



**National
Early Care & Education
WORKFORCE CENTER**

**Building Supportive Systems
for the ECE Workforce:**

**Research on Compensation,
Career Pathways, and
Working Conditions**

April 2026

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Introduction

Early educators^a make essential contributions to American families and the U.S. economy. Yet they receive lower compensation and fewer workplace supports compared to educators of older children.^{1,2} Low levels of compensation, lack of adequate workplace benefits, and work-related stress are associated with burnout among early educators and their intent to leave the profession.^{3,4,5,6} Furthermore, low levels of compensation, work conditions that often lack adequate supports, and educational attainment and qualifications without commensurate compensation have contributed to a shortage of early educators in the United States.^{7,8,9} A shortage of early educators inevitably leads to a lack of child care for families.

Given that any solution aimed at addressing access to high-quality care for families should include a focus on the work conditions and compensation for early educators,¹⁰ states, communities, Tribes, and territories are looking for ways to support the career pipeline for early educators and address longstanding issues of low compensation and substandard work conditions for the early care and education (ECE) workforce.

In this report, we provide an overview of three key policy areas that need to be addressed by any state, community, Tribe, or territory aiming to support and retain a highly qualified ECE workforce. These three key policy areas are:

- Qualifications and educational support
- Compensation and financial relief strategies
- Work environment standards and supports

What follows is a summary of what we know about these three policy areas. For each topic, we consider the evidence base for the policy area, the current gaps in our understanding, and areas of opportunity for improvement. This report also identifies some common themes across the three policy areas and makes recommendations for future research, policy, and practice that can inform the work of system leaders and practitioners at federal, state, Tribal, and local levels. The information and recommendations shared in this report aim to make a difference for the career pathways, compensation, retention, well-being, and productivity of early educators in the United States.

About this Report

This report synthesizes the state of early care and education (ECE) workforce policy issues and was developed based on an extensive environmental scan carried out in 2023. The National ECE Workforce Center used a multi-method scan approach that included the following methods:

- Literature and Document Review
- Scan for Policy Summaries
- Web Scraping
- Educator Interviews
- Outreach to Other Federally Funded Research Projects
- Outreach to Federal Agency Staff
- Outreach to Non-Federal Organizations & Experts

You can read more about the environmental scan in the acknowledgements section of this report, and more details about the methods in the appendix to this report.

^a Early educators are those who work directly with children ages zero through five (not yet in kindergarten) in classrooms or family child care homes. This definition, specific to the National ECE Workforce Center, excludes individuals who are in the category of family, friend, and neighbor (FFN) care and those who work exclusively with school-age children.



Key Findings



Qualifications & Educational Support

In “Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation,” the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine recommended that the bachelor’s degree become the minimum qualification requirement for lead early childhood educators.¹¹ A second complementary recommendation identified the need to develop and implement “comprehensive pathways and multiyear timelines at the individual, institutional, and policy levels for transitioning to a minimum bachelor’s degree qualification requirement, with specialized knowledge and competencies, for all lead educators working with children from birth through age 8.”¹² These pivotal recommendations strengthened prior calls for increasing the qualification requirements for early educators and bolstered efforts to invest in and to support the ECE workforce to attain higher qualifications. The second recommendation highlights the complexity involved in requiring the ECE workforce to attain higher degrees and/or credentials within the current context of early childhood personnel preparation and workforce conditions.

The field has raised concerns about mandating higher qualification requirements, as their implementation may exacerbate current challenges in the system. Much of the ECE workforce are women who are employed full-time, earn low wages, and may have difficulty accessing and completing traditional degree programs.^{13, 14} Here, we synthesize what we know about current educational qualifications in the early childhood field and the educational supports that promote attainment of higher qualifications.

- **Auspice:** Findings from the 2019 National Survey of Early Care and Education (NSECE) reveal that a substantial portion of the center-based workforce has a degree or some college credit. However, teacher educational attainment varies by auspice (i.e., for-profit, not-for-profit, government-run programs), with teachers in the not-for-profit and government-run sectors generally reporting higher credentials and degrees.¹⁵
- **Ages of children served:** Center-based teacher qualifications also vary by age of children served, with teachers of preschool children more likely to have a bachelor’s degree (40.4%) than those who care for children under age 3 (17.6%) and those who care for both age groups (24.4%).¹⁶
- **Home-based workforce:** The qualifications of the home-based workforce are wide-ranging; 2019 NSECE findings highlight that a substantive portion of the home-based workforce (up to one third depending on type) have some college education and more than one third of the workforce has at least an associate’s degree.¹⁷
- **Head Start:** The Fiscal Year 2021 Program Information Report (PIR) data indicated that 95 percent of Head Start preschool teachers have an associate’s degree or higher in ECE or a related field. The majority of teachers have earned a bachelor’s degree (59%), followed by an associate’s degree (23%) and an advanced degree (13%).^b
- **Early Head Start:** Just over 23 percent of Early Head Start teachers hold a bachelor’s degree and 4.5 percent have a graduate degree or higher. About one third of Early Head Start teachers have a vocational/technical diploma or associate’s degree, and 25.5 percent have vocational/technical or

^b At the time of the original environmental scan activities in 2023, the 2021 PIR data were the most current published data. The full PIR data set, prior year reports, and forms are available to the public upon request. Contact the HSES help desk to request access. Email: help@hsesinfo.org. Toll-free: 866-771-4737. Local: 571-429-4858. Current HSES users can access the full PIR data set via the Reports tab at <https://hses.ohs.acf.hhs.gov>.



some college education but no diploma or degree. Over three-quarters (78.5%) of Early Head Start teachers have earned an Infant/Toddler Child Development Associate (CDA) certification.¹⁸

- **American Indian and Alaska Native Head Start:** An examination of data from Head Start Region XI, which primarily serves American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) children, indicated that over 55 percent of children were served by a lead teacher who held a bachelor's degree and 73 percent of children were served by a lead teacher who held a state-sponsored credential.¹⁹
- **Experience:** Both the center-based and home-based workforce report high levels of ECE experience. For example, over 43 percent of center-based early educators reported more than 10 years of experience.²⁰ Over two thirds (70.6%) of home-based, listed educators reported at least 10 years of experience, and 40 percent of the unlisted, paid home-based workforce reported at least 10 years of experience.²¹
- **Higher education:** Findings from a novel web scraping analysis conducted as part of the environmental scan on which this report is based indicated that Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs), minority-serving institutions (MSIs), and Tribal colleges and universities (TCUs) are more likely than the general population of institutions of higher education (IHEs) to offer ECE and ECE-related degree programs.



Compensation & Financial Relief Strategies

Historically, early educators have had—and continue to have—some of the lowest wages among all job categories in the United States. As of May 2024, the annual mean wage for child care workers in the United States was \$32,050, compared to cashiers (\$31,810) and fast food and counter workers (\$31,350), who earn the lowest among the major occupation groups in the United States.^c

Public funding has provided only modest assistance in increasing ECE workforce compensation. On one hand, the flagship federal investment in Head Start has produced some of the best wages in the ECE sector; however, early educators in Head Start earn only a few dollars more per hour than those in programs without public funding.²² Child care subsidies, the other primary source of federal investment, may reinforce low wages among the ECE workforce. The reimbursement rates provided by most states to child care providers only cover a fraction of the true cost of care.²³ Further, early educators, particularly lead teachers, in publicly funded pre-K programs in states with statute-based salary parity typically earn higher wages than Head Start educators.^{24,25}

Multiple data sources document the low wages^d and the limited benefits early educators receive. However, there was generally less analysis on benefits compared with wages in the literature. There was also **far less evidence about the consequences of low wages and lack of benefits for ECE educators and about how to address low wages.** What evidence exists is primarily correlational. In other words, the analyses do not control for other characteristics that could instead explain differential wages.

^c The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), through its Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics (OEWS), produces wage estimates annually for approximately 830 occupations at the national and state levels, and for metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areas. See <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/personal-care-and-service/childcare-workers.htm> and <https://www.bls.gov/oes/> for the estimates quoted in this sentence. Please note that the OEWS does not include information on home-based or self-employed child care providers, so these wage estimates may not be reflective of the entire ECE workforce.

^d Low wages are commonly defined as workers earning less than two-thirds of the median wage in a specified community (see Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] definition of wage levels). We do not define a low wage in terms of a specific hourly wage in this report, but we provide additional guidance here to contextualize what low wages commonly mean.



Variation in wages for center-based ECE staff was associated with several factors,^e including the following:

- **Auspice:** Educators in school-sponsored centers (which primarily include pre-K but can include other types of care) typically have the highest hourly wages compared with educators in Head Start and pre-K (that is not a part of a public school) and those in other settings.²⁶
- **Ages of children served:** Infant/toddler educators are typically paid less than preschool educators.²⁷
- **Center funding:** Educators working at centers receiving Child Care Development Fund (CCDF) dollars often earn the lowest average hourly wages compared with centers receiving either Head Start or pre-K funding, but not CCDF.²⁸
- **Geographic location:** Although there is no discernible difference in average wages by community poverty level, the level of rurality is significantly associated with differences in wages. Specifically, early educators in rural areas are paid less than those in non-rural areas.^{29,30}
- **Role:** Assistants are paid less than lead teachers/instructors.^{31,32} Center directors also earn more than teachers or assistant teachers, but their wages also tend to be lower than K-12 educators.³³
- **Educational attainment:** Educators with no postsecondary degree and no certification reported the lowest wages; educators with certification (but no postsecondary degree), associate's degree, or bachelor's degree (or higher) reported the highest wages.^{34,35}
- **Years of experience:** More years of experience are associated with higher wages; educators with less than five years of experience are typically paid the lowest average wages.^{36,37}
- **Languages spoken:** Educators in 2019 who spoke only English earned less than those who could speak another language.³⁸
- **Race/ethnicity:** The race/ethnicity of an early educator can also be associated with variation in wages. For example, Black early educators typically have lower average wages compared to White early educators,³⁹ although national and state studies often come up with different ranges for wage estimates.^{40,41,42}



Work Environment Standards

Work environments provide an important context for early educators' interactions with young children. Research indicates that a variety of work environment supports may lead to reduced burnout, greater job satisfaction and retention, and improvements in teaching practice and teacher-student interactions. One way of organizing these workplace supports is to think of them in terms of focusing on (a)

the physical environment, (b) the worker's psychological well-being, and/or (c) the workplace climate. It is imperative to acknowledge and proactively address the critical needs of early educators in their work environment, whether that is a center-based program or a family child care home, as this investment pays dividends for both the educators and the children entrusted to their care.

A literature review, as well as an examination of the themes from interviews with early educators, revealed the following conclusions about work environment supports in general and as they relate to key ECE workforce outcomes (i.e., turnover, emotional well-being, educator effectiveness):

^e There is no comparable, publicly available information on the average wages of home-based early educators in 2019 from the National Survey of Early Care and Education (NSECE). Wage comparisons between home-based and center-based early educators are complicated by the fact that home-based educators often report their overall household income in surveys rather than separately reporting their wages from working with children.



- **Stressors:** The literature highlighted job conditions like low pay, physical and emotional demands with few breaks throughout the day, and isolation from other adults as potential contributors to poor emotional well-being among the ECE workforce.⁴³
- **Supports:** The empirical literature was limited, but there was some correlational evidence that turnover and educator effectiveness were related to benefits,^{44,45,46} paid professional development (PD),^{47,48} paid planning time,⁴⁹ supportive leadership,⁵⁰ and provision of infant and early childhood mental health consultation (IECMHC).⁵¹
- **Interventions:** Educator emotional well-being was also related to IECMHC (though the literature was somewhat mixed),^{52,53,54,55,56} as well as specific programs and approaches designed to support adult emotional, physical, and social well-being.^{57,58,59,60,61,62,63,64}
- **Interconnections:** Social well-being was an important factor identified for both center-based and home-based early educators, and across published research and interviews. Social well-being and emotional well-being are closely intertwined in the published literature.
- **Home-based workforce:** Research with home-based early educators is more limited, but evidence highlights specific challenges and needs of the home-based workforce, given their unique roles (e.g., home-based educators are also often small business owners),^{65,66} isolation from other adults, and historically, more limited access to work environment supports.^{67,68}

Cross-Cutting Themes

We found similar facilitators and barriers to improving the circumstances for the ECE workforce across the policy areas (see Table 1.2). Notably, a lack of resources in one policy area was identified as a barrier to another policy area. For example, poor compensation was identified as a barrier to achieving advancement in qualifications and educational support; likewise, a lack of training in supportive leadership was identified as a barrier to workplace climate.

Table 1.2. Summary of Facilitators and Barriers Found in the Environmental Scan, by Policy Area (or Sub-Area)

Qualifications	
Facilitators	Barriers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scholarships • Minority-serving institutions • TCU-Head Start partnership program • Clear career pathways with accessible points of entry • Linkages between IHEs and state or territory career pathway • Articulation agreements between associate’s and bachelor’s degree programs • Responsive advising in IHEs • Instruction in multiple languages in IHEs • Diverse faculty in IHEs • Accessible educational modalities in IHEs • Peers and mentors on the job • Verbal encouragement from family/friends • Tangible support from family/friends (e.g., help with family responsibilities, financial support) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor compensation • Insufficient supports within educational agencies (e.g., poor advising, lack of instruction in multiple languages, lack of diverse staff, few educational modalities) • Personal circumstances (e.g., stress, lack of time outside of work)



Educational Supports	
Facilitators <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Scholarships Tax breaks Loan forgiveness Wage supplements Bonuses Paid internships Flexibility in scheduling Substitutes Paid time off Tuition reimbursement Peers and mentors on the job Verbal encouragement from family/friends Tangible support from family/friends (e.g., help with family responsibilities, financial support) 	Barriers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Poor compensation Poor working conditions Insufficient funding and financing Personal circumstances (e.g., stress, lack of time outside of work)
Compensation	
Facilitators <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bonuses Public benefits (e.g., SNAP, Medicaid) Unionization One-time pandemic recovery funding 	Barriers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Insufficient state and federal policies regarding increasing ECE workforce compensation Lack of diverse funding sources for increasing ECE workforce compensation
Environment: Supportive workplace climate	
Facilitators <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Benefits (e.g., health insurance, retirement) Access to and paid time for professional development Paid planning time Infant and early childhood mental health consultation Supportive leadership Appropriate staffing patterns (e.g., access to substitutes, floaters) 	Barriers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inadequate funding for benefits, paid professional development and planning time, and support staff Lack of training in supportive leadership
Environment: Supports for adult well-being	
Facilitators <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Programs and policies to support emotional well-being (e.g., mindfulness, stress management trainings) Programs and policies to support physical well-being (e.g., nutrition and physical activity workshops; see also supportive physical environment) Peer-to-peer and professional learning communities Pandemic recovery funding to enhance mental health supports 	Barriers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of supportive programming Limited time to participate in programming Isolation from other adults High job demands



Environment: Supportive physical environment

Facilitators	Barriers
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Facilities to support adults (e.g., breakrooms, adult-sized furniture)• Supplies and materials• Health and safety features• Pandemic recovery funding to enhance the physical environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Inadequate funding for supportive physical environment features• Burden associated with health and safety protocols

Source: Environmental Scan Team

Another common theme found across the environmental scan of the policy areas is **variation in early educators' experiences and outcomes by demographic characteristics of the workforce**. For example, preschool teachers were more likely to have a bachelor's degree than infant/toddler teachers, and teachers in non-profit and government-funded programs were also more likely to have a bachelor's degree compared to educators working in for-profit programs. There have also been and continue to be differences in compensation based on race and ethnicity.^{69,70}

Similarly, there is variation within the workforce in compensation, with those serving the youngest children earning less than those serving older children. Additional differences were noted between educators residing in rural areas compared to educators in more urban locations.⁷¹

Finally, we noticed across policy areas that **several subpopulations of the ECE workforce are largely missing from—or under-represented in—the research literature**:

- Family child care educators
- Early educators serving Tribal and territory communities
- Early educators in rural areas
- Early educators serving children with developmental delays or disabilities
- Early educators who speak a language other than English

Implications for Future Research, Policy, and Practice

Research

Many of the implications for future research are related to the gaps we found in the evidence base within both the academic and grey literature.

- **More research is needed on understudied subgroups of educators, such as those in family child care homes, educators working in Tribal communities and territories, educators serving children with developmental delays or disabilities, and educators whose home language is not English.** The scan of recent and seminal literature revealed that educators from some backgrounds and settings have received less attention. For example, across all policy areas, there was a considerable lack of research findings that focus on early educators in family child care homes. The scan also revealed little information about compensation and financial supports for Indigenous ECE educators and for educators whose home language is not English. Future research should target these understudied subgroups, even though there may be some logistical challenges in doing so. In particular, we need research on understudied segments of the ECE workforce regarding their well-being, effectiveness,



and rates of turnover in the field. We recommend that future research include the voices and perspectives of these educators.

- **More research is needed on early educators serving infants and toddlers.** While not missing from the research literature, it is still noteworthy that early educators serving infants and toddlers are not fully considered in policy solutions discussed across the policy areas.
- **More research is needed on the implementation of promising practices and innovations to learn how improvements are achieved for early educators and whether the benefits of these innovations are fairly distributed among early educators.** For example, our review of research on **work environment supports** suggests we need a better understanding of how these supports are being put in place and sustained over time in programs and in state systems. There are also questions about promising strategies for accessible career pathways. Specifically, while **ECE career and technical education (ECE-CTE) programs** have the possibility of being offered across demographically and economically diverse students, are they? Does the implementation of these programs vary by community characteristics? Specifically, are high-quality ECE-CTE programs equally distributed across communities with differing demographic characteristics? We are also in need of more information about what components of **apprenticeship models** are supporting targeted outcomes such as completion of qualifications and workforce retention. Likewise, it is important to understand the implementation and impact of varied **wage supplement initiatives**, including the key features and conditions (e.g., amount, periodicity, eligibility) that lead to favorable recruitment and retention outcomes for early educators. Implementation science is a useful framework to bring to bear on the study of how state or local innovations meet the needs of early educators. Implementation research focuses attention on key principles of implementation science,⁷² including leadership buy-in, practical and infrastructure support, and specific practices and strategies that are implemented with high quality and competency in service of the intended result.
- **More research is needed that engages educators as partners in research, and that amplifies educator voice and educators' lived experiences in our understanding of what works to improve outcomes for the ECE workforce; this is especially true for under-studied educator populations.** Very little research thus far has been designed and conducted with educators as partners; their voices and experiences should be reflected in the design and evaluation of programs. We, therefore, do not yet know whether individuals who have led or experienced innovative strategies or policies have found them to be useful. Engaging educators—including classroom educators, program leaders, and system leaders—as partners in our research endeavors, from research design through research interpretation, will go a long way toward improving our understanding of what works for early educators. It is especially important to engage with Tribal communities to support the collection and analysis of compensation and financial support data. Engaging Tribal communities in research leadership may ensure that studies align with the specific priorities and needs of those communities.
- **More research on the understudied aspects of work environment supports.** Specifically, we saw very little research that focused on topics other than workforce well-being from a psychological standpoint. There was very little research on provision of paid planning time; access to mental health consultation; provision of substitutes; conditions of the physical environment such as facilities, supplies and materials; and supports for early educators' physical well-being. More research is needed on these understudied aspects of work environment supports in the future.
- **Future research should examine the economic impacts of current and proposed funding changes to support the ECE workforce.** Research is beginning to document and evaluate how bonuses provided by the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding have affected workforce well-being and retention in the field. However, ARPA funding was time limited. New research is needed to



understand (a) early educators' experiences in the context of reduced financial support and (b) how state strategies aimed at sustaining funding affect educator outcomes. For example, more research is needed on how funding strategies to support the ECE workforce impact federal and state budgets, and how sustainable these funding strategies are.

- **Future research should examine a wider range of benefits (including retirement or paid time off) and financial supports (including reliance on public assistance programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Plan [SNAP] or Medicaid) when studying ECE compensation, while continuing to monitor educator wages.** We need research on compensation to expand to benefits beyond salary and health insurance. Future research needs to look more comprehensively at compensation and at the financial infrastructure that undergirds these systems. At the same time, research needs to continue to monitor ECE wages across sectors, funding streams, and settings to examine if improvements in wage gaps both within ECE and with other allied fields is improving.
- **Examine the conditions of workers in allied fields,^f as well as early educators serving in U.S. military settings and international settings, to see if there are lessons to be learned for better supporting the ECE workforce in U.S. classrooms and family child care homes.** It is possible that strategies and innovations used in military child care or child care in other countries (e.g., Canada) could be adopted and scaled in U.S. domestic settings. There is also an urgent need to address not only the wide variations across ECE settings but also the differences between ECE and allied fields, such as K-12 education. To improve our understanding of how ECE compares to allied fields, future research should examine features of the profession and characteristics of the professionals/workers in those fields.

In addition to the above-mentioned research priorities that we derived from the environmental scan activities of the first year of the National ECE Workforce Center (2023), we have also developed a comprehensive set of research questions that comprise an actionable research agenda to address compensation and career advancement for early educators based on over three years of learnings from the Center's research and direct technical assistance with states (2024 – 2026).⁷³ (Please see the “further reading” section at the end of this report for access to this resource.)

Policy and Practice Solutions

The findings from this environmental scan can also be useful to federal, state, Tribal, and local decision makers and practitioners. Here are a few solutions and promising practices informed by the evidence that we found in the scan. Many of these solutions aim to address the barriers noted in Table 1.2.

Qualifications & Educational Support

Research has identified several strategies that support navigable pathways to degrees and credentials:

- **Expanding bachelor's degree access:** Allowing community colleges to offer bachelor's degrees in ECE-related fields. (As of 2023, eight states allowed this.)⁷⁴

^f We are interested in workforce members in “allied fields” that are primarily front-line workers who have specific caregiving, therapeutic, or educational practices as part of their profession. Additionally, we would also consider sole proprietor businesses as an “allied field” since we can compare their experiences to those of home-based educators who are often business owners as well as educators. Specific allied fields could include K-12 educators, out-of-school-time providers, home visitors, early childhood mental health consultants, social workers, occupational therapists, physical therapists, nurses, direct care workers (nursing homes, long-term care settings, home health aides, personal care attendants, certified nursing assistants), and sole proprietors.



- **Streamlining transfer pathways:** Developing statewide articulation agreements⁸ between associate's and bachelor's degree-granting institutions. (Twelve states had statewide agreements as of 2023, while 28 states had some level of articulation.)⁷⁵
- **Providing financial support:** Establishing comprehensive scholarship programs—as of 2020, 40 states had scholarships supporting ECE credentials, 45 states supported associate's degrees, and 42 states supported bachelor's degree programs.^{76,77}
- **Supporting working learners:** Offering paid professional development time, paid time off, flexible scheduling, and substitute coverage so educators can pursue education while working.⁷⁸
- **Ensuring educational accessibility:** Partnering with institutions that offer responsive advising, instruction in multiple languages, diverse faculty, and multiple educational modalities (online, evening, weekend options).^{79,80,81}
- **Building clear career pathways:** Creating apprenticeship programs, high school technical education programs, and paid internship opportunities.^{82,83,84}
- **Additional supports:** Other supports that facilitate degree attainment include tuition reimbursement,⁸⁵ loan forgiveness programs,^{86,87} and addressing personal circumstances through stress management resources and work-life balance supports.^{88,89}

Compensation & Financial Relief Strategies

Low compensation is the primary barrier to securing a stable, supported, well-qualified ECE workforce. As the ECE field is a labor-rich sector serving many families who cannot afford the cost of care, increasing compensation fundamentally requires substantial public financial support. Several concrete strategies can address this challenge:

- **Expanding dedicated ECE funding streams:** Increasing funding for programs like Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five (PDG B-5), which some states already use to provide bonuses to ECE workforce members.⁹⁰
- **Requiring compensation standards in contracts:** Establishing contracts between state and federal programs (such as Head Start) and community-based child care programs that mandate funds be used to increase ECE workforce compensation.⁹¹
- **Implementing cost modeling:** Using cost modeling that includes higher wages for ECE educators rather than relying solely on market rate surveys to set reimbursement rates.⁹²
- **Adopting living wage standards:** Setting wages for ECE educators to a living wage index that adjusts with time.⁹³
- **Creating targeted tax credits:** Developing tax credits tied to educators' training that increase with additional training or qualifications obtained.⁹⁴
- **Expanding health care access:** Extending Medicaid eligibility to ECE workforce members.^{95,96}

⁸ Articulation agreements are when higher education institutions agree on the terms of recognizing one another's coursework, which allows students attending one institution to transfer credits to another.



Work Environment Standards

Research has identified several strategies that address the demanding conditions ECE educators face and that support their emotional, physical, and social well-being:

- **Providing comprehensive benefits:** Offering health insurance, paid sick leave, and retirement benefits—research shows these benefits are associated with reduced turnover and improved educator effectiveness.^{97,98,99}
- **Ensuring paid planning and professional development time:** Allocating regular, protected time during work hours for curriculum planning, child assessment, and participation in training—evidence links paid planning time to both reduced turnover and increased effectiveness.^{100,101}
- **Expanding IECMHC:** Providing mental health consultants who work directly with educators to address challenging behaviors, classroom dynamics, and educator stress.^{102,103,104}
- **Implementing educator well-being programs:** Offering mindfulness training, social-emotional learning for teachers, stress reduction interventions, and Total Worker Health approaches that address both physical and psychological safety in the workplace.^{105,106,107}
- **Cultivating supportive leadership:** Investing in administrator training on coaching, mentoring, and creating professional learning communities—research identifies supportive leadership as a key factor in reducing turnover.¹⁰⁸
- **Addressing isolation through connection:** Creating peer support networks,^{109,110} communities of practice,¹¹¹ and mentorship programs¹¹² are particularly critical for family child care educators who work independently.¹¹³
- **Providing substitute coverage and flexible scheduling:** Ensuring educators can attend professional development, take time off when needed, and manage work-life balance without compromising program quality or their own income.^{114,115,116}
- **Additional supports** that enhance work environment quality include access to counseling and mental health services, reflective consultation models integrated into professional development systems, ergonomic supports for the physical demands of the work, and business management assistance specifically for family child care educators who balance dual roles as educators and small business owners.^{117,118}

Cross-cutting Solutions

- **Targeted approaches for specific educator populations:** Policy strategies must specifically address the unique needs of infant/toddler educators and family child care educators. Family child care educators face distinct challenges given their dual roles as educators and small business owners, their isolation from other adults, and historically limited access to work environment supports.^{119,120} Some existing policy solutions, such as compensation parity between preschool and K-3 educators, may inadvertently create new wage inequities for infant/toddler educators. New policy solutions tailored to these populations are essential.
- **Elevating educator voice:** Policymakers should actively seek out and listen to educator voices to ensure that solutions address real needs and challenges experienced in the field.
- **Strategic communications:** Policy and practice reforms must be matched with strategic communications initiatives to shift public perception and attitudes regarding the work of educating



and caring for young children and the people who families depend on to provide that education and care. Changing public perception is foundational to building political will for necessary investments.¹²¹

Conclusion

The activities of the environmental scan carried out in 2023 yielded a wealth of information about the status of the knowledge base for three key policy areas affecting early educators: qualifications and educational supports, compensation, and work environment standards and supports. The gaps identified in the knowledge base informed recommendations for future actionable research, while a synthesis of common themes and barriers to these policy areas informed a set of policy and practice solutions that federal, state, Tribal, and local decision makers can and should consider. Together, future work by researchers, policymakers, and practitioners can make a difference for the career pathways, compensation, and well-being of early educators in the United States.

For Further Reading

- National Early Care and Education Workforce Center Team (2026). [An Actionable Research Agenda for Strengthening the ECE Workforce](#). National Early Care and Education Workforce Center.
- [National Early Care and Education Workforce Center Environmental Scan Resources](#) (last updated on 3/31/2026):
 - Qualifications and Educational Supports
 - Compensation and Financial Relief Strategies
 - Work Environment Standards
 - Workforce Data
 - Financial Resources



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If readers of this report wish to see individual chapters of the full environmental scan report or the entire environmental scan report, please contact Tamara Halle at thalle@childtrends.org.

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Appendix: About the Environmental Scan

Goals of the Environmental Scan

The primary aim of the environmental scan was to summarize recent and seminal research to identify lessons from and gaps in the collective knowledge base about what works to support the ECE workforce in terms of their career pathways, compensation, and work environments. The main activities of the environmental scan were to:

- **Summarize the research evidence** (i.e., “what we know”) about practices, policies, and investments aimed to support the ECE workforce in the United States.
- **Identify gaps and opportunities** (i.e., “what we don’t know yet”) in the current research field to build and support the ECE workforce in the United States. These gaps and opportunities are informed by our analysis of who within the ECE workforce is included in the existing evidence base and who is missing from it. In some instances, we conducted our own original research as part of this environmental scan to answer select research questions.
- **Highlight selective^h innovations** in addressing the needs of the ECE workforce in the United States. Many of these innovations are coming out of state-led efforts; some, but not all, recent innovations are being funded through COVID-19 relief fund dollars and/or Child Care Development Funds (CCDF) or preschool development grants focused on supporting children birth to five (PDG B-5). Because innovations are often new ways of doing things, many have not been fully evaluated for their effectiveness at this time.

A framework used for the environmental scan identified five areas of policy focus: qualifications and educational supports, work environment standards, compensation and financial relief, workforce data and data systems, and financial resources. It is believed that addressing these policy areas effectively will bring about improved outcomes for the ECE workforce in the United States.¹²² The first three policy areas are featured in this brief.

Methods

We took a multi-method approach to the environmental scan, inclusive of document scans and original research activities (see text box). The literature and document review activity identified 1,146 relevant documents published in the past five years (2019-2023); we also identified 27 relevant policy summaries from approximately the same time period (2020-2023).

While the focus of the environmental scan was on recent research and policy activities (i.e., published in the five years immediately prior to the launch of the National ECE Workforce Center), we recognize that there are several seminal pieces of literature that fall outside this time frame that are important to consider. We, therefore, included a limited set of seminal research reports. We also included newer documents not yet published (or published after the close of the official literature review), provided by colleagues based on our outreach to other federally and non-federally funded research projects.

^h We use the term “selective” because the authors of the environmental scan report did not conduct an exhaustive scan of all innovations happening in states, communities, Tribes, and territories. Rather, we highlight one or two innovations from states or communities in each chapter, based on our knowledge of these efforts and our estimation of their worthiness for further empirical evaluation.



We also conducted some original research on a limited scale. Specifically, we interviewed about 20ⁱ early educators from a variety of settings, and we conducted web scraping of online job posting sites and the websites of institutions of higher education (IHE) to answer specific research questions about workforce compensation and career pathways, respectively. Finally, we reached out to federal and non-federal organizations, project teams, and experts to gather additional information and documents to include in this environmental scan.

As we conducted the environmental scan, we considered the ECE workforce across a variety of demographic and geographic dimensions, as well as across ECE settings and auspices (see Appendix Table 1.1). We were also interested in how these characteristics intersected with the five policy areas of interest to the environmental scan.

Appendix Table 1.1. Workforce Characteristics, ECE Settings, and ECE Sectors of Interest to this Environmental Scan

Early Educator Characteristics	ECE Settings	ECE Auspice
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Race/ethnicity • Immigrant status • Tribal membership • Language(s) spoken • Educator role (e.g., lead, assistant, aide, owner) • Educational attainment • Years of experience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family child care homes • Center-based • School-based • Urban • Rural • Community-based 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State or local pre-K • Head Start/Early Head Start • Tribal Head Start • Migrant and Seasonal Head Start • CCDF-funded ECE • Mixed-delivery ECE programs • For-profit and non-profit ECE programs • Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)-funded early childhood special education

Note: We acknowledge that early educators who serve military families in U.S. Department of Defense-funded child care are another subgroup of the ECE workforce. However, a review of the military child care system and workforce was beyond the scope of this environmental scan.

ⁱ Twenty interviews were conducted; however, during one interview, we determined that the individual was not part of our target population, and we therefore excluded their data from analysis.



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