



Qualifications & Educational Support

Work Environments Affect Early Educators' Career Decisions

Research-to-practice brief series

The National Early Care and Education (ECE) Workforce Center is a joint research and technical assistance center that equips state and local leaders to drive change in ECE workforce policy.

This brief is based on analyses of Supportive Environmental Quality Underlying Adult Learning (SEQUAL) data collected in 2022-23 in the Pacific Northwest and Southeastern United States with 595 early educators. Researchers at CSCCE analyzed the data to understand how educators assess different aspects of their work environment and whether those assessments could predict educators' career intentions.

Intended audience

This brief is intended for state and local ECE program administrators and technical assistance providers, as well as researchers.

Top Line Takeaways

Just as children are shaped by their learning environments, early childhood educators are influenced by the environments in which they work. These work environments can affect their teaching practices, health and well-being, and professional growth.¹ Supportive work environments for early educators may include:

- Adequate staffing to allow for paid breaks and paid planning time
- Ergonomic, adult-sized furniture
- A respectful workplace culture
- Opportunities for educators to give input into program policies
- Consistent work schedules

When these supports are missing from workplaces, educators may be more likely to experience job dissatisfaction and consider leaving the field.^{2, 3, 4, 5}

This brief summarizes findings from two studies conducted by the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (CSCCE) on how early educators' work environments may influence their career decisions. CSCCE used the [Supportive Environmental Quality Underlying Adult Learning \(SEQUAL\) tool](#)⁶ to assess how early education environments support educators' work and well-being. Findings suggest that retention and turnover are associated with work environments. Early educators who reported more supportive work environments across several domains of the SEQUAL tool were more likely to want to stay in those supportive programs.

Alongside research findings, this brief offers examples and practical considerations to help ECE programs and leaders put research into action to strengthen working conditions for early educators.

Background

For decades, the early care and education (ECE) field has grappled with retaining early educators. Research has shown that inadequate working conditions and low wages contribute to turnover and educator shortages.^{7, 8, 9} However, many of these studies focus on how individual aspects of the work environment affect early educators. Few studies have taken a holistic view of how components of the work environment come together to influence educator outcomes, and even fewer prioritize the perspectives of early educators.



The studies summarized in this brief look specifically at how the multifaceted nature of work environments (see text box) influence early educators' plans to stay in their jobs or in the ECE field—often referred to as their career intentions or career plans. These career intentions are a strong predictor of educators' actual mobility and turnover.^{10, 11} Understanding what shapes educators' future career plans can help identify policies and practices that better support retention.

What Are Work Environment Supports for ECE Educators?

Work environment supports refer to the factors that early educators need to thrive professionally and in the practice of providing care. The **SEQUAL (Supportive Environmental Quality Underlying Adult Learning) survey tool**, developed by the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (CSCCE), assesses multiple features of the work environment that support or hinder the work of early educators. The SEQUAL tool is completed by early educators and captures their perspectives of workplace policies, practices, and relationships. For center-based programs, the measure consists of five domains and their 14 dimensions (noted in italics below):

1. **Teaching Supports** (*observation and assessment, materials, supports and resources for children and families, staffing, professional responsibilities*), focusing on resources that support educators' teaching practices such as access to substitutes, regular breaks, curriculum materials, and paid planning time.
2. **Learning Community** (*professional development, applying learning*), emphasizing collaborative professional development opportunities.
3. **Job Crafting** (*decision-making, input, teamwork*), highlighting how staff collaborate, share input, and influence decision-making within their programs.
4. **Adult Well-being** (*economic well-being, wellness supports, quality of work life*), focusing on staff members' physical, emotional, and economic health and well-being.
5. **Program Leadership** (*supervision, oversight*), examining how educators assess the support and guidance of program leaders.

What We Found

CSCCE conducted two studies using the SEQUAL tool to examine how early educators view their work environments and how these views relate to their career plans. The studies took place in 2022 and 2023, and included 595 early educators in center-based programs across two different geographic areas (Pacific Northwest and Southeast US). Respondents were categorized based on their career intentions: those who planned to stay in their current program (*stayers*); those who planned to leave their program but remain in the ECE field (*movers*); those who planned to leave the ECE field, including those who may continue in education with older students (*leavers*); and those who were unsure of their plans (*unsure*).

To better understand how early educators experience their work environments, CSCCE examined patterns in their responses across the different dimensions of the SEQUAL tool. This analysis revealed three groups of educators with distinct work environment support experiences:



Average work environment supports: More than half of early educators fell into this group, characterized by average ratings across the various types of work environment supports. Their responses showed *somewhat positive* assessments across most dimensions.



Below-average work environment supports: About one-third of early educators fell into this group, characterized by below-average ratings across their work environment supports. Their responses showed *less positive* assessments across most dimensions.



Above-average work environment supports: Just one in six early educators fell into this group, characterized by above-average ratings across their work environment supports. Their responses showed very positive assessments across most dimensions.

Key Findings

Lastly, CSCCE researchers looked for patterns across these three groups as they related to educators' career intentions. Their key findings include:

- 1 Retention is associated with supportive work environments.** Educators classified in the **Above Average** and **Average** groups were more likely than those in the Below Average group to report the intention to remain in their current program.
- 2 Turnover is associated with low (or fewer) work environment supports.** Educators in the **Below Average** group were substantially less likely than educators in the other two groups to report wanting to stay in their current program, and were more likely to report wanting to leave their program or the field entirely.

These findings suggest that educators who feel supported in multiple aspects of their work environment (e.g., collaborative relationships, wellness supports, having input into program practices) are more likely to want to stay in those supportive programs.

Examples From the Field

Across the country, states and other organizations are considering how to improve work environment supports for early educators, often with the goal of improving recruitment and retention. In some cases, they are using [SEQUAL](#) or the [Model Work Standards](#) (MWS) as a way to involve early educators more authentically in the process of designing new policies or practices. Below, we share three examples of engaging with early educators to better understand, and ultimately improve, their work environments.



Indiana Association for the Education of Young Children Workforce Coordinators

Recognizing the importance of ECE work environments and standards for attracting and retaining a well-qualified workforce, the Indiana Association for the Education of Young Children (INAEYC) is exploring how to better support ECE programs to create the conditions necessary for early educators to thrive in the field. Through their [Early Childhood Workforce Systems](#) Project, INAEYC “supports the ECE workforce in Indiana through research-based initiatives designed to bring greater consistency and opportunity for education, career navigation, and professional recognition.”

As part of this work, INAEYC regional workforce coordinators used the MWS tool with center-based directors and family child care providers to identify goals to improve the working conditions of early educators throughout Indiana. A predecessor to SEQUAL, the MWS was created with and by early educators from across the country who engaged in a process of revisioning a high-quality work environment.¹² The MWS self-assessment tool can be used to identify aspects of the work environment that need improvement; in turn, advocates can use this data to push for change.

Workforce coordinators supported educators, directors, and FCC providers in exploring the MWS within their programs and working together to set goals and make improvements based on their self-assessments.



Head Start Staff Well-Being, New Directions Early Head Start in New Castle County, Delaware

During the COVID-19 pandemic, supplemental funding available to support Head Start staff wellness led to the creation of the [Lunch Breaks](#) program at [New Directions Early Head Start](#) (NDEHS), housed in the Delaware Institute for Excellence in Early Childhood at the University of Delaware. The concept behind Lunch Breaks was simple: provide well-being supports to educators where and when they can access it. As part of the program, a [Board-Certified Health and Wellness Coach](#) offers brief health coaching to educators during their staggered lunch breaks. The Coach is available bi-weekly, so educators can form relationships and revisit concerns and supports. NDEHS also provides a variety of healthy snacks and other incentives to encourage participation.

Staff engagement with the program has been strong for more than two years, and the program has been offered at three different center-based programs associated with NDEHS. One educator who has participated described the impact of the program on her work, “I definitely felt more present in my classroom. I had an outlet for me, so I could be more present in the classroom.”



The Model Work Standards Project in Guilford County, North Carolina

[EQuIPD](#), a technical assistance organization based in Guilford County, North Carolina, launched the [Model Work Standards Project](#) in 2023 with funding from Ready for School, Ready for Life and the North Carolina State Legislature. This project had three main goals: 1) to support early educators' communication, leadership, and advocacy skills to help them be more actively involved in shaping their work environments; 2) to introduce and explore the ideas of rights and responsibilities as they relate to elements of work environments; and 3) to inform program practices and policy decisions to better support stability and reduce turnover in early childhood settings.

The project supported staff across three program sites to use the Model Work Standards to identify strengths and priorities for change and then create action plans to achieve their goals. Early educators received stipends to support their participation. Funds were also provided to programs to help them achieve their goals. By developing early educators' leadership, communication, and problem-solving skills, the project allowed staff at each program to set the direction for developing and implementing their action plans. Educators had ownership over the process and the support of their administrators.¹³

Where to Go From Here

Research suggests that work environments play a role in early educators' teaching practices, well-being, and career intentions. Specifically, the findings from the studies presented in this brief can help develop actionable policy solutions for supporting and retaining the workforce through the improvement of their work environment.

Below we offer some opportunities at the system and program levels to move this research into practice.

If you are a **state ECE administrator**, consider:

- What kind of data does your state collect on the work environments of early educators?
What additional data do you need on work environments to make informed decisions?
- Does/could your state offer flexible funding streams to support improving work environments for early educators?
- What policies does your state have regarding the working standards for early educators, and do these policies reflect what educators really need? How can existing policies be strengthened or expanded? For example, revising QRIS standards to reflect aspects of the work environment.

If you are a **technical assistance provider**, consider:

- How can you engage educators to better understand how they are experiencing their work environments?

Additional resources:

- [SEQUAL survey tool](#) can be used by programs or systems to document strengths and areas of improvement.
- [The Model Work Standards](#) offers a list of workplace standards that can be used to create change.

- Where can your efforts be expanded to focus on improving the work environments of the programs you support?
- What are the unique features of work environments for home-based providers, and how might these contribute to their decisions to maintain or close their businesses?
- Are there existing funding sources in your state or community that could be used to improve work environments in the programs you support? What assistance might these programs need to apply? For example, you might pursue partnerships with universities or businesses to offer staff training or state/local public health funding for staff well-being initiatives.

If you are a leader in a **center- or home-based program** consider:

- How are you collecting input from your staff about the conditions they need to thrive as educators?
- What are some of the no-cost solutions you could implement to improve working conditions (e.g., creating opportunities for relationship building among staff members, adding a suggestion box) that also create opportunities for staff to have input into the programs and policies that affect them?
- Are there resources in your community such as team-building training or low- or no-cost wellness programming that you could draw upon to support workplace improvements?

Importantly, what is meaningful for one community may not have the same effect in all communities. Those working at the system, program, and individual levels in the ECE field should enlist the expertise of educators, families, and other stakeholders to identify specific aspects of the work environment that need attention.

Methods

The two studies included in the analyses for this brief were conducted in different geographic regions across the United States with differing sampling strategies and policy contexts. One was a statewide study conducted in a western state and included all licensed center-based programs. The second study was conducted in two counties in a southeastern state and included only center-based programs receiving public funding. The studies were analyzed separately to understand the policy context and location-specific variation. Both studies utilized the same data collection procedures, which consisted of an online survey emailed to all educators working in eligible programs. The survey was designed to be completed in approximately 40-45 minutes. The procedures and study protocol were reviewed and approved by the institutional review board (IRB) at the University of California, Berkeley.

CSCCE conducted descriptive analyses to understand educators' overall assessments of their work environments, and how these were related to their career intentions. CSCCE conducted latent profile analyses to understand patterns among educators in their assessments of their work environments. Finally, they conducted multinomial logistic regressions to examine the associations between the groupings of educators based on their perceptions of their work environments and educators' career intentions. Due to the nature of the research design, results should be interpreted as correlational and future research would need to be conducted to establish causality.

Acknowledgements

This brief has benefited from the contributions of staff from the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (CSCCE), who led study conception and design, conducted data collection utilizing the Supportive Environmental Quality Underlying Adult Learning Survey, performed analysis and interpretation of results, and drafted initial findings. While CSCCE contributed to this work, the views expressed herein are those of the authors and may not necessarily reflect the views of CSCCE or those acknowledged for their contributions.

This research 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.

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Suggested citation: Carlson, J. & Lessard, L. (2025). *How Work Environments Impact Early Educators' Career Decisions*. National Early Care and Education Workforce Center.

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