data sources, the Higher Education Inventory collected by the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment and analyzed by the National ECE Workforce Center offered especially valuable insights. Survey responses from 51 higher education programs revealed regional gaps in access to degree programs, limited opportunities to study in languages other than English, and faculty shortages that could constrain system capacity if credential demand increases. Change team members noted that these findings highlighted the geographic and linguistic barriers many educators face and underscored the need for flexible and competency-based pathways. For example, one change team member reflected that data showing “the significant lack of higher education degrees among the existing workforce... helped us make the case that experience needed to be valued in the ladder as well as education credentials.” Participants indicated that discussing these data together across sectors helped build shared understanding, even when information was incomplete or imperfect.

Participants also identified opportunities to strengthen data use in future efforts. Some expressed uncertainty about how wage scale values were determined or noted that newer cost modeling data were not accessible to all stakeholders, suggesting that clearer communication around analytic methods and assumptions could deepen shared understanding. They also described the process of developing the unified framework as intentionally aspirational—a mindset actively supported through coaching, facilitation, and leadership guidance. Facilitators encouraged the team to move beyond existing system constraints and balance current realities with future possibilities, while leadership and advocacy representatives emphasized how the new wage scale could support broader funding advocacy. These supports encouraged innovation and helped the team feel comfortable thinking ambitiously, while also highlighting the need for more comprehensive, cross-sector data to guide decisions. Future efforts could strengthen this balance by expanding workforce datasets to better capture the relative value of education and experience across roles, improving data on challenges experienced by subgroups of educators (e.g., non-English-speaking educators), and addressing gaps in the Higher Education Inventory, including information on program capacity.

Finally, participants noted that involving change team members earlier in data planning and ensuring timely access to materials would strengthen collaboration and confidence in data-driven decision-making.

Overall, New Mexico’s approach to data-driven decision making demonstrated how combining existing information with targeted new analyses can guide complex workforce reforms. The experience underscored the value of using data to anchor discussions, highlight differences in experience and opportunity, and envision change, while also showing that transparent processes and robust data systems are essential for sustaining shared learning and trust.

### Featured Strategy for Data-Driven Decision Making: Higher Education Inventory

By surveying 51 higher education programs across New Mexico, the Higher Education Inventory revealed key barriers to accessing degree programs, including geographic gaps, language limitations, and faculty shortages. These findings helped the change team anticipate capacity constraints and elevate the importance of alternative, competency-based pathways. The strategy illustrates how examining system capacity early can prevent unintended consequences and promote fairness in workforce reforms.

# Principles Drivers

## Overview of Principles Drivers

The Change Framework identifies Principles Drivers as the underlying beliefs and mindsets that support sustainable systems change. These drivers reflect the attitudes, values, and perspectives necessary for achieving early childhood workforce and system-building goals. Within this set, two primary drivers are highlighted. Together, these drivers emphasize the importance of not only policies, programs, and infrastructure, but also the perspectives, values, and engagement of those who live and experience the system daily.

Principles Drivers	<b>Engaging educators in systems change</b>	Educators have representation in systems change & are meaningfully included
	<b>Culture &amp; narrative shift</b>	Entrenched mindsets & typical ways of working are challenged

### Focal Driver: Engaging Educators in Systems Change

New Mexico involved educators from the outset of this change initiative, ensuring that workforce perspectives shaped the design of the Unified Wage Scale and Career Lattice Framework. The approach combined direct representation on the change team with structured feedback mechanisms and broad outreach to capture a range of voices across sectors, roles, and regions.

#### Direct Representation of Educators

Educators served on the change team, bringing classroom experience and program leadership perspectives, while higher education representatives contributed insights about faculty and pre-service teachers to ensure attention to current and future workforce needs. Change team members leveraged their professional networks to gather input from colleagues and communities, surfacing challenges, sharing information, and returning collective feedback to the group. Change team members who were direct service providers received stipends for participation, which helped support engagement. Some participants noted that having educators directly represented on the change team enabled authentic engagement, providing some frontline educators and coaches the opportunity to “be part of the team” in co-designing the framework. Others observed that representation favored individuals in leadership roles given challenges scheduling around educators’ work hours.

#### Structured Feedback Mechanisms

To capture additional perspectives, particularly from direct-service educators such as classroom teachers and family child care educators, New Mexico conducted 10 focus groups over two weeks, co-facilitated by change team members and National ECE Workforce Center staff. Over 200 participants representing a range of roles, sectors, and regions contributed in-person and virtually, in English and Spanish. Additional feedback was collected from approximately 150 individuals through an online form. Though change team members highlighted some challenges, including compressed focus group timelines which limited opportunities for sustained engagement, they also emphasized that these feedback mechanisms helped ensure that the process and final framework reflected the needs of the broader early childhood workforce.

For example, one change team member reflected:

*"I think the additional meetings that we held to invite our... stakeholders to the table so that we could hear from ... providers was really profound. I did have several staff at that meeting, and one, in particular... was able to make a suggestion that at the next task force meeting was voted and accepted. So, her... being able to have that voice was really powerful, too— as the professional who's in the field today. So, I think that was definitely... a strength of the task force."*

Focus group participants highlighted the importance of “linguistic responsiveness”, flexible pathways for rural providers, and regular salary updates aligned with cost-of-living changes. They and change team members alike also stressed the need for robust support and communication infrastructure to ensure successful and sustainable implementation. Key priorities included:

- Provide clear messaging about the purpose, scope, and limitations of the wage scale, including which elements are required versus flexible
- Conduct multi-modal communication campaigns targeted to legislators, administrators, educators, and program leaders
- Offer training and technical assistance, including help lines, county-based support staff, and piloted trainings
- Clarify tax implications, eligibility, and calculations
- Pilot the wage scale in a phased approach to test and refine implementation before full rollout
- Integrate with existing systems like New Mexico’s new Professional Development Information System (PDIS) to streamline administration and reduce reporting burden

Feedback gathered from the change team and additional engagement mechanisms informed revisions to role categories, leadership tiers, overlapping responsibilities, and competency-based assessments. Participants also underscored broader considerations for implementation, including preventing funding cliffs for educators, supporting Social Security contributions, strengthening program infrastructure, and mitigating competition with school districts. They emphasized that clear communication, training, and support materials are critical for helping educators understand the purpose and limitations of the unified wage scale.

Overall, engaging educators as active collaborators ensured that the Unified Wage Scale and Career Lattice was grounded in the realities of New Mexico’s workforce. The inclusive and structured engagement identified shared priorities while surfacing sector-specific differences, strengthening the framework’s practical applicability, and provided lessons for sustaining fair, workforce-informed implementation.

## Featured Strategy for Engaging Educators in System Change: Focus Groups

To ensure the Unified Wage Scale and Career Lattice reflected workforce realities, New Mexico sought educator feedback on a draft that was far enough along to prompt concrete reactions, yet open for revision. Ten focus groups and an online form engaged more than 350 educators across roles, sectors, and regions, surfacing priorities such as community-informed approaches, linguistic access that reflects the state’s population, rural access, and clear implementation supports. Their input led to refinements in role categories, leadership tiers, and competency-based assessments, ensuring the framework better reflected the realities of educators’ work. The approach demonstrates how timely, structured engagement can strengthen design and foster ownership of systems change.

## Looking Ahead: Next Steps and Remaining Questions

As New Mexico moves toward implementation, stakeholders expressed both enthusiasm for its potential and recognition of the work ahead. Across change team members and focus group participants, the wage scale is viewed as a valuable educational and advocacy tool. It elevates the visibility of compensation issues and conveys respect for the workforce. If implemented, it is expected to improve recruitment and retention, enhance fairness for the ECE workforce, and strengthen outcomes for children, families, and communities. One Change Team member shared:

*"[I believe] that with investments... that we can not only recruit, but we can retain the workforce we have if they see that their work is valued and respected in this new and important way."*

At the same time, both groups highlighted the complexity of translating the framework into practice. Key challenges include securing sustainable funding; determining how funds should flow (directly to programs or professionals); and establishing mechanisms to ensure intended salary increases reach the workforce, including safeguards against unintended consequences such as programs reducing wages in anticipation of state support. Implementation planning must also address increased payroll taxes, impacts on public benefits, and the administrative burden on programs, including fee-for-service programs, while avoiding passing costs on to families.

Stakeholders emphasized that successful implementation will require sustained attention to workforce pipeline development and equitable pathways. Higher education institutions—including small colleges, regional institutions, and Tribal Colleges and Universities—are critical partners, and their meaningful involvement should include compensating faculty for system-level work and leveraging existing articulation agreements and accreditation structures. Making the wage scale and career lattice operational will also require policy decisions about recognizing various forms of expertise, including considering mechanisms for credit for prior learning, equivalency-based competencies, and teaching-quality assessments. Stakeholders noted that aligning early childhood workforce compensation with higher education pay structures, while outside ECECD's direct authority, represents a broader fairness consideration for states pursuing wage scale reforms.

New Mexico's experience underscores both the opportunities and complexities of advancing workforce-focused reforms as part of broader early childhood system change. The state's work demonstrates the importance of pairing short-term strategies, such as temporary wage supports, with long-term structural initiatives, such as cost-model reimbursement and unified wage scales. It also highlights how reforms aimed at one group of stakeholders—educators—intersect with affordability and access considerations for families and providers. For other states, the case illustrates how sustained attention to workforce compensation and career advancement can be integrated into larger ECE system reforms, while also pointing to the ongoing challenges of aligning funding, policy, and implementation to achieve lasting impact.

Taken together, these reflections and lessons suggest that the unified wage scale represents both an important milestone and the beginning of a complex implementation journey. It offers a foundation for advancing fair and competitive compensation in New Mexico's early childhood system while highlighting the decisions, resources, and collaborative efforts needed to bring that vision to life.

## What's Next for the Case Study Report Series

While this report focused on New Mexico's experience using the Change Framework to guide their efforts to design and implement a wage scale and career lattice, the National ECE Workforce Center is also partnering with other states to reach their unique goals related to compensation, career pathways, and workplace supports. In the future, we will describe the goals, Change Framework assessments, and selected focal drivers of teams participating in our second Action Research Partnership focused on improving compensation for early educators in 3 participating states. We will continue to provide updates on additional Action Research Partnerships and teams participating in our Communities for Action targeted assistance. We also plan to release a more detailed technical report on the New Mexico case study in 2026 for readers who are interested in more detail about the change process, our evaluation, or other components of the work.

### Acknowledgements

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<sup>1</sup> New Mexico Early Childhood Education and Care Department. (2021). *2021 Annual Outcomes Report*. Santa Fe, NM: ECECD.

<sup>2</sup> Graf, E., Kubelka, J., Schwartzman, T., Hafford, C., Hernandez, M., & Rous, B. (2022). *A Study of Peer Learning Opportunities for CCDF Grantees: Final Report*. OPRE Report 2023-119. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.