

A DECADE OF CHANGE: Progress and Possibility in Early Childhood Workforce and Finance

PAPER & WEBINAR SERIES | OCTOBER–DECEMBER 2025

To transform what's possible for young children, we must transform what's true for early childhood educators. When it comes to quality in early learning, the knowledge, skills, and experiences of early childhood educators are among the strongest drivers of children's outcomes. And yet, despite their essential role, the workforce still faces persistent barriers and a lack of recognition for the vital work they do every day. The undervaluing of the workforce—as reflected in suppressed wages, limited benefits, and challenging working conditions—has largely stemmed from a disjointed and underfunded system. The predictable result is that the supply, quality, and sustainability of early childhood programs are limited, and millions of young children miss out on the kinds of early learning experiences that lead to positive outcomes year after year. Investing in educators is both critical and urgent to changing this story. When the early childhood workforce is well-prepared, well-supported, and fully compensated, programs thrive and children gain the opportunities that lay the foundation for lifelong success.



The Early Educator Investment Collaborative (The Collaborative) is a coalition of national funders committed to transforming the early childhood education (ECE) profession. Our efforts are driven by a clear goal: to help all early educators achieve their full potential as professionals in order to ensure that each child is prepared for success in school and life. Grounded in the landmark 2015 report on workforce by the Institute of Medicine and the National Research Council (*Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation*) and the 2018 report on financing by the National Academies (*Transforming the Financing of Early Care and Education*), The Collaborative's work continues to focus on addressing systemic issues in the field by advancing pay equity, professionalizing the ECE workforce, aligning the ECE and K–12 systems, and establishing a well-funded system that serves all children—not just those whose families can afford to pay. We envision a future with no opportunity gaps, where every child has the chance to meet their full potential through access to high-quality early childhood education.

As the 10-year anniversary of the 2015 Transforming the Workforce report approaches, The Collaborative invites the field to look back at the triumphs and challenges of the last decade—and to consider what is possible for the future. In partnership with several national organizations, a series of reflection papers has been developed and gathered here to elevate ongoing efforts, spark discussion across the field, and inspire renewed and collective action toward building a stronger and more sustainable early childhood system for the future.

READERS CAN EXPECT . . .

A range of distinct perspectives and experiences. The series highlights the various perspectives within the early childhood system—from those who teach and care for young children in center- and home-based settings, to institutions of higher education, to state boards of education. Through analysis of recent research and discussion of relevant data, these diverse voices shed light on the nuances of workforce and financing issues and offer fresh perspectives on opportunities for building a better tomorrow.

A spotlight on progress and solutions generated in recent years. Together, these papers illuminate successes, lessons learned, and the momentum that continues to drive progress. They provide field-based examples of innovation and demonstrate what is possible through collaboration.

A call to action. Each paper presents concrete recommendations to spark transformative change and chart bold, actionable pathways for the future of the field. Collectively, they offer a unified vision that elevates opportunities to strengthen the early childhood workforce and financing, with the goal of building a more sustainable, high-quality system for young children, families, and communities.

KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM THE SERIES . . .

The papers speak not only to the importance, but also to the urgency of workforce development and financing issues. In many cases, they reflect on how the early childhood workforce in particular has been shaped by multiple forces: the landmark IOM/NRC and National Academies reports, recent progress and innovations (including those highlighted in this series), and the deep and unique challenges our field has faced over the last decade. Building from this important context, the papers contribute perspectives on what it will take to build on the momentum gained by the contributing organizations and other leaders in the field, all working toward a more sustainable future for the profession. Across the five-paper series, several critical themes emerged:

Strengthening systems infrastructure and alignment. The authors emphasize the connection between the strength of a system—its functionality in terms of cross-sector coordination and collaboration, levels of funding, and availability of data to drive decision-making—and the degree to which the workforce can be well-prepared and well-supported. Recommendations highlight the need for greater investment in systems-building to enhance leadership capacity, break down silos, and enable more effective and far-reaching workforce solutions.

Creating comprehensive solutions that apply across all settings. The papers document how different parts of the early childhood system are funded through different streams and at varying levels, leading to disparities in compensation, qualifications, and working conditions across settings. They call for workforce development and financing strategies that reach all early childhood professionals—whether working in home-based, center-based, or school-based settings.



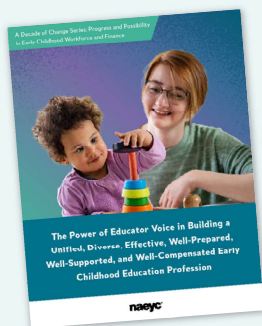
Centering equity as a primary lens for solution-seeking. Centering equity requires addressing outdated mindsets rooted in sexism and racism, and creating diverse on-ramps and growth pathways that acknowledge the many ways individuals enter and bring expertise to the profession. The papers emphasize the importance of elevating the voices of those closest to the issues during solution-building and analyzing both the intended and unintended impacts of our actions—especially on those most marginalized by the present system.

Expanding research to drive decision-making. The series underscores the need for more research and data to support a comprehensive approach to financing the ECE system and supporting its workforce. Recommendations include looking beyond the early childhood field for potential solutions, conducting and applying research that reflects the diversity of the workforce, and developing more systematic and streamlined methods of disseminating research findings that can inform practice and policy.

Maximizing investments in the system. The papers identify opportunities to increase efficiency within major funding streams—such as Child Care Development Fund (CCDF), Head Start, state Pre-K programs—while also emphasizing the importance of leveraging both public and private funding strategies, partnerships, and other existing resources. At the same time, the authors acknowledge that efficiency alone is insufficient; the current landscape calls for advocacy and innovative strategies to fully fund a system that values and supports its most critical resource: the professionals who devote themselves to the care and education of young children.

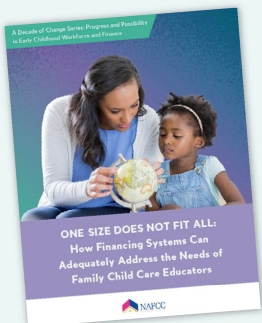
EXPLORE THE REFLECTION PAPER SERIES!

Contributors to the series include the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), the National Association for Family Child Care (NAFCC), The CAYL Institute, the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa College of Education, and the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE).



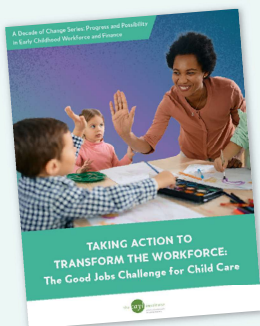
THE POWER OF EDUCATOR VOICE IN BUILDING A UNIFIED, DIVERSE, WELL-SUPPORTED, AND WELL-COMPENSATED EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION PROFESSION

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) highlights the central role of educators' voices in advancing a unified, diverse, effective, well-prepared, well-supported, and well-compensated early childhood education workforce. Building on landmark research and initiatives, NAEYC emphasizes that progress depends on elevating educators' expertise and lived experiences to shape policies, standards, compensation systems, and professional pathways. By centering and responding to educators as leaders, states and communities can move toward a cohesive ECE profession that ensures all children benefit from high-quality early learning.



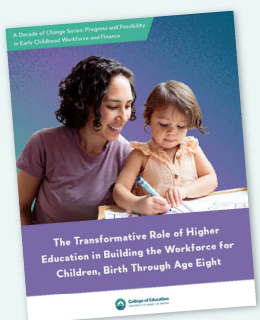
ONE SIZE DOES NOT FIT ALL: HOW FINANCING SYSTEMS CAN ADEQUATELY ADDRESS NEEDS OF FAMILY CHILD CARE EDUCATORS

The National Association for Family Child Care (NAFCC) asserts that family child care providers are among the most undervalued members of the early childhood workforce, despite their pivotal role. It highlights the urgent need for differentiated financing models, staffed networks, equitable compensation, and inclusion in public Pre-K to recognize and sustain family child care providers as both teachers and business owners. The report calls for systemic, sustained investments that recognize and support family child care in its unique role to expand access and respond to family choice.



TAKING ACTION TO TRANSFORM THE WORKFORCE: THE GOOD JOBS CHALLENGE FOR CHILD CARE

This paper examines the Metropolitan Boston Good Jobs Challenge–Child Care Initiative, the nation’s only federally funded project of its kind. Led by The CAYL Institute, the initiative was designed to recruit, train, upskill, and place 850 early childhood educators through cross-sector collaboration. The effort integrated higher education, workforce agencies, and child care employers to address systemic barriers and sustain a diverse workforce. Preliminary outcomes show progress in recruitment, retention, and compensation, aligning closely with recommendations in the 2015 Transforming the Workforce report, which calls for bold, collaborative action.



THE TRANSFORMATIVE ROLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN BUILDING THE WORKFORCE FOR CHILDREN, BIRTH THROUGH AGE 8

The Transformative Role of Higher Education in Building the Workforce for Children, Birth Through Age 8 focuses on addressing the fragmented and inequitable early childhood system by preparing, supporting, and elevating a diverse and skilled workforce. It provides a review of national reports and initiatives that call for competency-based qualifications, accessible degree pathways, interdisciplinary curricula, and financial supports for ECE professionals. It positions colleges and universities as key players in advancing equity and high-quality early learning for all, emphasizing their unique role in teacher preparation and their capacity to advocate for a well-supported and well-compensated workforce.



STAYING COMMITTED: HOW POLICYMAKERS ARE SHIFTING PRIORITIES TO SUPPORT EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND THE WORKFORCE

Over the past decade, the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) has elevated early childhood education as a bipartisan policy priority by equipping state boards with research, networks, and strategies grounded in the Transforming the Workforce and Transforming the Financing reports. Through the NASBE Early Childhood Education State Network, it has supported 14 states and territories in strengthening teacher preparation, licensure, professional development, and compensation policies to build a more prepared and stable workforce. While challenges such as workforce shortages and the need for sustainable financing remain, this paper points to growing bipartisan commitment that positions states to make lasting progress for children, families, and educators.



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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