

Communities for Action (CFA) Evaluation Report

April 2026

Aims

Primary
drivers

Secondary
drivers

About the Communities for Action

As implemented by the National Early Care and Education (ECE) Workforce Center, a Community for Action (CFA) is a targeted technical assistance and peer learning opportunity to support states in advancing priority ECE workforce aims. Launched in 2025, CFAs focused on strengthening career pathways, with particular emphasis on recognizing competencies gained through experience.

We designed CFAs to provide state teams with structured time, resources, and support to identify and take action toward their ECE workforce career pathway goals. Through a cohort-based model, participants engaged in facilitated sessions that combined subject matter expertise, peer learning, and guided planning—with an emphasis on building knowledge, applying systems thinking, and developing actionable strategies. The [ECE Workforce Systems Change Framework](#) (“Change Framework”) served as a foundation for the work, utilized by states to assess their systems, identify priorities, and develop action plans.

In alignment with the Change Framework, we structured participation around multi-sector state teams representing partners across agencies and organizations. We called these teams “change teams.” Through an application process, we selected 12 states, which we organized into two cohorts based on their stage of progress: an emerging cohort (five states) exploring initial approaches to recognize competencies gained through experience and an advanced cohort (seven states) working to refine and expand existing efforts. States in the emerging cohort were generally starting from scratch and had a goal of identifying a first step toward establishing a system for recognizing competencies gained through experience and on-the-job learning. In contrast, states in the advanced cohort were looking for ways to connect and expand existing mechanisms of recognizing competencies to make more coherent, effective career pathways.

Both cohorts followed the same scope and sequence across sessions. The stage of the states’ implementation shaped the questions and discussions covered in each cohort. The CFAs were implemented over six months and included six cohort sessions (see Figure 1), optional monthly office hours, and independent team activities.

Cohort sessions focused on community building and level-setting across states, an introduction to the Change Framework, exploration of promising practices for recognizing competencies, and strategies for developing a state-specific action plan. Sessions included time to learn from subject matter experts and to share experiences, successes, and considerations with peers. Between sessions, state teams met independently to complete a Change Framework-based assessment and to develop their state-specific action plans.

Across both cohorts, the CFAs supported states in applying a systems lens to their work, building a shared understanding of their state systems, identifying strategic priorities, and advancing actionable plans to strengthen career pathways.

Figure 1. Communities for Action Session Overview



Evaluations Questions & Approach

To understand participants’ experiences in the CFAs, we explored two evaluation questions:

1. How did participating states engage with the CFA process?
2. What are the most commonly selected levers for change (Change Framework secondary drivers) for states? What reasons do state leaders give for choosing those levers for change to focus on?

To address the evaluation questions, we used data sources including attendance records and meeting materials, post-session surveys, and exit interviews conducted with a subset of participating teams (11 teams). The Institutional Review Board of Child Trends reviewed and approved all evaluation procedures.

Participant Engagement in the CFA Process

Participant attendance and engagement with the process can serve as an important indicator of success and satisfaction with the program. While participation in the CFA was voluntary, attendance was steady across the six sessions and averaged 64 percent of enrolled participants. Among participants who joined, 60 percent attended at least four of the sessions. Attendees were highly engaged in the sessions and asked questions, offered insights, and regularly demonstrated application of the materials in their own work.

Additionally, office hours were consistently attended by a smaller group of five participants with 3-5 additional participants joining any one office hour session. Office hours served as unstructured time for participants to ask questions and hear from Center staff and peers, and there was always a robust discussion. In exit interviews, participants reported this component to be helpful in their understanding and work.

States identified five aspects of the CFA that were particularly helpful in shaping their understanding and work:

- The Change Framework Reflection Tool and Drivers:** Many states highlighted the Change Framework Reflection Tool as a foundational tool for identifying system gaps and prioritizing actions. For example, one state noted that the facilitation guide consistently pointed them toward data-driven decision making as their primary need. Another state "loved" the Change Framework Reflection Tool for helping them narrow their focus into an actionable plan.
- Peer-to-Peer Learning:** Connecting with other states was a major highlight for most participants. One state shared that connecting with similar states ignites passion for the work and keeps the team motivated. Several states found it useful to see how other states handled specific challenges in establishing credit for prior learning, articulating state competencies, or other related issues.
- External Facilitation and Protected Time:** Several states noted that outside support from an independent partner was very helpful for guiding the work without adding undue pressure. This "protected time" allowed teams to engage with a specific systems view that was often missing from their daily operations.
- Specific Actionable Tools:** States valued specific activities used during sessions, such as using human-centered design tools including "personas" and storytelling to capture the human element of the workforce. One state noted the benefit of thinking longer-term and another noted the benefit of thinking about stackable credentials.
- Engagement Structures:** The six-month commitment was viewed as an ideal, manageable timeframe for states. It also served as just enough structure for states with volatile budgets and leadership shifts to still be able to engage and benefit from the experience. Participants frequently cited office hours as a valuable "middle ground" for receiving tailored guidance and feedback between formal sessions.

*"It's helpful to be able to come together or else we feel like we're the only ones dealing with this [challenge of creating better supports for the ECE workforce].... That's really the most helpful aspect of being part of a community like this is that we don't really feel as alone."
— CFA participant*

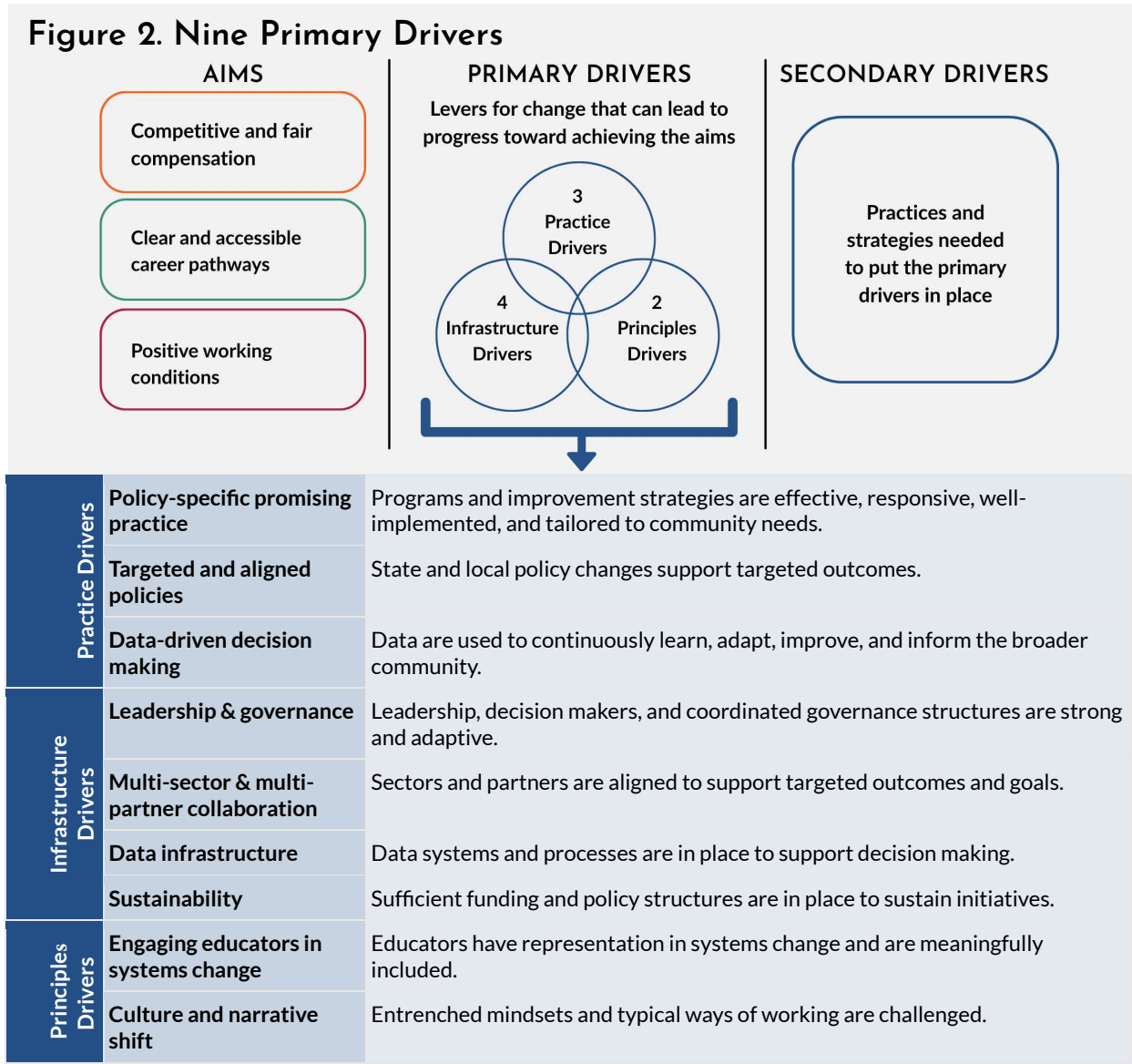
There were a handful of states that experienced substantial disruption during the CFA, including funding cuts, leadership transitions, and work to launch a new unified state early childhood agency. Despite these

disruptions, leaders were able to lean on their multi-sector teams to continue the work and, in some cases, identify ways to mitigate challenges that had arisen due to funding cuts.

Driver Selection & Action Planning

The Change Framework is the CFA’s guiding theoretical framework. During a CFA, we used the Change Framework Reflection Tool to individually survey team members, who then engaged in a semi-structured team discussion based on a provided discussion guide. Although some states experienced delays and challenges with the process due to competing demands, 11 of the 12 participating states selected change drivers and created an action plan to guide their work.

In alignment with the Change Framework (see Figure 2 for the primary drivers in each driver type), we directed states to select drivers that reflected either strengths and opportunities they want to leverage or identified gaps that urgently need to be addressed as they work to recognize competencies gained through experience. States embraced both approaches, with several opting to address system bottlenecks or needs specific to the stage of their current work.



Reasons for selecting drivers varied by the focus of each driver.

- **Targeted & aligned policies:** Some states stated they chose this driver because their existing pathways felt like "DIY career pathways" that are confusing for educators and others in the field to understand. Additionally, several teams noted that career pathways feel informal or inconsequential with a lack of state-level mandates that tie career progression to recognition via quality improvement systems or pay increases.
- **Data-driven decision making:** States selected this driver because they felt their current systems could benefit from more coordination and/or that data access can be incredibly challenging. They recognize the need for data to identify important improvements, demonstrate return on investment to legislators and other stakeholders, and to ensure that new policies were not just "checking a box."
- **Multi-sector, multi-partner collaboration:** States broadly recognized the need for and benefit of multi-sector, multi-partner collaboration from their experiences on a CFA change team, among other experiences. Some states who selected this driver identified specific goals of the collaboration, including a desire to establish shared understanding between institutions of higher education and other partners and to bridge the gap between community colleges and four-year institutions. Other states aimed to strategically approach collaboration to identify who to bring in and when.
- **Sustainability:** Some states prioritized this driver due to recent fiscal volatility, highlighting the need to sustain progress through formal policies that endure through political changes. Another state that was further along in their work to recognize competencies gained through experience selected this driver to ensure their ongoing planning involved sustainability considerations.
- **Culture & narrative shift:** Some states selected this driver to address so they could shift the narrative towards the importance of brain development, the importance of continuity in the ECE workforce, and/or to highlight the business and economic case for child care and a highly effective ECE workforce. States also selected this driver to focus on narratives about the expertise and value of early educators, helping educators themselves and others recognize their worth as "magic makers" rather than simply low-wage workers.
- **Engaging educators:** States selected this driver because they realized the benefit of engaging the "frontline" workers who face the daily realities of early education such as low compensation, lack of professional recognition, challenging behaviors, and burnout.

Key Lessons Learned

These evaluation results suggest that states were highly engaged with the CFAs, attending meetings, sharing expertise and challenges, and building on their existing successes. States in both the emerging and advanced cohorts found the CFA helpful in advancing their efforts to recognize competencies gained from experience. The Change Framework allowed each state to identify specific drivers that aligned with their strengths while also leveraging opportunities to expand and improve.

Key strengths of the CFA approach include:

1. **Focusing on a topic that was relevant and uniquely suited to the structured peer learning approach:** To fully implement a system that recognizes competencies gained from experience, each state needs to navigate a series of steps and manage challenges that might not be easily anticipated beforehand. The CFA provided actionable guidance, expert facilitation, and the peer learning that allowed states to address even the most minute challenge.
2. **Hosting two cohorts allowed states with a range of experience to participate with peers:** The homogeneity within the emerging and advanced cohorts facilitated improvements that were better matched to the status of each state's progress. In addition, cross-cohort sharing maximized the benefit of participation and built peer networks across stages of readiness that could be leveraged in the future. This approach—of separating states based on readiness while providing connections across groups—is an ideal solution for future cohort-based approaches to supporting the ECE workforce.

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

Acknowledgements

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

Thanks to Anne Douglass, Brandy Jones Lawrence, and Lauren Zarick for their feedback and helpful reviews and to Audrey Franchett and Jasmine Henderson for design assistance.

Suggested citation: Castle, S., Sheffler, K., Smith, S., Huddleston-Casas, C. & Lessard, L. (2026). *Communities for Action Evaluation Report*. National Early Care and Education Workforce Center.