

Early Educator Engagement and Empowerment (E4) Toolkit

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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has helped highlight something that those working in early care and education (ECE) have known all along: early educators are the backbone of our communities. The work of caring for and educating young children is intellectually, physically, and emotionally challenging. Throughout the United States, more than 2 million people, most of whom are women, quite literally help brains develop and contribute to lifelong outcomes. Early educators are also central to the economy as their labor allows many parents to participate in the workforce.

Yet, something else many of us know all too well is that ECE is not immune to inequities based on gender, class, race, and language, which are woven throughout our nation's institutions and culture. The historical and pervasive undervaluing of labor performed by women and people of color in the United States has combined to create one of the most underpaid workforces in the country. The current organization and financing of ECE and the absence of a publicly funded system poses severe risks to educators' well-being, reinforces disparities among educators, and hinders efforts of all educators to facilitate children's learning.

Throughout this toolkit, when we refer to early educators, teachers, or the ECE workforce, we mean all those who work in home- and center-based settings who provide group care and early learning to children prior to kindergarten.





Early educators are the best spokespeople about the conditions under which they work and what they need in order to thrive. Policy leaders have much to gain by actively engaging educators in identifying workable solutions to the child care crisis. At the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (CSCCE), we believe educators have the right to exercise power in their profession and should be able to organize and participate in the public discourse, free from interference. Through our work and engagement with early educators over the past 23 years, we've learned that early educators need: the conditions to engage in good preparation; access to ongoing learning; safe and supportive working environments; and appropriate compensation, including a livable wage and benefits. We developed the solutions detailed in the Early Educator Engagement and Empowerment (E4) Toolkit based on the experiences early educators have shared and the research we have conducted. We created this toolkit to support early educators in their advocacy, power building, and engagement with stakeholders.

While the experience of the pandemic and the exposure of America's child care crisis have increased attention to the ECE workforce, recent events alone have not been enough to bring about comprehensive reforms. The ECE sector has suffered [extensive job losses](#) since February 2020, exacerbating a workforce crisis that existed long before the onset of the pandemic.¹ Recovery continues to be challenging as wages remain low and poverty rates high among this essential workforce. These conditions fuel a staffing crisis in which providers struggle to compete with businesses like retail and food service, which are now paying entry wages of \$15 or more and offering benefits. For those with a college degree, the options are even greater.

The information and resources included in the E4 Toolkit are meant to be talking points that can be used in a variety of settings.

Acknowledgements

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2. About the Early Care and Education Workforce

Early educators provide critical services to our community. They are brain builders, providing care and education that support children's learning and development during the period when brain development is most sensitive. Their service allows other workers to do their jobs. Yet, the labor, knowledge, and skills of this very experienced and skilled workforce have been devalued for far too long.





Photo by Brittany Hosea

- Nearly all early educators (more than 95%) identify as women, and many are women of color and/or immigrants.
- More than one half of home-based providers and one third of lead teachers in child care centers have 16 or more years of experience as educators;²
- Early educators are essential to children's development and support for working families and the economy but are asked to sacrifice their own economic security to do this work. The national median child care worker³ pay is just [\\$13.22 an hour](#).⁴
- Leading up to the pandemic, [conditions for the ECE workforce](#) were already dire:⁵
 - Early educators were experiencing poverty at very high rates, with poverty rates an average of 7.7 times higher than teachers in the K-8 system.
 - Even early educators holding a bachelor's degree were paid less than elementary school teachers in every state.
 - Many early educators reported being in economic distress. For example, 81% of those surveyed in one Florida county worried about having enough to pay their family's monthly bills and 78% worried about paying housing costs.
- Given the harsh economic conditions, it's not surprising that we've lost more than 9% of the child care workforce over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. For up-to-date information, [visit our website tracking job shortages in early care and education](#).⁶

Get specific data about wages, poverty rates, and more from CSCCE's 2020 Early Childhood Workforce Index State Explorer⁷

3. Education and Training

Early educators are lifelong learners who routinely participate in formal and informal learning. They spend a tremendous amount of energy and resources participating in education and training and hone their skills in the course of their daily work with children. Early educators are often defined as “non-traditional,” since many are first-generation college students, parents, full-time employees or small business owners, and/or dual language learners.



- About 75% of early educators have attended college.
 - Among center-based teaching staff, 30% have earned a bachelor's degree or higher, and 18% have earned an associate degree.
 - Among home-based providers, 19% have earned a bachelor's degree or higher and 20% have earned an associate degree.⁸
- When early educators have access to resources and are given adequate time, they can be even more successful in earning college degrees than “traditional” students. Yet, higher education systems are often not designed to help the ECE workforce be successful.
 - Faculty do not reflect the racial, ethnic, and professional diversity of the workforce.
 - The cost is out of reach or saddles early educators with student debt, especially given their low pay.
- Early childhood higher education programs need resources and strategies to diversify faculty pipelines to recruit faculty members of color and those with experience as early educators, including experience in centers and family child care settings and with infants and toddlers.

Solutions

Additional resources and conditions proven to support early educators' success in education and training are needed:

- Financial resources/scholarships;
- Alternative class schedules and arrangements (classes offered in multiple languages, the option to take online classes, courses in community-based locations);
- Academic counseling and tutoring specific to early educators;
- Cohort models in which a group progresses together;
- Adequate time, not arbitrary deadlines, to meet new and increased qualifications; and
- Professional development that translates into college credits, especially when training is required by local, state, and/or federal agencies.

As states change the requirements for teaching young children, it's important to create multiple options so early educators can maintain their employment and have their practical experience and training recognized. Options may include:

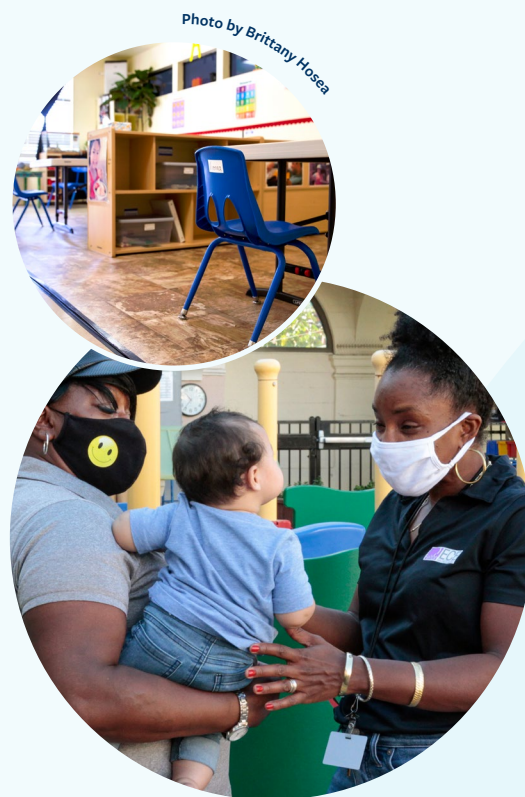
- Creating a methodology to account for experience and multiple forms of education and training already completed; and
- Developing different requirements for existing early educators that are separate from the requirements for those who join the workforce after the establishment of new rules.

4. Working Conditions

The [work environments](#) of early educators matter.⁹ Children depend on educators who are not only skilled, but who also have their well-being and needs supported. Like any other professional, they need benefits that include paid sick leave and vacation, access to retirement savings, and adequate time and staffing to do their jobs. Yet, the current ECE system undermines educators' humanity and dignity by preventing them from accessing these basic necessities.



- The reality is that most programs are severely under-resourced. Surveys of the ECE workforce throughout the country show that too many educators face insufficient teaching supports, which impacts program quality and hinders their ability to apply their practice. For example:
- 45% of teaching staff surveyed in California reported that they did not have or could not depend on planning time during their paid work hours when they were not responsible for children.
 - 70% of early educators surveyed in Minnesota reported there was not enough staff to provide children with individual attention.
- Quality improvement initiatives have mostly ignored the working conditions of educators. The majority of states do not include quality standards provided to educators in their definitions of quality. For example, only [16 states](#) include paid planning or preparation time as an indicator in their quality rating and improvement systems.¹⁰



Solutions

Change is needed:

- Workplace standards should be established in definitions of quality—such as guidance on appropriate levels of paid planning time, sufficient staffing, and materials and resources for staff—and included in funding formulas and quality improvement funding.
- More than two decades ago, early educators in centers and home-based programs led an effort to articulate standards for their work environments to support their teaching practice. These **Model Work Standards** for Centers and Homes have recently been updated and continue to provide a vision for ensuring the needs of educators are met.¹¹

5. Public Funding

Early care and education services are a public good, but they are delivered mostly in a private market in which parents are expected to pay the full cost of services. Imagine if parents had to individually pay for second grade or if second grade teachers' wages were determined by what parents could manage to pay. This is how most early care and education operates in the United States, and it has failed children, their families, and early educators.

- Most programs are unable to charge for the [true costs of services](#) and have to rely on what parents can afford. Educators end up subsidizing the system with their low wages, and as a result, 98% of other occupations in this country are paid more.¹²



Solutions

In addition to providing emergency funding, the federal pandemic relief programs have shown how government funding can be used effectively across the sector in public programs (like Head Start or pre-K) and those receiving child care subsidies. More than half of the states in the nation have used **federal relief** funds to intentionally support wages and the recruitment and retention of educators.¹³

- Providing economic dignity to educators in center- and home-based programs starts with funding wage and benefit standards that: set a wage floor at the locally assessed living wage; account for job role, experience, and education levels; and reach parity with similarly qualified elementary school teachers.
- States and localities have the power to create policies and revenue sources to adequately fund ECE services as a public good. Parents cannot afford to pay more, and educators cannot afford to work under the current conditions.



For your state's estimated costs of a system that values the ECE workforce, see the CSCCE report [Financing Early Educator Quality](#)¹⁴

6. Disparities Within the Workforce

The early educator workforce is racially and linguistically diverse, but that diversity is not distributed equitably across positions within the field. Women of color are overrepresented in the lowest-paying jobs, underrepresented in leadership roles, and frequently paid unequal wages for equal work.



- Disparities exist within the ECE workforce based on race and the age group of children taught. Black women and educators working exclusively with infants and toddlers face the greatest economic hardships; they are systematically paid the lowest wages.¹⁵
- Among center-based teachers, those working full-time exclusively with infants and toddlers are paid up to \$8,375 less per year than those who work with preschool-age children. This pay penalty persists at every level of education. Even teachers with bachelor's or graduate degrees make less when working with infants and toddlers, in comparison to those who work with preschool-age children.
 - Black educators in the workforce are disproportionately affected by this wage penalty for teaching younger children as they are more likely to work with infants and toddlers than their peers; 52% of Black teachers work with infants and toddlers compared to 43% of early educators in general.
 - Black educators are paid, on average, \$0.78 less per hour than White early educators. This gap widens for Black educators who work with preschool-age children; they are paid \$1.71 less per hour compared to their White peers who teach preschool-age children.

Solutions

Facilitating racial justice must be a key component of any ECE policy. Targeted funding and structural change are needed to end the racial and ethnic disparities experienced by members of this workforce.

- Any program that receives public funding to provide ECE services should be required and funded to adhere to wage standards.
- Policymakers and state and local administrators need data to understand and respond to information about who is benefiting from and who is excluded or harmed by specific policies.
 - Collecting data from all, not just some, members and parts of the ECE system is essential. Data collection would help policymakers and other stakeholders understand the conditions of early educators and the impact of policies.
 - When inequities are identified, important questions to answer include: “How are decision-making processes centering the experiences of those most oppressed?” and “Is the group most impacted by a policy missing from the space where decisions are being made?”
- Building a body of current data about racial and ethnic communities that are underrepresented in ECE workforce datasets is essential, including for Asian and Native American educators, broken down by ethnicity and tribal affiliation. Collecting stories directly from early educators is an important source of data and recognizes that people are far more than their demographics.

7. Workforce Data System

The absence of a good ECE data system allows anecdote and bias to drive policy decisions. Lack of a consistent and high-quality data system on the ECE sector is indicative of the devaluing of this workforce. The development of a well-funded, robust workforce data system is an important step to identify and remedy the disparities and inequities faced by early educators.



- A good workforce data system requires a comprehensive plan and adequate funding to:
- Include all members of the ECE workforce employed in schools and center- and home-based child care settings;
 - Collect quantitative and qualitative data from early educators;
 - Be comprehensive enough to identify disparities in such areas as compensation and educational attainment;
 - Analyze and disseminate data and reports on the economic status and well-being of the ECE workforce; and
 - Assess the impact of policy and funding decisions on early educators.



8. Teacher Power

Early educators are influential when they use their collective power to advance public policies that support their professional well-being and effectiveness.



- Early educators have a rich [history](#) of organizing and building collective power.¹⁶ One great example is the [Worthy Wage Campaign](#), a grassroots effort to empower and mobilize educators to reverse the child care staffing crisis in the 1990s.¹⁷ It was organized around [the following three objectives](#):¹⁸
- To create a unified voice for the concerns of the ECE workforce at the national, state, and local levels;
 - To increase the value and respect for those who provide early care and education through improving their wages, benefits, working conditions, and training opportunities; and
 - To promote the accessibility and affordability of high-quality early care and education options that meet the diverse needs of children and families.
- The legacy of teacher power continues today.
- In the summer of 2021 in Washington, D.C., efforts by the Under 3 DC Coalition ([under3dc.org](#)), a coalition of parents, early educators, advocates, community-based organizations, and health professionals, led to a [public investment of \\$75 million](#) that the city will use to publicly fund increases in early educator pay by at least \$10,000 per year, per educator.¹⁹
 - In 2022, the North Carolina Early Education Coalition ([ncearlyeducationcoalition.org](#)) convened the first of three annual Early Educator Advocacy Academy cohorts for 100 early childhood educators throughout the state. Participants in the Advocacy Academy receive memberships to professional organizations, a \$150 stipend for their time, as well as training that provides context around the inequities and systemic racism that exists in the United States and advocacy training.

Solutions

These examples of activism show the influence and importance of early educators coming together to advocate on their own behalf. To facilitate organizing and the building of collective power, early educators need:

- Supportive, safe spaces to share their experiences, collaborate, and build alliances with one another;
- Resources in the form of data about the ECE sector and guidance on advocacy and organizing;
- Access to policymaking spaces to ensure that their perspectives are prioritized in the decisions being made that impact the ECE sector and workforce; and
- Compensation for their contributions and participation in activities like trainings and workgroups.

Explore the [ECHOES website \(cscce.berkeley.edu/projects/echoes\)](#), a CSCCE project that connects ECE today with its history and activism

9. Next Steps

Early educators themselves are central to helping policy leaders and stakeholders understand the problems of the early care and education system and identify workable solutions. There is a pressing need to center the ECE workforce in discussions on policy responses to the child care crisis that is happening now at all levels of government. The information shared in this toolkit could be used in a variety of ways, including:

- In group settings of early educators as a way to build shared understanding and alliances;
- In conversations with advocacy organizations to identify the needs and desires of the ECE workforce; and
- In policymaking spaces (city council meetings, state meetings, etc.) to support personal narratives and anecdotal experiences with the hopes of pushing for systemic solutions in early care and education and social justice for early educators.



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Notes

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About CSCCE

The Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (CSCCE) has been the national leader in early care and education workforce research and policy since 1999. CSCCE provides research and analysis on the preparation, working conditions, and compensation of the early care and education workforce. We develop policy solutions and create spaces for teaching, learning, and educator activism. Our vision is an effective public early care and education system that secures racial, gender, and economic justice for the women whose labor is the linchpin of stable, quality services.

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