

## CHANGE FRAMEWORK CASE STUDY

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

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Aims

Primary drivers

Secondary drivers

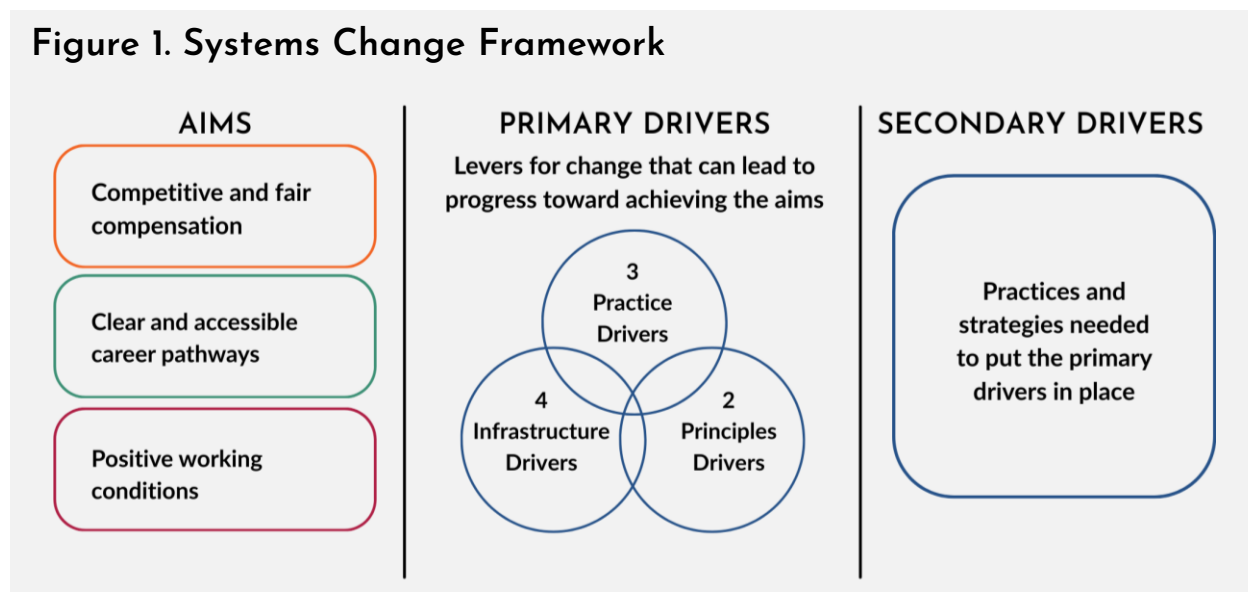
## About the National ECE Workforce Center

The National Early Care and Education (ECE) Workforce Center is a joint research and technical assistance center that equips state and local leaders to drive change in ECE workforce policy. Through Action Research Partnerships, the National ECE Workforce Center offers our technical assistance and research capabilities to leaders in states, territories, Tribes, and localities who are working to improve systems affecting the ECE workforce. Action Research Partnerships engage leaders from ECE oversight agencies who are ready to partner with state or community-level “change teams”—at least 10-12 people who represent multiple perspectives, experiences, and roles—on specific practice and infrastructure change that will improve ECE career ladders, compensation, and workplace policies.

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

## The Change Framework

Figure 1. Systems Change Framework



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

## Application of the Change Framework in New Mexico

### Background

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

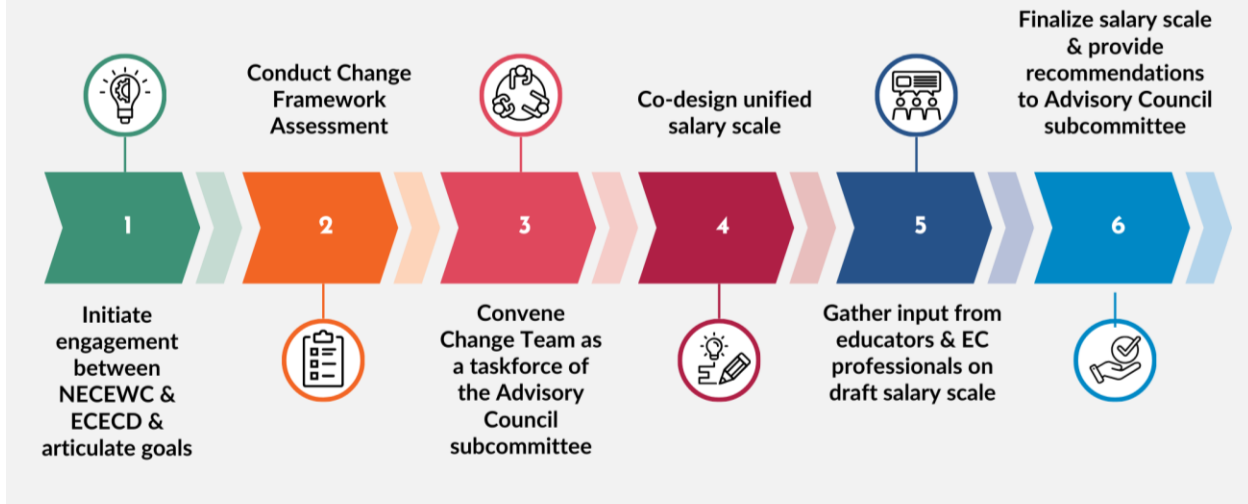
As part of these reforms, New Mexico has taken several steps to address compensation and career development for early educators. Temporary pandemic relief funding was used to provide across-the-board wage increases, and targeted supplements have offered additional support to segments of the workforce.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

### Partnership with the National ECE Workforce Center

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

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

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



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

## Overview of this Report

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

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

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

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

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

## Infrastructure Drivers

### Overview of Infrastructure Drivers

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

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



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

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

The change team was charged with informing key decision points in the design of the Unified Wage Scale and Career Lattice, including how roles would be named and structured,

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

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

how education and experience would be recognized, strategies to support entry and advancement, and which specializations should be acknowledged. Members met every other week from December 2024 through July 2025, guided by the *Early Care and Education Workforce Salary Scale Playbook: Implementation Guide* and facilitated by the National ECE Workforce Center and Prenatal to Five Fiscal Strategies. Meeting formats were adapted based on participant feedback, including small group discussions, rotating breakout groups, extended sessions, and synthesis of feedback into reviewable materials.

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

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

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

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

Task force recommendations were reviewed by the ECE Professionals Subcommittee and the full Advisory Council and await next steps to inform ECECD decision-making. The experience demonstrated that cross-sector collaboration is both feasible and essential for advancing workforce reforms and provides a foundation for sustaining partnerships as New Mexico moves toward implementation.

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

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

# Practice Drivers

## Overview of Practice Drivers

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

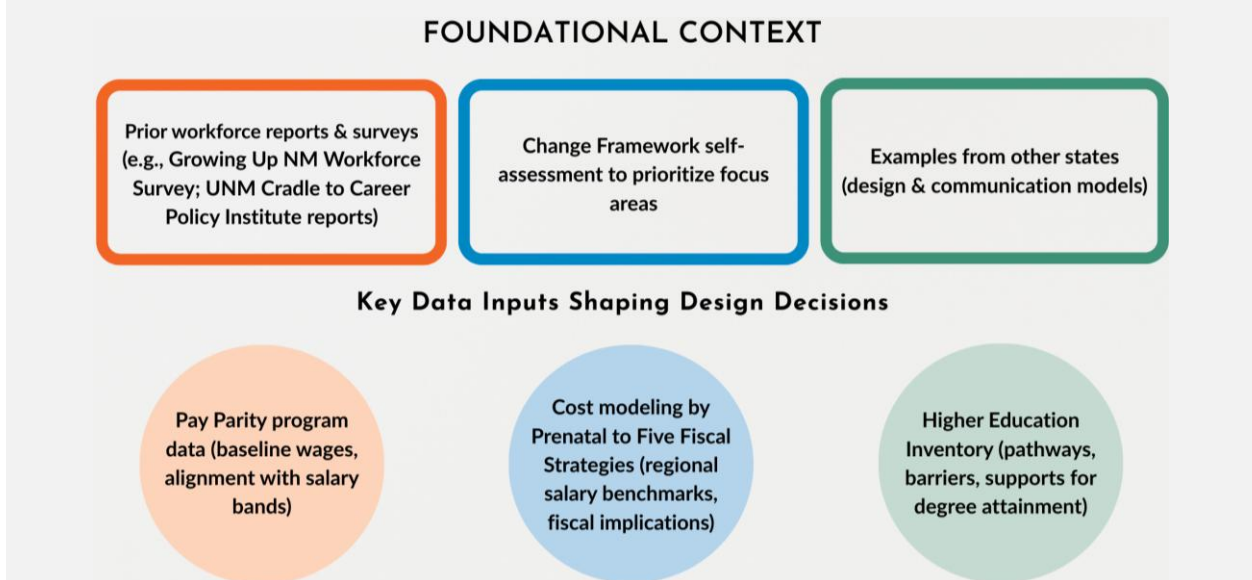
Practice Drivers	Policy-specific promising practices	Programs and improvement strategies are effective, responsive, well-implemented, and tailored to community needs
	Targeted and aligned policies	State and local policy changes support target outcomes
	Data-driven decision making	Data are used to continuously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



### Focal Driver: Data-Driven Decision Making

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

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



Together, these sources supported the change team as they systematically worked through the essential actions identified in the salary scale playbook, from identifying roles and defining qualifications to constructing salary bands and planning implementation. Participants noted that these data provided a

strong foundation for discussion; for instance, cost modeling helped establish minimum pay levels and revealed disparities across sectors, reinforcing the need for aligned compensation.

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

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

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

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

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

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

# Principles Drivers

## Overview of Principles Drivers

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

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

### Focal Driver: Engaging Educators in Systems Change

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

#### Direct Representation of Educators

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

#### Structured Feedback Mechanisms

To capture additional perspectives, particularly from direct-service educators such as classroom teachers and family child care educators, New Mexico conducted 10 focus groups over two weeks, co-facilitated by change team members and National ECE Workforce Center staff. Approximately 200 participants representing a range of roles, sectors, and regions contributed in-person and virtually, in English and Spanish. Additional feedback was collected through an online form, with approximately 120 responses. Though change team members highlighted some challenges, including compressed focus group timelines which limited opportunities for sustained engagement, they also emphasized that these feedback mechanisms helped ensure that the process and final framework reflected the needs of the broader early childhood workforce.

For example, one change team member reflected:

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

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

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

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

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

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

To ensure the Unified Wage Scale and Career Lattice reflected workforce realities, New Mexico sought educator feedback on a draft that was far enough along to prompt concrete reactions, yet open for revision. Ten focus groups, along with an online form, engaged approximately 200 educators across roles, sectors, and regions, surfacing priorities such as community-informed approaches, linguistic access that reflects the state’s population, rural access, and clear implementation supports. Their input led to refinements in role categories, leadership tiers, and competency-based assessments, ensuring the framework better reflected the realities of educators’ work. The approach demonstrates how timely, structured engagement can strengthen design and foster ownership of systems change.

## Looking Ahead: Next Steps and Remaining Questions

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### Acknowledgements

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

# Appendix: Data Collection & Analysis Methods Summary

## Overview

This appendix describes the data sources and analytic approach used in connection with the National Early Care and Education (ECE) Workforce Center's Action Research Partnership (ARP) with New Mexico. The work drew on two types of data collection, each serving a distinct purpose. The first consisted of semi-structured interviews with members of the New Mexico Early Childhood Education and Care Department (ECECD) and the Change Team. These interviews were conducted as a formative evaluation and served as the principal source of evaluative evidence for this case study report. The second type encompassed a higher education inventory and workforce focus groups and surveys.

We designed these activities primarily to inform the change process and support the Change Team's development of the unified wage scale and career lattice. Although they were not intended as evaluative data sources, we document them here because they provided important contextual information referenced in the report and may serve as useful models for other states and practitioners undertaking similar initiatives.

In addition, the project generated facilitation materials (e.g., monthly Task Force member surveys, meeting agendas, notes) that supported process management. We also used these materials in a limited capacity to refine interview guides, but we did not analyze them systematically. While we do not describe these materials further in this appendix, we note them here to provide a complete picture of the data environment in which the evaluation was conducted.

## Data Sources

### Interviews with ECECD Leaders and Change Team Members

We conducted interviews with members of ECECD and New Mexico's Change Team to document implementation progress, identify barriers and facilitators, and generate lessons to inform future ARP cohorts. The Institutional Review Board of Child Trends reviewed the interview procedures and determined they did not constitute human subjects research, as the data collected focused on the systems in which participants work and engage, rather than on the individuals themselves as research subjects.

### Interview Protocol

Interviews were guided by semi-structured protocols developed by the research team and reviewed by the National ECE Workforce Center technical assistance team. We used two versions of the protocol: one for ECECD staff and one for Change Team members. Both protocols were organized around three focal drivers identified through New Mexico's self-assessment process: Multi-Sector and Multi-Partner Collaboration, Data-Driven Decision Making, and Engaging Educators in Systems Change.<sup>a</sup> Additional questions addressed overall progress and barriers to implementation.

The protocols were largely parallel, with framing adjusted to reflect each group's organizational role. For example, the ECECD protocol asked participants to identify participating sectors before reflecting on their

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<sup>a</sup> In the interview protocols, some drivers were referenced using shorthand terminology (e.g., "Educator Voice" to refer to Engaging Educators in Systems Change); these terms were used for conversational clarity but correspond directly to the focal drivers described here and in the New Mexico Case Study Report.

influence, whereas the Change Team protocol began by asking participants to reflect on how the multi-sector structure shaped the process. The Change Team protocol also included follow-up questions examining cross-sector dynamics, including challenges and facilitators to reconciling the distinct needs and structural constraints of different workforce sectors into the development of the unified wage scale and career lattice framework.

We developed additional tailored probes for particular roles (e.g., contract-based employment in early intervention, multi-role classification in family child care, salary competition with school districts affecting Head Start and state funded pre-K programs). These probes were informed by Change Team meeting debrief notes and consultation with the National ECE Workforce Center's technical assistance lead for New Mexico. Both protocols are included below (Protocols A and B).

## Participants

At the conclusion of the partnership, we invited 11 individuals to participate in semi-structured interviews; eight completed interviews and three did not respond to the invitation. We identified participants through purposive sampling in consultation with the National ECE Workforce Center's technical assistance lead for New Mexico. Selection prioritized individuals with high levels of engagement in the Change Team while ensuring representation across major sectors of the ECE workforce (i.e., child care, Head Start, state-funded pre-K, home visiting, early intervention), as well as representatives from higher education, advocacy organizations, and state agency leadership. The final sample included six members of the Change Team and two ECECD senior leaders. Because we selected participants based on engagement and availability, findings reflect the perspectives of highly involved stakeholders and may not represent the views of all Change Team members.

## Procedure

Members of the National ECE Workforce Center research team conducted interviews virtually via Zoom between late May and early August 2025. Interviews were conducted in English and ranged in length from 19 to 44 minutes, with an average duration of approximately 32 minutes. Prior to scheduling, invitees received a written description of the study purpose and confirmed their willingness to participate. On the day of the interview, participants were provided with an overview of the discussion topics. At the start of each session, the interviewer reviewed confidentiality procedures and obtained verbal consent for audio recording. Interviews were recorded using Zoom's recording feature. Automated transcripts were generated and subsequently reviewed and corrected for accuracy by a member of the research team. We stored all recordings and transcripts in a secure, access-restricted folder.

## Analysis

We analyzed interview transcripts using a rapid qualitative analysis approach,<sup>b</sup> employing a hybrid inductive-deductive, matrix-based structure. A single researcher reviewed all cleaned transcripts and developed a coding matrix informed by both the interview content and the overarching evaluation questions: (1) To what extent do states and communities make progress toward systems change and improvements for the ECE workforce? and (2) What are the facilitators and barriers to progress related to each ARP aim in states and communities?

The resulting domains largely aligned with topics addressed in the interview protocols, though one—perceived potential uses of the wage scale—reflected an emergent theme not explicitly included in the protocols. The final domains included perceptions of current progress; facilitators of and barriers to

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<sup>b</sup> Hamilton, A. (2020). Rapid Qualitative Analysis: Updates/Developments. U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. [https://www.hsrdr.research.va.gov/for\\_researchers/cyber\\_seminars/archives/video\\_archive.cfm?SessionID=3846](https://www.hsrdr.research.va.gov/for_researchers/cyber_seminars/archives/video_archive.cfm?SessionID=3846)

progress, including reflections on features of the change process that supported the framework's development; perceived potential uses and effects of the framework; anticipated challenges to implementation; multi-sector and multi-partner collaboration, including overall reflections, barriers, facilitators, and sector-specific workforce needs; educator engagement; and data-informed decision making.

We summarized relevant transcript content within each domain, incorporating illustrative excerpts where appropriate, to populate the matrix and identify cross-cutting themes. Based on the completed matrix, the researcher drafted a summary of key findings. The draft summary was reviewed through a peer debrief process with one interviewer and the National ECE Workforce Center's technical assistance lead for New Mexico to clarify interpretations, identify potential gaps, and provide contextual information about the process.

Findings presented in the case study draw primarily from the interview data. We used information from the higher education inventory and workforce feedback activities, below, to contextualize interview findings and illustrate how data informed the change process but was not independently analyzed for evaluative conclusions.

## Higher Education Inventory

The Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (CSCCE) and the National ECE Workforce Center administered a survey to higher education programs across New Mexico to assess the availability of and barriers to ECE-related degree and credential programs in the state. ECECD and the National ECE Workforce Center identified this inventory as a priority early in the initiative, reflecting recognition that the wage scale development process would surface important questions for higher education—particularly regarding the gap between credential requirements and formal pathways. The survey focused primarily on degrees and credentials related to child care positions, as this sector has the largest gap between existing licensing requirements and the pathways envisioned in the draft wage scale.

The survey was conducted at the degree program level, meaning institutions with relevant programs were invited to complete the survey, and those with multiple relevant programs were invited to complete the survey separately for each program. We sent invitations to 84 programs; 51 completed the survey (61% response rate).

The inventory included open- and close-ended questions and addressed four areas: (1) geographic and linguistic access to degree programs; (2) barriers and facilitators for student progress and completion; (3) current practices in competency-based credit for prior learning; and (4) higher education capacity to meet potential increases in demand for ECE credentials and degrees if the wage scale increases credential requirements. The Change Team used the findings as a key data input during the co-design process, and they are discussed in the Data-Driven Decision Making section of the case study report. CSCCE developed the survey instrument as part of their higher education inventory process.<sup>c</sup>

## Workforce Focus Groups and Surveys

To gather input from the broader ECE workforce on a draft of the unified wage scale and career lattice framework, the Change Team conducted 10 focus groups between June 2 and June 13, 2025. Recruitment was led by Change Team members, who served as trusted ambassadors within their communities. Some convened focus groups during regularly scheduled meetings, while others organized sessions specifically for

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<sup>c</sup> Center for the Study of Child Care Employment. (n.d.). Higher Education Inventory. University of California, Berkeley. <https://cscce.berkeley.edu/services/higher-education-inventory/>

this purpose. All focus groups were co-facilitated by Change Team members and the National ECE Workforce Center's technical assistance lead for New Mexico. They conducted sessions both in person and virtually, in English and Spanish, with approximately 200 participants contributing across formats (based on pre-registration data; actual attendance was not systematically tracked).

Recruitment aimed to ensure broad representation across roles, sectors, and geography. Target participants included individuals working in child care, Head Start, state-funded pre-K, home visiting, and early intervention programs, as well as those supporting these sectors in professional development, higher education, or career and technical education (CTE) settings. The Change Team also sought representation from a range of geographic locations and community types across New Mexico. To support equitable participation, ECECD offered stipends of \$50 per hour to participants whose attendance was not covered by their employer, as well as mileage reimbursement for those traveling more than 50 miles one way to attend in person.

Focus groups invited both general impressions of the draft framework as a whole and structured feedback on its specific components. Discussion areas included:

- **Role Categories and Position Titles:** whether categories and titles were clear and whether participants could locate their own role and those of colleagues on the framework
- **Responsibilities:** whether listed responsibilities reflected the realities of participants' roles across sectors
- **Competencies:** whether listed competencies aligned with role responsibilities
- **Qualifications:** whether proposed credentials and experience requirements aligned with competencies, and participant interest in and considerations for a competency-based assessment pathway
- **Salary Alignment:** whether proposed salary levels were appropriate and realistic, with explicit acknowledgment that current reimbursement rates in some sectors may be insufficient and that salary calculations would inform legislative budget requests
- **Ease of Use:** how readily participants could use the scale in practice, including for roles not explicitly listed
- **Supporting Career Progression:** whether the framework helped identify growth opportunities and what additional supports would be needed
- **Instructions and Guidance:** whether the instructions for using the wage scale were clear and sufficient
- **Implementation Considerations:** anticipated challenges, ideas for successful rollout, and needed supports

Focus group participants were also invited to provide individual feedback through an online form between June 3 and June 14, 2025. The form was shared at the close of each session, and participants were given time to complete it during the session; access remained open after sessions ended. While the form was intended for focus group participants only, the open link may have been shared further by attendees. Approximately 120 individuals completed the form, which collected demographic information including respondents' role or title, organization or program type, and years of experience in the early childhood field; name was collected optionally. Substantive questions addressed the same dimensions covered in the focus groups, using a mix of yes/no items, a five-point ease-of-use rating scale, and open-ended follow-up questions. An open-ended item invited general impressions of the framework as a whole, and a final section invited any additional comments.

Findings from the focus groups and online form were synthesized by the National ECE Workforce Center's technical assistance lead and shared with the Change Team, who used them to inform revisions to the draft framework prior to finalization; specific revisions informed by this feedback are discussed in the Engaging Educators in Systems Change section of the case study report. The focus group guide and online form are included as Protocols C and D below.

# Protocols

## Protocol A: Interview Guide - ECECD

Thank you for joining us and for taking the time to speak with us today.

Introductions: [Interviewer #1 Name, role, affiliation], [Interviewer #2 Name, role, affiliation], part of the case study team at the National ECE Workforce Center.

During this interview, we would like to learn more about your experience with the wage scale development process over the last year. We are especially interested in learning more about barriers and facilitators to progress on your goals. We are gathering this information to understand your state's progress during this time. I would like to provide some information on the guidelines for today's interview. Your participation in this interview is voluntary; you are not compelled to answer any of the questions.

All responses gathered from this interview will be kept confidential. Information you provide will be anonymized, and any potentially identifying details will be removed from reports or publications.

We would like to ask your permission to record the interview using the built-in feature on Zoom. This will help us stay present during the meeting and refer to it later to ensure accuracy of the analysis. The recording will be added to our secure folder only accessible to the center team. Do you give your consent to record this interview?

The first questions are about how **multi-sector partnerships** impacted the development of the wage scale.

1. First, can you tell me about the types of sectors and partners that were involved in this process?
2. How did their involvement impact the process overall?
3. What barriers did you face working across sectors?
4. What factors or actions do you think positively contributed to your ability to work across sectors?

Our next questions are about **educator voice** in the development of your wage scale. By educator, I'm including both ECE teachers but also others in your ECE system like home visitors.

5. In what ways were you able to integrate educator voice in your process?
6. What barriers did you face in your efforts to integrate educator voice?
7. What factors or actions do you think positively contributed to your ability to integrate educator voice?

Our next questions are about **using data to help make decisions** in the development of your wage scale. [If needed, you can say, '*for example the higher education inventory, the competency crosswalk, or some of the data you brought in to describe your workforce*']

8. Can you share an example of how you used data to help make decisions?
9. What barriers did you face in your efforts to use data for decision making?
10. What made it easier to integrate data into the process?

Our last questions are about your **progress to date**.

11. Overall, how would you describe the progress the state team has made through this process?
  - a. What specific parts of the process do you think contributed most to that progress? [Ideas if needed: involvement of educators, engagement of different sectors, composition or usefulness of Change Team, meetings with the National ECE Workforce Center, higher education inventory]
12. What barriers do you envision you will face as you continue the implementation process?

## Protocol B: Interview Guide - Change Team Members

Thank you for joining us and for taking the time to speak with us today.

Introductions: [Interviewer Name, role, affiliation], part of the case study team at the National ECE Workforce Center.

During this interview, we would like to learn more about your experience with the wage scale development process over the last year. We are especially interested in learning more about barriers and facilitators to progress on your goals. We are gathering this information to understand the Task Force's progress during this time. I would like to provide some information on the guidelines for today's interview. Your participation in this interview is voluntary; you are not compelled to answer any of the questions.

All responses gathered from this interview will be kept confidential. Information you provide will be anonymized, and any potentially identifying details will be removed from reports or publications.

We would like to ask your permission to record the interview using the built-in feature on Zoom. This will help us stay present during the meeting and refer to it later to ensure accuracy of the analysis. The recording will be added to our secure folder only accessible to the center team. Do you give your consent to record this interview?

My first questions are about how **multi-sector partnerships** impacted the development of your wage scale.

1. The development of the wage scale involved people from various sectors. How did the involvement of different sectors impact the process overall?
2. What barriers did you face working across sectors? [anything you would like to highlight for your specific sector]
3. What factors or actions do you think positively contributed to your ability to work across sectors?

My next questions are about **educator voice** in the development of your wage scale.

4. In what ways were you able to integrate educator voice in your process?  
*[Depending on the interviewee's rank/role, could reframe as: 'As you are representing xyz sector, how have you brought up educators in your sector in the Task Force team discussions/ learning from community and coming back?' - or - 'I know you represent xyz sectors, in what ways were you able to bring the voice of educators in the process of developing the wage scale?']*
5. What barriers did you face in your efforts to integrate educator voice?
6. What factors or actions do you think positively contributed to your ability to integrate educator voice?

My next questions are about **using data to help make decisions** in the development of your wage scale.

7. Can you share an example of how you used data to help make decisions?  
*[If respondent gets stuck, could prompt by offering some types of data shared, such as: The Change Framework self-assessment data, data from New Mexico's pay parity programs, previous work in New Mexico, University of New Mexico Cradle to Career Policy Institute's ECE Workforce Considerations, Growing Up New Mexico wage scale work, early childhood wage & career lattice cost estimates for New Mexico, cost modeling with Prenatal to Five Fiscal Strategies, examples from other states]*
8. What barriers did you face in your efforts to use data for decision making?
9. What made it easier to integrate data into the process?

My final questions are about your **progress to date**

10. Overall, how would you describe the progress the Task Force has made through this process?

- a. What specific parts of the process do you think contributed most to that progress? [Ideas if needed: involvement of educators, engagement of different sectors, composition or usefulness of Task Force, meetings with National ECE Workforce Center, higher education inventory]
11. What barriers do you envision you will face as you continue the implementation process?
12. Since the ECE workforce consists of a diverse group of educators, it can be challenging to incorporate every group's needs into one career ladder. In your opinion, what was most helpful in the wage scale and career lattice framework for New Mexico?
13. What do you feel worked well in making sure your sector's perspectives and needs were included in the design of the wage scale and career lattice?

### Follow-up Questions by Sector

#### *Child Care*

1. We understand the importance of recognizing early educators' experience in the wage scale. How has their prior experience been recognized in this wage scale?

#### *Head Start/pre-K*

2. Task force discussions have highlighted the challenge community-based programs face in competing with school districts that often offer higher wages, better benefits, stronger infrastructure, and more administrative support. How has this dynamic played out in your experience, and what reflections or insights can you share?
3. How has measuring competency to get the appropriate compensation impacted the development of the wage scale?

#### *Family Infant Toddler (FIT)*

1. Task force discussions have highlighted the challenge community-based programs face in competing with school districts that often offer higher wages, better benefits, stronger infrastructure, and more administrative support. How has this dynamic played out in your experience, and what reflections or insights can you share?
2. Many FIT providers have unique qualifications based on their specialized roles, so we understand that it's important for the wage scale and career lattice to recognize that. In what ways do you think this was addressed in the design of the wage scale?
3. Could you elaborate on the challenges for the family infant toddler group regarding the development of the wage scale (given that many FIT providers work on a contract basis)?

#### *Family Child Care*

1. Since family child care providers' responsibilities fall across multiple roles, it seems to be challenging to determine where they all fit in the wage scale. How did this issue play out as you developed your wage scale? How did multi-sector partnerships impact this particular issue?

#### *Home Visiting*

1. Home visitors often have unique qualifications and specialized roles. In what ways do you think the wage scale and career lattice have recognized the home visitor's unique needs?
2. We understand the importance of recognizing early educators' experience in wage scale. How has their prior experience been recognized in the wage scale?
3. Task force discussions have highlighted the challenge community-based programs face in competing with school districts that often offer higher wages, better benefits, stronger infrastructure, and more administrative support. How has this dynamic played out in your experience, and what reflections or insights can you share?

**Higher Ed**

1. Higher ed professionals are sometimes at lower salaries than what is indicated in the salary scale. How did this issue inform the development of the unified wage scale?

**Protocol C: Focus Group Discussion Guide****1. Welcome & Introduction**

- Introduction of facilitators and purpose of the focus group (Task Force background information)
- Brief overview of the wage scale framework
- Outline expectations for respectful dialogue and active participation
- The findings from this focus group will help inform the final development and implementation of the unified wage scale for all New Mexico early childhood sectors. We want to make sure that the voices of staff and leaders from child care, pre-K, Head Start, FIT, and home visiting, like you, are heard and shared with the Advisory Council and ECECD as they think about what is next for the NM early childhood workforce.

- **Goals and process of the focus group**

Before we begin, we'd like to share some important information with you about how the focus group will work.

- As the facilitator, I'll be asking you questions. However, our goal is to start a discussion between all of you—please feel free to respond directly to one another. I might interrupt the conversation to ask you to clarify something you said, or to move us on to another topic if we're running low on time.

[For larger groups separating into breakouts:] To make sure that everyone gets a chance to contribute, we are going to break out into smaller groups for discussion. Each group should appoint a notetaker so that we can make sure your ideas are shared with the wage scale and career lattice Task Force. To keep us moving, I will be the time-keeper and will share questions with all of you as we go. As you talk, I will circulate among the groups to answer questions and hear your thoughts. Notetakers, if you can, please note where feedback is specific to one sector so we can keep that in mind as well.

- You can choose whether or not to participate in the focus group today, and you may stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions that you don't want to.
- There are no right or wrong answers! Everyone here today comes from a variety of backgrounds. We really want to understand all the diverse perspectives that you bring to our discussion. As the conversation progresses, you might find that you have a different opinion or experience, so please share it with the group as you feel comfortable! We just ask that you be respectful of one another, and that you speak one at a time so we can hear you.

- **Consent**

The National ECE Workforce Center team and our partners on the wage scale and career lattice Task Force will take every precaution to maintain the confidentiality of the information shared today, but the nature of focus groups means that we cannot guarantee confidentiality. To respect

the privacy of other focus group members, we ask that you not repeat anything that is said during the discussion. Your name, your program name, and any other identifying information about you will never be connected with the responses you share today and will never be shared in any reports or presentations. Your responses will not have any impact on your child care or other license or credential or on your participation in any ECECD programs or services.

Before we begin, we want to make sure that everyone is willing to participate. If you are not comfortable participating, you are welcome to leave at any time. If you are willing to participate, we will need to hear a verbal “yes” from you before we begin.

***Are you willing to participate in this discussion?*** [Wait for a “yes” from each person before continuing.]

### Digital Recording

We would like to get your permission to record the session so that we don’t miss anyone’s important comments. This recording will be stored on a secure drive, and it will not be shared with anyone outside of the National ECE Workforce Center’s team. We will use the recording to help fill in our written notes. The recording will be destroyed at the end of the project.

***Do I have your permission to record?*** [Wait for a “yes” from each person before recording.]

## 2. Framework Overview Presentation

- Highlight the roles, competencies, and salary framework
- Emphasize areas where feedback is most needed (e.g., qualifications, position alignment, salary fairness)

## 3. Discussion Segments

We will first start with your general reactions to the framework as a whole. Then, we will have a discussion about each column that will allow you to give more specific feedback on components of the draft wage scale framework.

- **General Impressions:** What are your overall thoughts about the wage scale framework?
- **Role Categories & Position Titles:** Are the role categories clear? Are there any titles unclear? Are you able to identify where your role and others on your team are represented on the wage scale framework?
- **Responsibilities:** Do the listed responsibilities align with work in your role? Remember that these are a subset or generalized set of responsibilities to reflect people in the same role across the various early childhood sectors.
- **Competencies:** Do the listed competencies align with the responsibilities in your role?
- **Qualifications:** Do the qualifications, credentials, and experience align with the competencies needed for your role? Would a competency-based assessment be applicable to your field and of interest to you or your staff? What should ECECD keep in mind as they move toward developing a competency-based assessment?
- **Salary Alignment:** ECECD is aware that for some sectors in particular, reimbursement rates are currently not sufficient to support these wages. Calculations using these salary levels will be used to develop specific asks to the New Mexico legislature to fund implementation. With this in mind, are the proposed salary levels appropriate and realistic for each role and experience level?

- **Ease of Use:** How easy or difficult would it be to use this wage scale in your current role? Would you be able to determine where a position that isn't specifically listed in the position titles best fits on the wage scale?
- **Supporting Career Progression:** Does the draft wage scale framework help you identify opportunities for growth in your career and/or for those you supervise? What additional supports are needed to help this framework inform career planning?
- **Instructions & Guidance:** Are the instructions for understanding and using the wage scale clear and sufficient?
- **Implementation Considerations:** What potential challenges or barriers do you foresee in implementing this wage scale? What ideas do you have for successful implementation? What additional supports do you think are needed to help with implementation?

#### 4. Closing & Feedback Form

- Summarize key takeaways from the discussion
- Provide instructions for completing feedback forms
- Offer details on next steps and how participants can stay informed

## Protocol D: Online Feedback Form

**Instructions:** Please complete this form to provide your feedback on the draft unified wage scale framework for the New Mexico early childhood workforce. Your input is valuable in ensuring the framework meets the needs of early childhood educators and professionals, direct service providers, and program leaders.

### I. General Information

- Name (Optional): \_\_\_\_\_
- Role/Title: \_\_\_\_\_
- Organization/Program Type (e.g., Child Care, pre-K, Head Start, FIT, etc.): \_\_\_\_\_
- Years of Experience in Early Childhood Field: \_\_\_\_\_

### II. Feedback on the Wage Scale Framework

#### 1. General Impressions

- What are your overall thoughts about the draft wage scale framework? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

#### 2. Role Descriptions & Position Titles

- Are the role descriptions clear and relevant to your work?  
[ ] Yes [ ] No
- If no, what improvements would you suggest? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

#### 3. Responsibilities

- Do the listed responsibilities align with the work you do in your role? (feel free to comment on roles you've previously held and/or roles you supervise)  
 Yes  No
- What additional responsibilities would you recommend? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

#### 4. Competencies

- Do the listed competencies align with the responsibilities in your role? (feel free to comment on roles you've previously held and/or roles you supervise)  
 Yes  No
- What additional competencies would you recommend? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

#### 5. Qualifications

- Do the listed qualifications align with the responsibilities in your role? (feel free to comment on roles you've previously held and/or roles you supervise)  
 Yes  No
- What should be considered as ECECD works toward designing a competency-based assessment pathway to ensure it aligns with the responsibilities in your role? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

#### 6. Salary Alignment

- Are the proposed salary levels appropriate and realistic for your role and experience level?  
 Yes  No
- If no, what adjustments would you suggest? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

#### 7. Implementation Considerations

- What potential challenges or barriers do you foresee in implementing this wage scale? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

#### 8. Ease of Use

- How easy or difficult would it be to use this wage scale in your current role?  
 Very Easy  Somewhat Easy  Neutral  Somewhat Difficult  Very Difficult
- What changes would make it easier to use? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

#### 9. Instructions & Guidance

- Are the instructions for understanding and using the wage scale clear and complete?  
 Yes  No

- What suggestions do you have for improving the instructions? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

#### 10. Supporting Career Progression

- Will the wage scale help you plan and move forward in your career?  
 Yes  No
- What additional supports would be needed to make the wage scale helpful in career planning? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**III. Additional Comments** Please share any other thoughts, ideas, or concerns you have regarding the draft wage scale framework. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for your time and valuable feedback!