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## Why Major Funders Are Teaming Up to Support Early Childhood Educators

Connie Matthiessen



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Evidence of the benefits of quality early childhood education keeps piling up, including downstream benefits that would more than cover the cost of the investment. It's now so compelling that one wonders why we don't just make early education universally available and be done with it.

Of course, we all know why. Complex policy changes seldom happen quickly or neatly, and there are many hurdles—from the economic and political to the logistical and practical—that make a rapid reform of that scope unlikely. But we may be getting closer, and several private funders are among the players trying to make it happen.

Support for early childhood education (ECE) has been growing steadily in recent years and gained momentum during the pandemic, when it became starkly clear that access to quality child care is an essential resource—and one that is not fairly distributed. This growing consensus is also reflected in the agenda of the Biden administration, which made childcare a major element of its comprehensive recovery initiatives, as [IP previously explored](#).

The latest big push from philanthropists comes in the form of a coalition focusing on one of the thorniest aspects of early childhood education: how to create an educator workforce that is diverse, professionally trained and mentored, and fairly paid. Eight funders already working in the early education space teamed up to create the [Early Educator Investment Collaborative](#). Partners include familiar names like the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Buffett Early Childhood Fund, the Ballmer Group, the David &

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Lucile Packard Foundation, and the Heising-Simons Foundation (see entire list of [partners here](#)).

The collaborative recently [unveiled](#) \$10.4 million in grants to support early educator programs working to transform access, training and compensation.

### **Insufficient education, unjust compensation**

Quality education in the earliest years has been shown to produce countless downstream [benefits](#), from bolstering school readiness and improving high school graduation rates to boosting wages once graduates join the workforce. Economist James Heckman’s [research](#) demonstrates that ECE disrupts the cycle of poverty and strengthens families. Beyond the human benefits, he calculates that early education has a 13% return on investment—making it economically practical, too.

Yet as a country, we continue to treat early childhood education as an option for those who can afford it, versus an essential resource that benefits everyone. As a result, early childhood educators continue to face inconsistent education requirements, spotty professional training, and low wages.

According to a [comprehensive 2015 report](#) by the Institute of Medicine and National Research Council: “Despite their shared objective of nurturing and securing the future success of young children, these [early childhood educators] are not acknowledged as a cohesive workforce, unified by their shared contributions and the common knowledge base and competencies needed to do their jobs well. They work in disparate systems, and the expectations and requirements for their preparation and credentials

have not kept pace with what the science of child development and early learning indicates children need.”

That report helped spur the formation of the Early Educator Investment Collaborative, according to Rebecca Gomez, program officer at Heising-Simons Foundation and co-chair of the collaborative. Heising-Simons is the philanthropy of investor Mark Heising and Liz Simons, a former teacher who is an heir to billionaire investor Jim Simons. One of the foundation’s core programs funds early childhood education. Other key partners include the [Buffett Early Childhood Fund](#), created by Susan Buffett, billionaire Warren Buffett’s daughter. The [Ballmer Group](#) promotes economic mobility for children and families, a priority for Steve Ballmer and his wife, Connie. The [Stranahan Foundation](#) isn’t a household name like many other collaborative members, but it’s a committed supporter of ECE, as IP has [reported](#), along with a variety of other causes, including K-12 education, mental health, and the arts.

“As funders, we came to the realization that we needed durable policy change, and that impacting revenue and finance issues over time was not something any one foundation could do,” Gomez said. “We realized we needed to make a collective investment to leverage funds and develop a broad national view on how to support the field going forward. We also thought it was important from a symbolic point of view to focus as a group on the issues impacting the ECE workforce: Compensation is unjust and education is insufficient. We wanted to show that we are united in this, we are stronger together, and we are in this for the long term.”

## “We are not babysitters”

The collaborative’s first project was an [analysis](#) of early educator preparation programs and requirements around the country. Then, after the pandemic hit, the group distributed [COVID-19 response grants](#) to mitigate the devastating impact on the ECE workforce.

The collaborative directed its [current round of grants](#) to innovative teacher preparation programs around the country. The six grantees include colleges and universities that are working with state or tribal nation partners to craft more accessible, diverse and effective programs to prepare early educators. The goal: “to elevate the early care and education (ECE) workforce, break down systemic barriers in higher education for early educator students of color, and promote professional compensation for a workforce frequently paid unjust wages.”

One grantee, Georgia State University, will use the funding to underwrite its newly launched [Project SEED](#), a program for early educators already working in the field. The program will provide full tuition scholarships, stipends and mentorships for students working toward a four-year early education degree.

According to Tonia Durden, Georgia State clinical associate professor and the coordinator of the college’s Birth Through Five program, many early educators want more training but can’t afford to give up their paychecks or cover tuition. Project SEED is designed to overcome such barriers: Classes are held in the evenings, and scholarships and stipends minimize the cost. Project SEED participants are recruited from partner organizations, including early learning

programs at the Atlanta public schools and the YMCA, and the Technical College System of Georgia.

“A four-year degree is absolutely critical for early educators,” said Durden, who was trained as an early educator herself. “We are not babysitters or caregivers—we are professionals. There is still a perception that early education is just childcare, even though we now know how much science and learning are required to take care of even the smallest infant. We have data that shows the gains in academic and SEL [social emotional learning] outcomes for children who have had a high-quality teacher. There are important skills that every early educator needs to develop; it’s not just about, ‘I love children.’”

### **Backbone of the economy**

Ola Friday, the collaborative’s executive director, pointed to Project SEED’s comprehensive mentorship program as one of the reasons it was selected as a grantee. GSU is also a minority-serving institution, which was another priority for the collaborative in its selection process, and the staff of GSU’s Birth Through Five program is racially diverse.

“We were looking for teams of applicants that mirrored the demographics of the educators they are training and the children those educators are teaching,” the collaborative’s Gomez said.

Building a more diverse early educator workforce is also a Project SEED priority, and all the participants are ethnically and/or linguistically diverse. “Sixty-five percent of early educators are white,” Durden said. “That does not match the student demographics,

especially here in Atlanta, where 50-plus percent of the students are ethnically diverse, and in many places, the percentage is as high as 100%.”

**Research** also shows that early educators of color are paid less than their white counterparts in an already deplorably compensated field. Strategies to increase pay for early educators is an issue that the collaborative will target more specifically in its upcoming work, and Friday acknowledges compensation as a barrier to improving and broadening access to ECE. “The issue of compensation is now front and center,” she said. “We have to be in the business of solving it.”

Will the U.S. commitment to early childhood education catch up with the science demonstrating its value? Friday sees its inclusion in the Biden administration’s infrastructure package as a good sign: “Childcare is an essential part of the package—it was included along with broadband access, roads and bridges,” she said. “Early childhood education is being lifted up as the backbone of the economy, of how our country operates. That signals a real change.”

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