

A Decade of Change: Progress and Possibility in
Early Childhood Workforce and Finance



**STAYING COMMITTED:
How State Policymakers Are Shifting
Priorities to Support Early Childhood
Education and the Workforce**

INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES

The Early Educator Investment Collaborative (The Collaborative) is a coalition of national funders committed to transforming the early childhood education (ECE) profession. Our goal is to help all early educators achieve their full potential as professionals so that every child is prepared for success in school and in life.

Grounded in the landmark 2015 report *Transforming the workforce for children birth through age 8: A unifying foundation* and the 2018 report *Transforming the Financing of Early Care and Education*, The Collaborative works to address systemic issues in the field by advancing pay equity, strengthening and professionalizing the ECE workforce, aligning early childhood and K–12 systems, and supporting a well-funded system that serves all children—not just those whose families can afford to pay.

Marking the 10-year anniversary of *Transforming the Workforce*, this series of reflection papers invites the field to look back on the progress and lessons of the past decade and to consider what is needed for the decade ahead. Developed in partnership with national organizations, the series elevates diverse perspectives and sparks dialogue to inspire collective action toward a stronger, more sustainable early childhood system.



The perspectives shared in these papers are those of the individual authors. They do not necessarily represent the views of The Early Educator Investment Collaborative, which shares them to elevate diverse voices and spark dialogue across the field.

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FROM LANDMARK REPORTS TO TODAY

The historic and seminal reports *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation* and *Transforming the Financing of Early Care and Education* recognized and clarified the important roles of state boards of education (SBEs) in supporting the early childhood education workforce.

The National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE), as the sole organization that supports state boards of education, seized the opportunity to join the cause of advancing the early childhood education (ECE) workforce.

Over the past 10 years, NASBE has used a variety of strategies to inform state board of education members about the critical role of the ECE workforce and the importance of revisiting state policies to better support the development of that workforce. These efforts have included research, webinars, study groups and work groups, policy reports and briefs, convenings, and numerous conference sessions.

When the *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8* report was released in 2015, the National Academies committee strategically engaged NASBE in a series of stakeholder discussions and convenings. These gatherings brought partners together to clarify roles and explore opportunities for collaboration. The experience significantly strengthened NASBE's staff capacity, fostered key relationships, and deepened cross-sector collaboration, which laid a strong foundation for the next decade of state board efforts to support the early childhood education workforce.

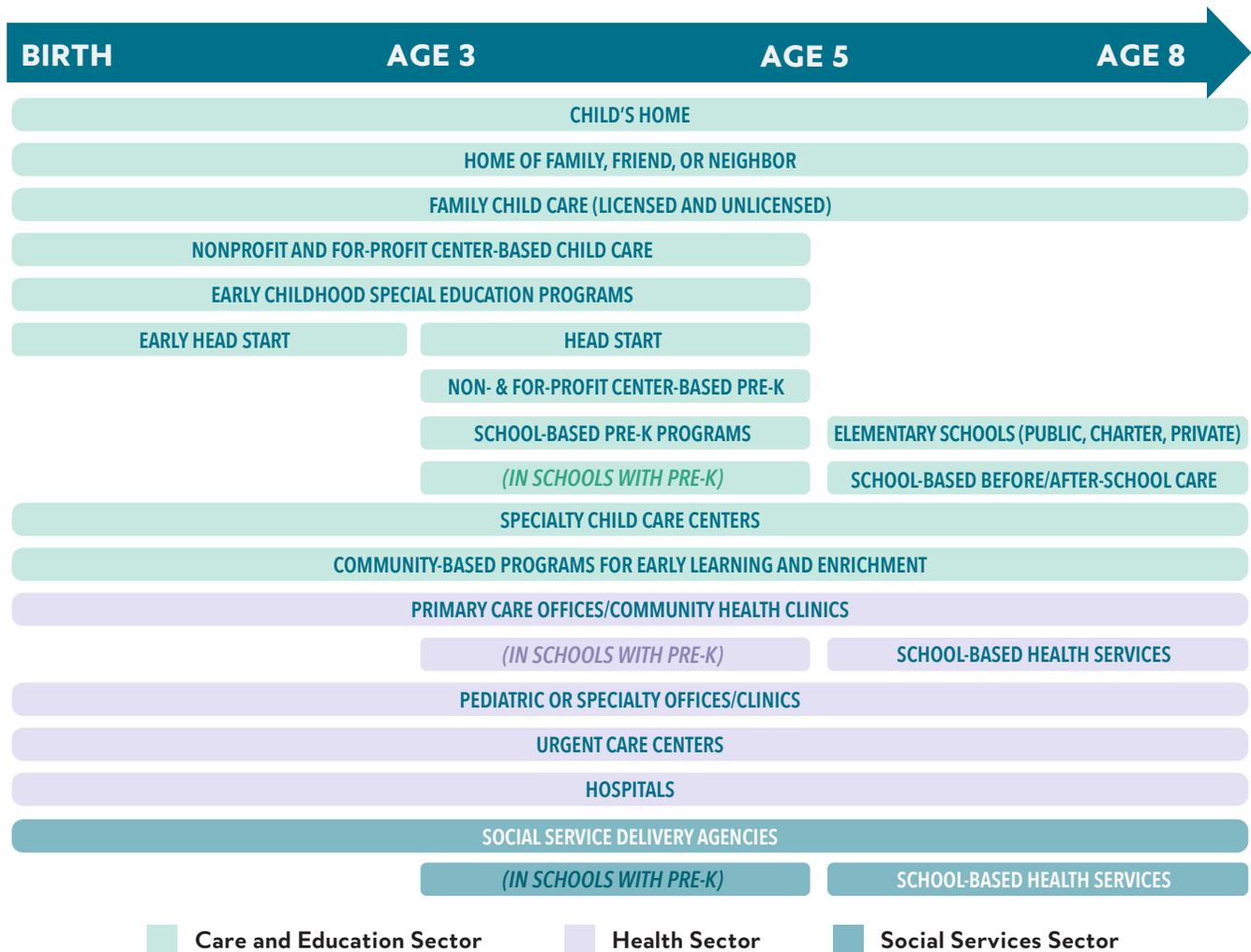


OUR COMMITMENT IN ACTION

NASBE's ECE work has been deeply influenced by the *Transforming the Workforce* and *Financing Early Care and Education* reports. Over the past decade, NASBE has remained committed to supporting state boards of education in understanding and acting on their responsibilities related to the ECE workforce. This work has been made possible through generous philanthropic support, which has enabled NASBE to elevate workforce issues and provide critical resources to state leaders.

Deepening the Understanding of ECE Settings

The *Transforming the Workforce* report gives a good clear overview of the complex system, which has been very helpful for policymakers to understand the different tiers and layers of the system.



Source: *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation*

NASBE staff used this graphic as a foundation to illustrate the role state boards of education can play and to show how various sectors and age-group transitions are interconnected.

The report redefined early childhood education by expanding the age range, from birth–5 to birth–8. By including the K–3 school years, the report broadened the scope of early learning and strengthened the responsibilities of state boards of education. This shift presented state boards with clear and powerful opportunities to take action on behalf of our nation’s youngest learners.

Shifting Mindsets to Garner Bipartisan Support

It has taken years of sustained effort and research-driven leadership for ECE to become a truly bipartisan issue. In 2025, 25 governors identified ECE as a priority in their State of the State addresses, reflecting growing recognition across party lines.¹ More than 12 state boards of education now include state-funded Pre-K in their strategic plans.² When it comes to early literacy and third-grade reading, that number climbs to 22 states, including both red and blue states, demonstrating broad, bipartisan commitment.³ This level of attention marks a significant shift from 2015, when ECE was far less prominent in state policy agendas.

When we first launched the NASBE project Supporting ECE Workforce Through Effective State Policies, ECE was not a priority in many states, and the rollout proved to be extremely challenging. In 2016, NASBE introduced a highly effective state network model to recruit the first cohort of states to focus specifically on ECE workforce policies, guided by the recommendations in the *Transforming the Workforce* report. The recruitment process was lengthy and required multiple rounds of negotiation, as we worked to convince state leaders that shifting their focus to ECE was both a strategic and timely investment. Ultimately, forming a network offered states a valuable opportunity to collaborate, build capacity, and strengthen their efforts to support the early learning workforce.

In the early phase of this work, NASBE staff actively sought out opportunities to share policy recommendations from the *Transforming the Workforce* report and raise awareness among state policymakers. We partnered closely with national organizations and contributed to broader field-building efforts, including participating in the Power to the Profession campaign led by NAEYC. Over the past decade, these efforts have helped grow the NASBE Early Childhood Education State Network into a community of 14 state teams, including the District of Columbia and Guam. This growth reflects a significant shift in how states view early childhood education as a top policy priority. Today, both ECE and its workforce remain strong bipartisan issues that have gained remarkable momentum over the past 10 years and continue to drive forward progress.



Addressing Key Report Recommendations

Among the report's many recommendations, those that have most resonated with state boards of education include improving qualifications and licensure standards, strengthening teacher preparation programs, expanding access to high-quality professional development, and addressing compensation and sustainable financing. These priorities have helped guide state policy conversations and drive more coherent, long-term strategies to support the early learning workforce. The recommendations informed NASBE's comprehensive research about state board authorities across 50 states:⁴

- **Teacher qualifications and licensure.** Thirty-two SBEs have authority over Pre-K–12 teacher licensure. Twenty-three states require bachelor's degrees for lead teachers in all their state programs. Outside state Pre-K systems, however, no state requires bachelor's degrees in early education settings, and only 11 require a Child Development Associate credential or vocational training. Most states require only a high school diploma, some training, or nothing at all.

- **Teacher preparation programs.** Twenty-eight SBEs have sole authority over preparation programs.
- **Professional development.** SBEs oversee teacher professional development programs in 15 states. Although professional development is crucial for teacher growth, very few paid professional developments are available for this workforce, especially for teachers in center and family care settings. States can examine the needs for professional development in different settings and allocate funding to provide job-embedded training. By providing such incentives, the early learning system could progress toward higher qualifications for teachers.
- **Financing and compensation.** In 31 states, SBEs maintain some degree of authority over funding and allocations for K–12 schoolchildren, whether it is manifested in the form of grants or budgetary approvals. Based on the 2025 data, 43% of the workforce is enrolled in public support programs and relies on a median wage of \$13.07 per hour. The low pay doesn't reflect the important role these educators play in the United States.⁵

These data served as a foundational lever for SBE members to elevate early childhood workforce development as a statewide priority and promote informed policy action.

BUILDING MOMENTUM TOWARD THE FUTURE

NASBE launched its **Early Childhood Education State Network** in 2017 to help state boards of education strengthen early learning systems and the early childhood workforce. The network began with a small group of pilot states, engaging in research, stakeholder engagement, and policy development to address issues such as educator preparation, career pathways, and professional development. These early efforts demonstrated the value of a collaborative space for state boards to share strategies and advance coherent birth-through-third-grade systems.

Over time, the network expanded to include a diverse mix of states and territories: California, Delaware, Illinois, Iowa, Michigan, Mississippi, Nebraska, New York, North Carolina, Washington, Guam, and the District of Columbia. Each member designs and tests policy solutions to improve ECE quality, workforce supports, and access. In 2025, Hawai'i and Maryland joined the network, bringing the total to 14 members. These new members are pursuing innovative approaches, such as expanding educator apprenticeships and strengthening governance structures that add fresh perspectives to the group's collective learning.



Today, NASBE's Early Childhood Education State Network serves as a hub for peer learning, cross-state collaboration, and systems-level innovation. The network continues to grow as more state boards recognize the importance of elevating the early childhood profession and ensuring equitable access to high-quality early learning opportunities for all children.

Below are some state examples of state board actions.

Teacher Qualifications and Licensure

The *Transforming the Workforce* report examined the existing qualifications and requirements for the ECE workforce and suggested that all lead teachers of children from birth through age 8 have at least a bachelor's degree. Yet fewer than half of educators working with children ages 3 to 5 in center-based settings and only 19 percent of those working with infants and toddlers have bachelor's degrees.⁶ Critics argued that obtaining a college degree is expensive and time-consuming and may not improve teaching skills, even as these critics recognize the problems of abysmal wages and ECE teachers who quit for better-paying K-12 jobs once they do attain a degree.⁷ However, keeping the bar low for the ECE workforce only reinforces the notion that ECE teachers' main duties are giving hugs and kisses, wiping noses, and changing diapers, for which a college degree is not required. If in fact the early years are the most critical for learning and skill building, as research suggests, then this notion is worth challenging.



Another recommendation from the report concerns licensure stratification. States also need to reconsider the stratification of their licenses, because teaching young children requires a skill set different from that for teaching older children. Broad licenses, such as K-5 or K-6 teaching licenses, may offer more flexibility for teacher placement but hinder the development of teacher preparation programs that train graduates for early learning grades.

States in the NASBE ECE State Network took a deep dive into workforce policy by closely examining their existing core competencies and teacher licensure structures to assess alignment with national recommendations. As a result, several states enacted significant policy changes to better support a qualified and well-prepared early childhood workforce.

As a member of NASBE's ECE State Network and with support from NASBE, **Michigan** began statewide discussions on elementary school licensure in 2016 by establishing a communication strategy to further its ECE workforce project and its licensure restructuring process. An NASBE leadership group met regularly to guide the NASBE project and coordinate various efforts involving the ECE workforce, and it set a

foundation by adopting common definitions and language. The leadership group comprised staff across offices within the Michigan Department of Education and key external stakeholders, such as business leaders, higher education faculty, and advocacy group leaders. Another group of Michigan educators and experts from higher education started working on the certification structure early in 2016. Through multiple surveys, studies, and convenings, the leadership group made a recommendation to add Pre-K–3 and grade 3–6 licenses, with some exceptions for small and rural schools where teacher shortages are a huge issue.

Meanwhile, teams of experts began writing teacher preparation standards around the new bands, which additional experts reviewed. In addition, department staff have been meeting with deans of teacher education programs and with faculty to update them on the process and to get feedback.

This change reflects deepened interest in the education community in the transition to kindergarten, and the Pre-K–3 band connects the typically disparate fields of early childhood and early elementary education.

In November 2018, the Michigan State Board of Education approved new teacher preparation standards that bifurcated an old certification for K–5 into two: one for lower elementary (Pre-K–3) and another for upper elementary (grades 3–6).⁸

In a similar fashion, in 2021, Michigan added a birth–K certificate that aligns with classroom needs for the youngest learners and helps to professionalize the early learning workforce. Michigan’s birth–K grade band signals that early childhood educators are vital to a birth–12 educational system that supports young children through their schooling and ensures that preparation programs focus on specialized skills necessary for reaching this age group.⁹

In 2022, the California State Board of Education played a central role in collaborating with the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing to develop and adopt the state’s first PK-3 Early Childhood Education Specialist Instruction Credential. The Commission approved the required regulations in August 2022, and the Office of Administrative Law finalized them in February 2024. This new credential authorizes educators to teach in self-contained classrooms from prekindergarten through third grade, including transitional kindergarten. It is a key part of California’s strategy to expand the early childhood workforce and meet the state’s goal of offering universal transitional kindergarten and preschool by the 2025–2026 school year.

Because the credential currently does not have its own salary schedule, the State Board of Education approved stipends to help the existing workforce transition. These stipends support educators—such as Child Development Permit holders and Multiple Subject Credential holders—in accessing professional development and degree programs needed to meet the new requirements. This action illustrates the unique role of SBEs in advancing workforce policy: setting standards, aligning them with long-term education goals, and providing the supports necessary for successful implementation.¹⁰



Teacher Preparation Programs

The *Transforming the Workforce* report did an extensive examination of the teacher preparation programs for the ECE workforce and suggested that most teacher preparation programs do not require students to study early language and literacy, despite the evidence of deficits in these skills among children living in poverty.

These programs are also lacking in other foundational areas, such as math and science. Furthermore, few courses focus on topics in diversity, such as working with dual language learners and understanding the race and culture of young learners. In designing their programs, institutions of higher education usually take their cue from state licensure stratifications. Too often, the wider the grade span a teacher license covers, the less the training for teaching the lower grades. Preparation programs tend to focus on topics more appropriate for teaching older children, with the result that many educators have poor training and coursework in early learning pedagogy and practices.

Some SBEs with authority over education preparation have taken a close look at reading instruction preparation and have held programs accountable. The **Colorado** State Board of Education in 2022 declined to grant full approval for the University of Colorado Denver's teacher preparation program because of deficiencies in reading instruction. The State Board granted partial approval to university programs in elementary education, special education, early childhood education, and literacy specialization. The university then made changes to meet state mandates for the science of reading.

Legislation in **Delaware** requires teacher preparation programs in the state to provide instruction in evidence-based reading instruction beginning July 1, 2023. The legislation requires the Delaware Department of Education to establish a minimum number of hours of training that instructors in educator preparation programs must complete in evidence-based reading instruction. As a result, the state's Professional Standards Board amended its teacher licensure regulations, which the Delaware State Board of Education then approved in 2024.

The **Iowa** State Board of Education oversees all 32 preservice teacher training programs in the state. The Iowa State Board joined the NASBE Network in March 2017 to develop Iowa's early-literacy standard of care, which defines knowledge and pedagogical competencies for teachers who teach K-3. The State Board was involved in the development of an in-service reading coaching project to ensure meaningful participation from Iowa's colleges and universities. The State Board worked with elementary teacher training programs to revise accreditation requirements.

Professional Development

States usually designate the professional development decision to local school districts, so professional development is known as a highly local controlled issue. However, SBEs can play key roles in this area by defining high-quality, effective professional development, encompassing time, frequency, intensity, and content. This definition can serve as a baseline for state and local agencies in promoting effective models, creating a career ladder, and collecting data on the effectiveness of teacher learning activities.



The **Mississippi** State Board of Education joined the NASBE ECE State Network in 2018 with a strong goal to provide high-quality professional development for ECE educators. With the Department of Education staff, the State Board came up with a detailed work plan for implementation. The State Board designed regional training sessions for 300 early childhood administrators (principals and district leaders working with Pre-K students) across the state, focusing on early learning guidelines, early learning standards, executive functioning, Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), and inclusive practices. The sessions were very well-received; the training improved educator competency and offered opportunities to earn continuing education credits needed for program accreditation and license renewal.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, **Michigan** and **Mississippi** reached out to NASBE for specific training for their teaching workforce on trauma-informed instructions for young children and adult self-care in that critical time. NASBE responded with two virtual professional development sessions, one for each state. The Mississippi session helped educators take a deep look within themselves, recognize signs of adverse childhood experiences, and get resources and strategies to support their own personal health and wellness as well as that of students and families during the pandemic. More than 350 educators attended the session, and they also received the credit hours for their certificates.

More than 300 birth–8 educators and leaders participated in the Michigan session, titled “What Is Trauma-Informed Practice, and How Do We Do It Virtually for Children From Birth to Age 8?” The session provided an overview of trauma-informed practice, the need for adult professional personal reflection, and the growth mindset needed to provide trauma-informed practices virtually. These examples show that states can step up to play a very important role in supporting ECE educators.



ECE Financing and Teacher Compensation

The *Transforming the Financing of Early Care and Education* report offered a clear vision for building a sustainable and equitable ECE financing system nationwide. However, financing remains one of the greatest challenges in the field. Despite growing awareness of the importance of early learning, the current political environment, marked by budget constraints, competing priorities, and funding cuts at both the state and federal levels, has made it increasingly difficult to secure the necessary investments. As a result, many states continue to struggle to implement the report’s recommendations, and meaningful, long-term funding solutions remain elusive.

In addition to federal funding, state-funded Pre-K programs rely on general revenues for ECE programs, and about 15 states require a local match. State funding for preschool also may include lottery funds, gaming revenues, sales taxes, and general revenues.¹¹ The *Transforming the Workforce* report referenced

a pay structure: Typically, families pay approximately 52% of the total cost of early care and education, with the public sector contributing 46% and the nonparental private sector funding about 2%.¹²

The good news is that funding for state-funded preschool reached record highs in the 2023–2024 school year. States spent more than \$13.6 billion (including \$257 million in federal COVID-19 relief funding) on preschool, an inflation-adjusted increase of almost \$2 billion (17%).¹³



During the COVID-19 pandemic, the historic federal relief funds gave states opportunities to advocate for investment in efforts to address ECE teacher shortages and retention in particular. Many state policymakers have done so, using the funding to support compensation and benefits, mental health and well-being, and professional development for educators across the birth-to-grade-3 education sector.

As federal relief dollars have been depleted, many states are facing an ECE funding cliff. Policymakers are now grappling with how to maintain support for ECE programs without disrupting services for children and families. Some states, such as Maryland, Vermont, and Virginia, have stepped up by increasing state investments to help stabilize the system and prevent program cuts.

Maryland's Financial Support for Family Child Care Providers

Maryland has significantly increased its financial support for family child care (FCC) providers in recent years, recognizing their essential role in the state's early childhood education system. In fiscal year 2025, the state allocated a combined \$488 million to the Child Care Scholarship Program (CCSP), marking the largest investment in child care in Maryland's history. This funding aims to make child care more affordable for families and supports providers in maintaining quality services.¹⁴

Additionally, the state has implemented targeted initiatives to support FCC providers. For instance, the Growing Family Child Care Opportunities Program addresses challenges such as closures in underserved areas and supports low-income women, many in communities of color, in establishing successful small businesses. These investments reflect Maryland's commitment to strengthening its early childhood education system by supporting the vital work of family child care providers.

While we are celebrating some wins, we can't ignore the fact that states need sustainable, long-term financing strategies, particularly those focused on improving educator compensation. There is a risk that short-term investments will be quickly exhausted, leaving a persistent funding gap and continued instability for the ECE workforce.

SHAPING THE NEXT DECADE

Over the past decade, the *Transforming the Workforce* and *Transforming the Financing* reports have significantly shaped the ECE field, and their influence will continue in the years ahead. These reports have played a critical role in informing state policies and initiatives, helping move the needle on key issues such as workforce development, educator preparation, compensation, and system financing. Through participation in NASBE's ECE State Network and collaboration with national and state experts, SBE members have deepened their understanding of ECE challenges and increased their capacity to lead meaningful change.



As a result, there is now greater awareness among state policymakers about the barriers hindering progress in ECE systems, and many have emerged as champions for advancing high-quality early learning and supporting the workforce. While significant challenges remain, particularly concerning sustainable funding and workforce stability, we remain optimistic. ECE continues to be a rare area that sees bipartisan agreement, and NASBE is committed to supporting state leaders with the latest research, policy guidance, and peer-learning opportunities to promote evidence-based decision-making and long-term system improvement.

Early childhood education is at an important turning point. The decisions made by policymakers and leaders in the coming years will be critical in shaping how accessible, high-quality, and equitable early learning becomes for young children and their families.

STRATEGIES TO DRIVE CHANGE

» **BUILD SUSTAINED BIPARTISAN SUPPORT FOR EARLY EDUCATION.** Early education remains one of the few policy areas in the United States that continues to enjoy broad bipartisan support, offering a powerful opportunity for sustainable investment and reform in the coming decade. State boards of education are committed to serve as champions on this issue. While there are many uncertainties at the federal level, we look forward to seeing more states step up to serve a more important role to support young children and their families, as well as the devoted teaching workforce.

» **ADVANCE WORKFORCE PROFESSIONALIZATION AND CAREER PATHWAYS.** The ECE workforce, long undervalued and underpaid, is finally receiving overdue attention, with more states investing in professionalization, compensation parity, and career pathways to attract and retain qualified educators. Several states have launched initiatives to align early educator compensation with that of K–12 teachers. For example, Washington, DC, implemented a pay equity fund that supplements salaries for early educators, bringing them closer to parity with public school teachers.

Simultaneously, states are developing credentialing systems and registered apprenticeship models that provide structured, supported entry points into the field. The U.S. Department of Labor now recognizes ECE apprenticeships as viable pathways, and states such as Colorado, Michigan, and North Carolina have implemented registered programs that combine job-embedded training with college coursework. Innovations in higher education, such as stackable credentials, credit for prior learning, and articulation agreements between 2- and 4-year institutions, are also reducing barriers to advancement, particularly for working adults and linguistically diverse educators. These are all good signs that policymakers and decision makers have intentions and goals to change the status quo to elevate the workforce and provide economic security for educators.

» **ADDRESS WORKFORCE SHORTAGES AND INSTABILITY.** While there are many encouraging signs of progress, we cannot overlook the most urgent and persistent challenge in early childhood education: severe teacher shortages and high turnover. These issues are driven largely by chronically low wages, limited benefits, and poor working conditions. As a result, turnover rates in the ECE workforce remain among the highest in the education sector, estimated at 30% to 40% annually in some states. Across the country, programs report being forced to close classrooms or turn away families due to a lack of qualified staff, jeopardizing ongoing efforts to expand access and improve program quality. Without meaningful action to stabilize and support the workforce, the gains made in ECE risk being undone in the next decade.



» **STRENGTHEN ECE GOVERNANCE AND SYSTEMIC ALIGNMENT.** In most states, ECE governance is fragmented across multiple agencies, typically departments of education, human services, and health, each overseeing distinct funding streams, regulatory frameworks, and accountability structures. As state policymakers seek to streamline and strengthen ECE systems, three common governance approaches have emerged: consolidating functions within a human services agency, integrating them into a state education department, or creating a new stand-alone early learning office.

While each model has potential, there is no one-size-fits-all solution for redesigning such a complex system. What matters most is not the structure itself but the conditions for success. A stand-alone office, for example, can elevate ECE's visibility, but without a clear strategy for cross-agency communication and coordination, it risks disconnecting early learning from the critical K-12 transition, undermining birth-8 alignment. Similarly, consolidation of ECE functions into a single agency may streamline oversight but can still fall short if it fails to build strong partnerships and engage key stakeholders from other sectors.

As states continue to evolve their governance structures in the next decade, lasting progress will depend on intentional collaboration, transparent communication, and a shared commitment to building an aligned, coherent birth-8 system.

» **INCREASE INVESTMENT IN EARLY CHILDHOOD.** The federal outlook for early childhood education remains uncertain, and recent developments signal significant concern. After years of inadequate funding, the latest federal budget proposal includes another steep cut. The proposed FY 2026 budget for the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), which oversees many key early learning and child care programs, totals \$93.8 billion, reflecting a 26.2% overall reduction. Core programs such as the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG), Head Start, and the Social Services Block Grant (SSBG) are level-funded at FY 2025 levels, offering no adjustment for inflation or growing demand. Alarming, the budget also proposes to eliminate several critical programs, including the Preschool Development Grant Birth-5 (PDG B-5), which helps states coordinate and improve early learning systems; the Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS) program; and the 21st Century Community Learning Centers, which fund afterschool services.

These proposed cuts would reduce the already limited federal support for child care and early learning, creating deeper strain on a fragile system. While it is difficult to predict the final outcome, these developments contrast sharply with the goals outlined in the *Transforming the Financing of Early Care and Education* report. That report sets clear benchmarks: To achieve universal access to high-quality ECE, public investment must rise to approximately \$140 billion annually, or about 0.75% of U.S. GDP. The report also recommends a phased funding approach, increasing federal investment from \$5 billion in Phase 1 to \$53 billion in Phase 4 to support quality improvements. Without meaningful investment at the federal level, the vision laid out in the report remains out of reach, and the needs of children, families, and educators will continue to go unmet.



EXPLORE THE SERIES

This document is part of a series of opinion papers developed to mark the 10-year anniversary of Transforming the workforce for children birth through age 8: A unifying foundation and the subsequent report on financing, Transforming the Financing of Early Care and Education. The series was created to reflect on the impact of these landmark reports, analyze the current state of the early childhood workforce and financing, and amplify diverse perspectives on challenges, progress, and opportunities shaping the field.

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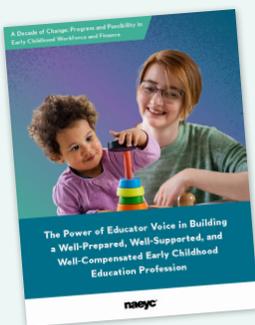


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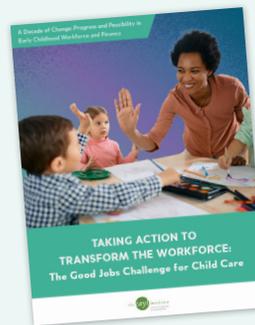
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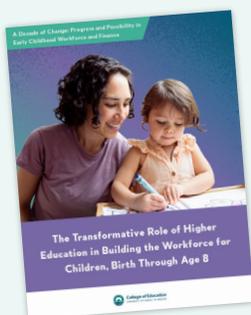
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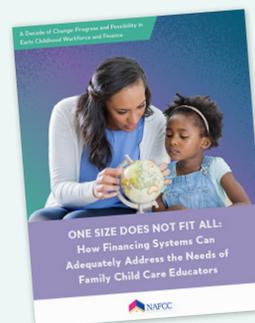
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ENDNOTES

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