

Preparing and Supporting Early Childhood Educators

FACT SHEET

Why does educator preparation and support matter in early childhood education?

Decades of research show that children's experiences from birth through age 5 provide a foundation for long-term learning, health, and well-being. High-quality early childhood education (ECE) can improve school readiness and lead to long-term benefits, including lower rates of special education placement and higher graduation rates.

Research also finds that preschool programs generate positive returns on investment, with [studies](#) estimating returns ranging from approximately \$2 to \$17 per dollar invested. The quality of these early learning experiences depends on whether educators are prepared to support diverse young learners.

Early childhood educators [need](#) specialized knowledge and skills to support children's physical, social-emotional, cognitive, and academic development. They must be able to support learning in language, literacy, and math; create engaging and developmentally grounded learning environments; and build responsive relationships with children and families.

Despite growing [state investments](#) in publicly funded preschool, workforce investments are inconsistent. Preparation requirements for early educators remain uneven across states, and access to high-quality preparation programs is often limited. Professional learning opportunities (e.g., coaching and mentoring) are not available to all educators. Finally, compensation is low, with many educators earning less than a livable wage.

What strategies help recruit and retain early childhood educators?

[Research](#) shows that building and sustaining a strong ECE workforce requires investments in educator preparation, compensation, and ongoing professional support. Strategies to recruit and retain a well-qualified ECE workforce include:

- **High-quality preparation and training.** Strong preparation programs build the knowledge and skills educators need to support young children's learning and development. Effective pathways often include affordable, accessible coursework, supervised clinical experiences, and financial support, such as scholarships and loan forgiveness. For educators already in the field, job-embedded learning opportunities such as apprenticeships can help them build skills while working.
- **Competitive compensation.** Low wages create significant barriers to entering and remaining in the profession and fail to reward educators who pursue higher education. Given that the current workforce is already dramatically [undercompensated](#) for their job demands, increased pay and benefits are critical components to supporting educator quality and improving [retention](#).
- **Ongoing professional learning and support.** Early educators benefit from mentoring, induction supports, coaching, opportunities for collaboration, professional growth, and career advancement opportunities. These supports can help improve workplace conditions, job satisfaction, and instructional practice, ultimately helping educators remain in the profession.

How are states strengthening the early childhood workforce?

States across the country are strengthening the early childhood workforce by expanding access to specialized training, improving preparation systems, and supporting aspiring educators as they enter and remain in the profession. Examples include:

- **Alabama**, which [requires](#) that state-funded preschool teachers receive salaries commensurate with their K–12 peers, as well as paid time for professional development. A robust statewide [coaching](#) model deploys coaches regionally to provide teachers with differentiated supports.
- **Louisiana**, which developed a [PreK–3rd grade teaching credential](#) that includes a full-year clinical experience supported by a stipend.
- **New Jersey**, which requires state-funded preschool teachers to hold a bachelor’s degree and a specialized early childhood credential. The state [created](#) multiple pathways to an early childhood credential, offering state-funded scholarships and stipends. The state requires that preschool teachers in schools and community-based coaching receive regular coaching and pay parity with K–12 teachers.
- **Washington**, which has a [statewide coaching system](#) for all early learning programs that receive public funds through the state’s quality rating and improvement system. The University of Washington supports the system’s coaches to be effective teacher mentors.

What policy strategies can strengthen the early childhood workforce?

[Research](#) points to several policy strategies that can help states build and sustain a strong early childhood workforce. Policymakers can:

- **Ensure early educators receive ongoing support to offer and sustain quality learning environments.** This should include [job-embedded coaching](#) and [professional development](#), as well as paid planning time.
- **Expand access to high-quality teacher preparation for early educators.** States can help preparation programs to expand access through grants, flexible course schedules, hybrid and online options, and strong advising and mentorship systems. Since many ECE students complete their initial college coursework at community colleges, states can facilitate transfer agreements between 2- and 4-year colleges. Policymakers can also provide financial support for early educators’ higher education, including tuition, books, and student fees.
- **Provide funding to help providers retain qualified staff with compensation commensurate with their education and experience.** Because ECE educators are often [paid](#) less than half the wages of their K–12 counterparts, it can be hard for programs to recruit and retain early educators, and the high cost of preparation is a barrier for early educators pursuing degrees and credentials. States can require pay parity with K–12 staff for state preschool educators, including in non-school-based settings, as New Jersey and Alabama have done.
- **Set clear, high expectations across early learning settings.** Most states have an early childhood credential, but minimum preparation requirements in many states are low and inconsistent across program types. States without an early childhood–specific teaching credential aligned to preparation standards could develop one to advance both the coherence of preservice preparation and the professionalization of the field. Compensation increases must accompany any new qualification requirements, or taxpayers will be filling a leaky bucket, as trained educators leave for higher-paying jobs.

Learn more

See [Coaching at Scale: A Strategy for Strengthening the Early Learning Workforce](#) for case studies of Alabama, Washington, and three California county coaching systems; [Preparing Early Childhood Teachers: Credentialing and Preparation Programs in Four States](#), for more on Louisiana, Massachusetts, New Jersey, and New York; or visit the full library of [LPI’s early childhood education research](#).