



ECE Workforce Research Highlight

April 2026

An Actionable Research Agenda for Strengthening the ECE Workforce

National ECE Workforce Center Team

National ECE Workforce Center Research Highlights provide a focused look at research related to topics relevant to the ECE workforce. The research questions in this highlight emerged through our technical assistance and research activities, including learnings from the state and federal policy landscape.

The low compensation and limited workplace supports available to the early care and education (ECE) workforce as compared to other educators is well-documented.^{1,2} States and communities are developing and testing solutions that seek to address issues related to compensation and career advancement. For instance, based on 2025-2027 Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) plans, over half of states³ are continuing to try and improve recruitment, retention, and career advancement of the workforce by updating registry requirements, improving access to higher education, and developing credentials that clearly articulate the specific competencies needed for each role in the ECE sector.

These policy actions are often informed by evidence, such as research on wage gaps that set the benchmark for the pay parity initiative in D.C.⁴ or on the links between qualifications and ECE quality⁵, but evidence is scant for many complex, nuanced issues, such as how to solve challenges of professional advancement and how to fairly implement new salary scales. Furthermore, effective, sustainable change requires more than selecting the policy or practice with the best evidence—it requires attending to and improving the system within which the policy or practice is implemented.

The National ECE Workforce Center developed an [ECE Workforce Systems Change Framework](#) that identifies nine key drivers of meaningful, sustainable ECE systems change. In this highlight, we use the three primary drivers of the Change Framework—practices, infrastructure, and principles—to highlight the need to attend to all three areas and to underscore the interconnection of the drivers as leaders pursue systems change. This highlight is designed for researchers who aim to fill critical, timely gaps in the field's knowledge regarding how best to design and implement policies and practices that support compensation and career advancement for all members of the ECE workforce

Since the Center's inception in 2023, we have continually scanned the research literature, policies, and technical assistance reports and resources; provided technical assistance to 19 states, and hosted conversations with over 20 national and regional organizations to both understand the current state of the field and effectively respond to the needs of state and community decision makers.

In this highlight, we synthesize over three years of learnings from these activities into a research agenda that can answer critical, timely questions in the areas of compensation and career advancement.

Compensation

The ECE workforce's low wages and limited access to benefits is well-documented. Many states have been spurred to action to improve compensation through wage supplements, updated salary scales, and bonus/retention programs. Similarly, some states, such as Arkansas, made strides in improving ECE educators' access to benefits including retirement, health care, and child care subsidies. To support the ECE field in implementing effective sustainable policy and programmatic solutions, researchers should address the following questions:

Foundational Questions

- What are the actual wages of family child care (FCC) providers? How do wages vary over time?
- Which benefits are offered to the ECE workforce, and which are accessible to FCC providers? Which benefits are taken up or used?
- Why do educators use or not use certain benefits?
- To what extent do educators rely on receiving benefits from the state and/or spouse/family?
- What role do benefits play in retention, above and beyond wages? In particular, what role does categorical eligibility for child care subsidies or other child care-related benefits play in promoting recruitment and retention of a highly qualified workforce?
- How do ECE educators navigate benefits cliffs? Does this vary for center-based and FCC educators?
- How much does wage variation across the sector explain movement around the sector (e.g., movement in roles, movement from community-based privately owned centers to publicly operated centers) and out of the field?

Practice Questions

- How are voluntary salary scales used by ECE program directors, professional associations or networks, and state ECE leaders? How many programs adopt the voluntary salary scale within a given state?
- What are the financing options for supporting sustainable wage increases for FCC providers?
- How are policies aligned or misaligned to ensure FCC providers can be reached/can access wage supplements, retention programs, and other wage increase programs?
- When a state decides to move from a voluntary to mandatory salary scale, what policy alignment actions need to be taken to ease implementation and reach the greatest numbers of eligible educators in center-based settings?
- Should funding to support increased wages go to the program or to the individual educator/workforce member? Which option is least burdensome? Which is most cost effective? Which is most fair?
- With regard to salary scales or wage supplement programs, who is involved in data-driven decision making, and what data are used to guide decisions regarding implementation and measuring effectiveness? What data are needed for decisions?

- What are barriers to and facilitators of data-driven decision making regarding compensation? What role does data infrastructure, data access, data interoperability, and data analysis capacity and interpretation play?
- What are the options for increasing wages of educators outside a state pre-K or subsidy system? D.C. Pay Equity offers one example; are there other potential options?
- What are the opportunities and challenges of benefits administered by the state (e.g., state retirement systems), versus by the ECE program? Which option presents the least burden and most opportunity for educators in center-based and in FCC programs?

Infrastructure Questions

- What key roles and activities of system leadership facilitate successful implementation of a new wage scale, and what types of adaptation are evident?
- For each type of benefit—retirement, health insurance, paid time off, sick and medical leave, and professional development—what are the roles of system leadership that facilitate successful implementation?
- When implementing a salary scale, what role does partner⁶ alignment or misalignment play? How do salary scale implementation initiatives keep partners engaged and authentically collaborative?
- What is the role of the business community or employer-sponsored child care in supporting increased wages and/or access to benefits?

Principles Questions

- Which outreach strategies are most effective at enabling educator involvement in decisions regarding salary scale implementation? What changes about the system and the salary scale implementation when educators are given substantial influence over decision making?
- What benefits do ECE educators most want/need? How does this vary by setting and role?
- Who are the audiences to focus on regarding narrative shifting around the ECE workforce's compensation needs? How efficacious are narrative shifting efforts among policymakers, the business community, and the public?
- How do effective multi-sector partnerships advance narrative shifting efforts by aligning key parties? How do teams overcome areas of disagreement to identify shared narrative goals to pursue?
- What narratives need to shift to include FCCs in compensation systems?

Career Pathways

Recruitment and retention challenges remain for the ECE workforce, with 16 percent of the ECE workforce entirely leaving the occupation in 2022, a figure that is higher than 90 percent of other occupations.⁷ In addition, states differ in whether their career pathways represent a ladder—a single, hierarchical advancement pathway often characterized by obtaining an associate's degree, followed by a bachelor's, then a master's—or a lattice, in which there are multiple (and sometimes alternative) pathways, as well as the ability to move laterally into adjacent roles. There is a lack of research on how the workforce navigates career pathways and how suitable and comparable alternative pathways are to traditional degree-based pathways.

While the National Association for the Education of Young Children's⁸ Unifying Framework offers a model of what a professionalized workforce should look like, evidence is needed to bridge the current realities and the desired future. As such, states need to tailor their career entrance and advancement options and are revising their career pathways to address recruitment and retention issues. There remain many questions regarding what career progression looks like for educators in FCC and center-based settings and what the right supports and conditions are for facilitating career advancement for those across the ECE sector.

To inform policy and practice around career preparation, credentialing, and advancement, researchers should address the following questions:

Foundational Questions

- How many educators change jobs around the sector, including from community-based centers to publicly funded centers (e.g., state pre-K, Head Start)? What are the reasons for this movement within the sector?
- When states offer multiple pathways and a career lattice, how many educators take each pathway, and how quickly do they advance? Are educator characteristics associated with pathway accessibility or use?
- Do differing pathways facilitate similar levels of competency?
- Are there unintended consequences whereby some educators encounter barriers on their pathway? Do some pathways lead to greater rates of turnover or exit from the field?
- What does career advancement look like for FCC providers? What job-embedded advancement opportunities exist, and what works?
- What does career advancement look like for a classroom educator who does not want to move into administration or coaching?
- What is the increase in compensation along each step of each pathway, and how much does the pay differential for obtaining a higher credential or degree drive attainment?
- How are degree and credential programs delivered, and how does variation in delivery impact attainment as well as the knowledge and skills gained? What are the significant gaps in program availability for FCC providers, educators in tribal communities, English language learners, and infant-toddler teachers?

Practice Questions

- To what extent are the competencies expected for field placements in early childhood teacher preparation programs aligned with credit for prior learning (CPL) frameworks?
- Do CPL approaches work equally well for all workforce members, including FCC providers, educators in tribal communities, English language learners, and infant-toddler teachers?
- What are key characteristics of CPL approaches for successful implementation? What barriers are experienced within higher education systems, and how are faculty and programs navigating them?
- What are the benefits and risks of state-developed credential systems that support career progression without college coursework? What are the benefits and risks of heavily linking progression to college coursework and degree completion?
- What barriers and supports are states experiencing when integrating national credentials into their state pathways, and what additional resources are needed to facilitate these connections?

- Are there constellations of supports for credential and degree attainment—offered in tandem with salary increases—that best predict attainment? Which combinations are most effective for different subgroups of the workforce?
- What are the outcomes of apprenticeship programs with respect to educator placement, retention, career advancement, and wages? What is known about access to registered apprenticeships for educators in home-based settings?
- What are the longitudinal outcomes of students from career and technical education (CTE) programs with respect to placement, retention, career advancement, and wages in the ECE field?
- To what extent are FCC educators' needs addressed in current degree programs? What adjustments are programs testing to better train FCC educators in the range of competencies needed while providing training in a format that works for them?

Infrastructure Questions

- What data infrastructure elements are necessary to track educator movement across pathways and to ensure that data adequately represent FCC providers, educators in tribal communities, English language learners, and infant-toddler teachers?
- How are institutions of higher education engaged in determining the competencies gained from work experience, and how does their involvement promote alignment with coursework, CPL, and practicum expectations?
- Given the unique aspects of providing care in a home—including physical environment differences, mixed-age groups, and non-traditional hours—how do the competencies gained through FCC experience differ from those gained in a center, and how should credentialing and advancement systems account for those differences?
- What constellation of system-level factors—including institutions of higher education and professional development delivery characteristics, program-level working conditions (e.g., paid time off for training), and state supports (e.g., accessible pathways, financial assistance)—need to be in place to support degree and credential attainment?

Principles Questions

- What do educators want available to them regarding competency-based approaches to career advancement? What are their reflections on the barriers and facilitators to advancing on each pathway?
- How do educators assess the accessibility of the pathways available to them?
- How are educators engaged in the design and planning of career pathways systems, and what difference does meaningful educator involvement make in shaping pathways that are accessible and responsive to workforce needs?
- How does the nature and depth of educator engagement shift during initial implementation? And how, after three to five years of implementation, do educators assess whether pathways have kept pace with technological, educational, and policy changes. What mechanisms exist to incorporate their ongoing feedback into system updates?
- What narratives exist among policymakers, institutions of higher education, and the public about who the ECE workforce is and what career progression should look like, and how do those narratives facilitate or hinder the design and uptake of diverse, accessible pathways?
- What narratives need to shift to include FCCs in career advancement systems?

Additional Questions about ECE Workforce Systems Change

Researchers can also support leaders and decision makers by answering broader questions about systems building and change, including from areas outside the ECE workforce:

- 1** What are common strengths of systems change approaches that facilitate progress towards higher compensation and more efficient career pathways? What are common gaps or roadblocks that hinder progress?
- 2** Is there a sequence to the systems change drivers? Are there issues of timing to pay attention to? Are some drivers more prescient under certain state/local conditions than others?
- 3** How do systems persist when faced with threats or adaptations to a particular policy or practice, including its infrastructure (e.g., financing, governance structure)?

The policy landscape for the ECE workforce is rapidly shifting. Program, community, state, and national leaders and decision makers need evidence that can guide not only the selection of effective practices and policies, but that speaks to efficient, effective, fair, and sustainable implementation. Answers to the research questions outlined above can help leaders and decision makers understand more deeply the benefits and unintended consequences of new policies and practices, and guide decisions regarding building durable, responsive early childhood systems that work for all sectors of the ECE workforce.

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- ⁶ Example partners include state and local agencies, ECE programs, professional associations, workforce council and labor groups, professional development organizations, institutions of higher education, community-based groups, and advocacy organizations. For more, see: Sheffler, K., Castle, S., Douglass, A., Hallam, R., Lee, Y., Beatty, L., & Pic, A. (2025). Multisector & multi-partner collaboration in systems change for the ECE workforce. National Early Care and Education Workforce Center.
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Who Are We?

The National Early Care and Education (ECE) Workforce Center is a joint research and technical assistance center that equips state and local leaders to drive change in ECE workforce policy. This center uses a research-to-practice model to advance compensation and career advancement for early educators.

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