

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



# **The Transformative Role of Higher Education in Building the Workforce for Children, Birth Through Age 8**



**College of Education**  
UNIVERSITY OF HAWAI'I AT MĀNOA

# 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 early years of a child's life—birth through age 8—represent the most rapid, sensitive, and foundational period of development. Neural connections in the child's developing brain are influenced by genetics, environment, and experiences. Healthy brain architecture is built and strengthened by adults who are responsive, consistent, and knowledgeable about how children develop and learn. Yet despite the importance of their work, the adults responsible for the regular daily care and education of our youngest citizens—the early childhood education (ECE) workforce—often lack the preparation, compensation, and professional status commensurate with this responsibility.<sup>1</sup>



The Institute of Medicine's (IOM's) and the National Research Council's (NRC's) 2015 report *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation* is a comprehensive, science-informed road map for improving how to prepare, support, and sustain early childhood education professionals across the United States in delivering high-quality learning experiences for young children. In 2018, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine published the *Transforming the Financing of Early Care and Education* report, which clarifies how the United States can fund accessible, affordable, high-quality early childhood education for children, birth to kindergarten entry.<sup>2</sup> These two seminal reports challenged higher education to work with partners to professionalize and finance ECE in order to advance young children's learning and development.

## Making the Connection to Higher Education

In the United States, ECE professionals serve children, birth through age 8, through a complex patchwork of federal, state, and local programs that vary in purpose, funding, children's age levels, quality, and workforce qualifications. Historically, early childhood educator preparation programs in higher education have been fragmented—divided by age group (infant/toddler, preschool, early elementary), by sector (child care, Head Start, Pre-K, K–3), and by institutions (community colleges vs. universities). This fragmentation contributed to inconsistencies in quality standards, different credentials, and lack of compensation parity between early educators teaching in community-based child care settings and their counterparts with similar education and experience in Pre-K and K–3 in public schools.

Furthermore, many states created separate pathways within universities or institutional silos within colleges of education and lacked seamless transfer and articulation agreements between community colleges and universities. In addition, early childhood educator preparation has not kept up with the interdisciplinary nature of the science of child development, learning, and well-being. This has hindered early childhood educator preparation programs and other related disciplines in universities from addressing the integrated developmental needs of young children.

These structural inequities affect the early childhood workforce, who are disproportionately women of color, with many lacking access to affordable, culturally responsive higher education programs. Furthermore, higher education faces several challenges in developing high-quality early educator preparation programs that effectively prepare ECE teachers so they can best support children and families. Some of these challenges include degree attainment that does not connect with mastery of an agreed-upon set of competencies grounded in developmental science, limited high-quality clinical and academic teacher preparation, and limited time or funding for ongoing professional development for higher education faculty.

As national and state leaders expand access to quality ECE through mixed-delivery models, universal preschool, and early intervention, the question of who will teach and lead these programs becomes increasingly urgent. We face a troubling paradox: bold public investment in early learning without an adequately prepared, supported, and stable workforce. Higher education holds a significant role in resolving this paradox. By reimagining how it prepares educators and leaders in early childhood education, higher education can serve as a powerful driver of workforce transformation and educational equity.

In *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8*, there are 5 recommendations (out of 12) that are relevant for higher education. The five recommendations fall under (1) qualification requirements for professional practice and (2) higher education and ongoing professional learning.

### Recommendations for Higher Education from *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8*

| AREA                                                 | RECOMMENDATIONS                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Qualification requirements for professional practice | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Strengthen competency-based qualification requirements for all care and education professionals working with children from birth through age 8.</li> <li>2. Develop and implement comprehensive pathways and multiyear timelines at the individual, institutional, and policy levels for transitioning to a minimum bachelor's degree qualification requirement, with specialized knowledge and competencies, for all lead educators working with children from birth through age 8.</li> <li>3. Strengthen practice-based qualification requirements, including a supervised induction period, for all lead educators working with children from birth through age 8.</li> </ol> |
| Higher education and ongoing professional learning   | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4. Build an interdisciplinary foundation in higher education for child development.</li> <li>5. Develop and enhance programs in higher education for ECE professionals.</li> </ol>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |

The *Transforming the Financing of Early Care and Education* report synthesizes the research and guides future policy development with 10 recommendations in nine areas. Of the 10 recommendations, there are two recommendations related to higher education in the area of financing workforce transformation.

**Recommendations for Higher Education from *Transforming the Financing of Early Care and Education***

| AREA                               | RECOMMENDATIONS                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Financing workforce transformation | <div><div>7.</div><div>Because compensation for the ECE workforce is not currently commensurate with desired qualifications, the ECE workforce should be provided with financial assistance to increase practitioners’ knowledge and competencies and to achieve required qualifications through higher education programs, credentialing programs, and other forms of professional learning. The incumbent ECE workforce should bear no cost for increasing practitioners’ knowledge base, competencies, and qualifications, and the entering workforce should be assisted to limit costs to a reasonable proportion of postgraduate earnings, with a goal of maintaining and further promoting diversity in the pipeline of ECE professionals.</div></div> <div><div>7a.</div><div>Existing grant-based resources should be leveraged, and states and localities, along with colleges and universities, should work together to provide additional resources and supports to the incumbent workforce as practitioners further their qualifications as professionals in the ECE field.</div></div> <div><div>7b.</div><div>States and the federal government should provide financial and other appropriate supports to limit to a reasonable proportion of expected postgraduate earnings any tuition and fee expenses that are incurred by prospective ECE professionals and are not covered by existing financial aid programs.</div></div> <div><div>8.</div><div>States and the federal government should provide grants to institutions and systems of postsecondary education to develop faculty and ECE programs and to align ECE curricula with the science of child development and early learning and with principles of high-quality professional practice. Federal funding should be leveraged through grants that provide incentives to states, colleges, and universities to ensure higher education programs are of high quality and aligned with workforce needs, including evaluating and monitoring student outcomes, curricula, and processes.</div></div> |



# OUR COMMITMENT IN ACTION

In 2021, the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa launched the Hawai‘i Early Childhood Educator Excellence and Equity Project, also known as the Hawai‘i ECE3 Project. It is a statewide initiative through the College of Education dedicated to strengthening Hawai‘i’s ECE workforce serving children from birth through age 8, through a collaborative systems approach that centers the voices of the ECE workforce. Since its inception, the Hawai‘i ECE3 Project has been designing, piloting, and refining evidence-based strategies to dismantle structural barriers to educator pathways, preparation, and compensation in Hawai‘i. These strategies include (1) a competency-based framework for ECE preparation programs; (2) accessible career pathways with credit for prior learning assessments; (3) a registered apprenticeship program; (4) a statewide bachelor’s degree in early childhood care and education serving children birth through age 8; (5) a student ambassador program to assist community college faculty with recruitment and retention of ECE students; (6) an ECE workforce compensation action plan; (7) a career pathways map; (8) specific state competencies for early childhood educators; and (9) an early educator leadership development program connected with continuous quality program improvement. The Hawai‘i ECE3 Project, in collaboration with its many partners, is committed to a strong and stable ECE profession that provides high-quality ECE programs for young children and their families.



Simultaneously, the Hawai‘i ECE3 Project partnered with the Hawai‘i Careers with Young Children (HCYC) and the Hawai‘i Association for the Education of Young Children (HIAEYC) to bring system leaders and ECE professionals together to discuss how Hawai‘i is acting on the recommendations of the Power to the Profession (P2P) *Unifying Framework for the Early Childhood Education Profession*.<sup>3</sup> The P2P *Unifying Framework*, released in March 2020, is a road map for creating a well-prepared, diverse, effective, and well-compensated ECE profession. The key focus areas of the *Unifying Framework* include (1) one distinct profession, three designations; (2) aligned professional preparation pathways; (3) professional compensation; and (4) supportive infrastructure and shared responsibility. In the P2P *Unifying Framework*, higher education has a central role to play in elevating the profession.

## A Transformative Funding Opportunity

The Collaborative, a national group of funders, took bold steps and invested in the critical work of linking early educator professional competencies with professional compensation so that all young children have equal access to high-quality learning experiences grounded in the science of child development. The **Transforming Lead Teacher Preparation Programs Through a Multi-Partner Innovation Grants** were opportunities for higher education and system partners to transform their preparation programs for early educators, break down systemic barriers to higher education for primarily women of color, and increase financial assistance and compensation for students studying to be early educators.

**2019**

The Collaborative issued a call for letters of intent (LOI) for the Transforming Lead Teacher Preparation Programs Through a Multi-Partner Innovation Grant.

**2020**

The Collaborative received 51 LOIs from more than 35 states/territories/tribal nations. The Collaborative then invited 29 applicants to submit full proposals.

**2021**

The Collaborative awarded 2- or 3-year innovation grants to six IHEs and state/territory/tribal partners. The lead IHEs were California State University, Sacramento; College of Menominee Nation; Georgia State University; North Seattle College; University of Colorado Denver; and the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa.

**2022**

Two more IHEs—Salish Kootenai College and University of Nebraska-Lincoln—were awarded this innovation grant.

**2021–2024**

These eight higher education partnership teams joined a professional learning community, facilitated by School Readiness Consulting (SRC), while steadily breaking down barriers and making incremental progress toward significant milestones established in their proposals.

After the completion of the Transforming Lead Teacher Preparation Programs Through a Multi-Partner Innovation Grant, The Collaborative and SRC released the report *Moving Beyond the Pilot: Sustaining the Success of the Transforming Lead Teacher Preparation Programs Through Multi-Partner Innovation Grant*.<sup>4</sup> First, this report emphasized the critical role of teacher preparation programs to lay the foundation for a more inclusive and diverse ECE workforce, especially with the growing national concern regarding the shortage of high-quality early educators. Next, this report focused on the challenges and opportunities teacher preparation programs took to dismantle barriers for students seeking ECE degrees, as well as the valuable lessons learned from teacher preparation programs that have successfully implemented systems change efforts. Finally, the report stated how sustainability of the work, with attention to resilient and adaptive strategies to ensure the long-term social and economic impact of the initiatives, was topic of continual conversation among the grantees. A number of the IHEs that were part of the Transforming Lead Teacher Preparation Programs Through Multi-Partner Innovation Grant are included in this paper.

# BUILDING MOMENTUM TOWARD THE FUTURE

This section will analyze the 5 out of 12 recommendations that are relevant for higher education since the release of the 2015 *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8* report.

## 1 Strengthen competency-based qualification requirements for all care and education professionals working with children from birth through age 8.

Clarity about competencies and qualifications for various levels of employment in early childhood education can lead to establishing career pathways that align to stackable credentials in 2- and 4-year postsecondary programs. Moreover, utilizing a competency-based approach allows for innovation in tailoring coursework to missing core competencies through various forms of professional development, training, or varying credit coursework. This creates a system whereby the educator candidate avoids course duplication and the accumulation of unused credits.<sup>5</sup>

### National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) releases professional standards and competencies.

In response to one of the recommendations in the *Power to the Profession Unifying Framework*, NAEYC released an agreed-upon core set of competencies for early childhood educators working with children from birth through age 8 in 2020: *Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators*.<sup>6</sup> This position statement also lays out a three-level profession pathway from early childhood educator I (entry), early childhood educator II (associate's degree), to early childhood educator III (bachelor's degree). This pathway acts as a bridge from the community college to the university. In addition, the associated leveling reflects the current reality of many educators with associate's degrees, while highlighting the audacious vision that all lead educators should hold a bachelor's degree.<sup>7</sup>

### IHEs implement national professional standards and competencies.

Many IHEs are redesigning their associate and bachelor ECE programs for diverse students with this core set of standards and competencies and associated leveling, which measures mastery and not just seat time. This set of agreed-upon knowledge, skills, values, and dispositions for the ECE profession serves to update core learner outcomes, course curricula, field experiences, and assessments. Here are a few examples:



- The Responsive Equitable System for Preparing Early Childhood Teachers (RESPECT) across Nebraska, led by the **University of Nebraska–Lincoln**, developed a shared competency-based framework that defines and aligns common expectations for educator preparation, credentialing, and licensing across all early childhood settings to better serve students at every stage of their careers.
- The Early Childhood Educator Excellence and Equity (ECE3) Project led by the **University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa** (UHM) developed a process to utilize a competency-based framework to redesign existing and new ECE programs, for all students to achieve their educational goals across multiple community colleges and university campuses. In addition, a new pathway for a bachelor of education in early childhood care and education (ECCE), covering prenatal through age 8, was developed and approved and is being launched in fall 2025.
- **Salish Kootenai College** (SKC) of the Flathead Reservation in Montana has been leading a collaborative effort to strengthen its Indigenous Early Childhood Teacher Preparation Program and increase the coordination of state agencies focused on early childhood education, tribal language revitalizations, and gaps in services for tribal nations.
- The Universities and Partners Learning, Innovating, Fostering Equity, Transforming California ECE Degrees (UP-LIFT CA) Project, led by **California State University, Sacramento**, focused on preparing teachers to work with dual-language learners, increasing diversity among the pool of early childhood educators, and fostering closer partnerships between 2- and 4-year IHEs.

## 2 Develop and implement comprehensive pathways and multiyear timelines at the individual, institutional, and policy levels for transitioning to a minimum bachelor’s degree qualification requirement, with specialized knowledge and competencies, for all lead educators working with children from birth through age 8.

Because the early childhood workforce is overwhelmingly female and disproportionately composed of women of color, immigrants, and first-generation college students, traditional higher education pathways are often out of reach for these individuals due to cost, rigid schedules, and lack of recognition for prior learning and experience. In addition, early childhood educator preparation programs need to consider how to improve retention and completion for traditional and nontraditional students.

To truly transform the workforce, higher education must meet all learners where they are—financially, geographically, culturally, and professionally. It must also establish comprehensive pathways and multiyear timelines at various levels for those in the ECE workforce to transition to a bachelor’s degree qualification requirement, allowing them to work with children from birth through age 8.

Some promising strategies include the following:

### Accessible pathways and articulation models.

**North Seattle College** created innovative multiple and accessible opportunities for current and future teachers to obtain associate’s, bachelor’s, and master’s degrees, particularly for the college’s multilingual students, and is establishing the first early childhood bachelor’s degree program in the United States taught entirely in Spanish. **Georgia State University’s** Project SEED removed barriers to admission, particularly related to prerequisite credits and entry examinations. The **Colorado Department of Higher**

**Education (CDHE)** and the **Colorado Community College System (CCCS)** have established seamless transfer pathways and articulation models in early childhood education to facilitate the transition of students from associate's degrees to bachelor's degrees. These pathways ensure that students completing an associate's degree at a CCCS institution are guaranteed to be able to transfer their credits and complete a bachelor's degree at any participating public 4-year institution.

### **Comprehensive student support infrastructure.**

Comprehensive student support services such as mental health and wellness counseling, on-demand tutoring and study support, integrated advising/coaching (including goal setting, time management, and tips on how to be persistent), and financial aid navigation are being offered to ECE students. Here are three examples:

1. **College of Menominee Nation** implemented a Culturally Responsive Student Support Model that incorporated culturally responsive induction and comprehensive supports for students to promote wellness, educational success, and retention.
2. **Georgia State University's** Supporting Early Educator's Development (Project SEED) is an innovative, fully funded teacher preparation experience for professionals interested in earning a bachelor's degree in birth-five (B-5) education. This project provided comprehensive, wraparound supports through mentorship, academic coaching, and financial resources.
3. **The University of Massachusetts Boston's** Early Childhood Fellowship Program is a bachelor of arts program that covers tuition and stipends to ensure Fellows can earn their degree without accumulating debt. In addition, this program offers personalized tutoring and academic support, regular mentoring and a learning community network, coaching to support and enhance the quality of teaching practices, and leadership development opportunities and an alumni network. The Fellowship Program was initially launched in 2014 with support from the Office of Indian Education in the U.S. Department of Education to work with Native American children in tribal and community-based programs. In 2022, the program was expanded with funding from the City of Boston to cultivate a pipeline of trained, high-quality educators in Boston.<sup>8</sup>

### **Credit for prior learning.**

Recognizing the skills and knowledge already acquired by early educators working in the field through competency-based credit for prior learning (CPL) options can unlock pathways that bring a credential or degree and increased compensation more within reach, within the context of expanded mixed-delivery prekindergarten programs at the state or local level. NAEYC and the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) have been partnering on a series of resources to support ECE higher education programs and policymakers in implementing and expanding ECE college credit to recognize competencies gained from prior learning and professional experiences. Their first report, published in December 2024, was *Credit Where Credit Is Due: Expanding Credit for Prior Learning in ECE Higher Education Programs*.<sup>9</sup> This report explains the value of CPL options and provides two examples of higher education CPL programs. Another example is Honolulu Community College's ECE program, a partner through the ECE3 Project at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, which developed several CPL options.



### Stackable credentials.

Stackable credentials allow students to progress from certificates to associate and bachelor's degrees with clear articulation. In the state of **Washington**, through the Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF), early learning professionals who want to further their education have a clear path to follow with Washington State Stackable Certificates,<sup>10</sup> which are aligned to Washington state's Core Competencies for Early Care and Education Professionals.<sup>11</sup> These stackable credentials are then offered through IHEs, including North Seattle College.

In **Illinois**, several IHEs, including Chicago State, Northern Illinois, Roosevelt, and College of Lake County, have been working on the Gateway to Opportunity Infant-Toddler Credential Competency Project.<sup>12</sup> Illinois developed 54 competency modules aligned to state- and profession-recognized standards. These modules allow institutions to offer stackable, flexible credentials and enable learners to demonstrate mastery and earn credit at their own pace.

### Micro-credentials.

A micro-credential is a modular, focused learning experience tailored to specific skills or competencies. Unlike traditional degrees and certificates, these credentials are stackable sets of credit-bearing courses that can be accumulated over time, providing learners with the flexibility to adapt their education to their career goals and market demands. Micro-credentials are designed to be shorter in duration. They are digitally badged and focus on specific skill sets that are highly relevant in today's rapidly changing job market. A digital badge represents the completion of a micro-credential or a series of micro-credentials, similar to a diploma. This approach to education recognizes the importance of lifelong learning and the need for continuous skill development in a fast-paced, ever-evolving professional landscape.



One example of integrating micro-credentials into ECE degree pathways or as professional development has taken place at one of the oldest Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in the United States, **Tennessee State University**, with its Center of Excellence for Learning Science and the ClearPath ECE initiative.<sup>13</sup> This initiative, which was studied in 2021, demonstrated that through strong system-level partnerships, micro-credentials may lead to credential attainment, workforce entry, promotions, and/or economic improvements, particularly for Black, Latino, and Indigenous populations, as well as women, in rural communities.

Other examples include the approach of **Hudson Valley Community College** in New York, which offers a micro-credential in early childhood that is aligned with the national Child Development Associate (CDA) credential and can transfer into the college's early childhood associate's degree.<sup>14</sup> The **University of North Alabama** offers a micro-credential in ECE for three online courses focused on foundations of early childhood practice, totaling up to nine credits.<sup>15</sup> The ECE micro-credential from **Missouri Western State University** is offered through blended, online, and face-to-face classes and can also be used for teacher certification.<sup>16</sup>

### ECE registered apprenticeship programs.

With the demand for a competent ECE workforce and improvements in career pathway models, ECE registered apprenticeship programs are rapidly proliferating across our nation as one viable strategy.<sup>17</sup> ECE registered apprenticeship programs can reduce or remove typical barriers to postsecondary educational attainment as they are “earn while you learn” U.S. Department of Labor–approved programs. These programs offer apprentices on-the-job training and financial, academic, and social supports toward the goal of obtaining a CDA credential, an associate’s degree, or a bachelor’s degree in ECE through local IHEs. These programs help to promote racial, linguistic, and socioeconomic equity in the profession, which is essential for a workforce that reflects and supports the diversity of the children it serves. The oldest models began in West Virginia, the City of Philadelphia, and Colorado.<sup>18</sup> Regional or county models, such as the First 5 Alameda County Early Educator Apprentice Program (EEAP) at the YMCA of the East Bay in Alameda County, California, were recently evaluated by the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (CSCCE). The study highlighted that apprentices reported growth in their knowledge about children’s development and learning and in their skills in designing and implementing teaching strategies to support children with a variety of learning styles and needs. The study also found that the majority of apprentices indicated their intention to remain in the ECE field after completing their apprenticeships and shared that there were improvements in their economic well-being as a result of higher wages and anticipated earning potential.<sup>19</sup>



### 3 Strengthen practice-based qualification requirements, including a supervised induction period, for all lead educators working with children from birth through age 8.

Some of the strategies that higher education is applying to strengthen practice-based qualification requirements include embedding supervised, high-quality clinical practice in diverse settings that early educators are already working in; establishing high-quality early learning sites through memoranda of agreement (MOA); connecting fieldwork with current course content and developmental competencies; training, supporting, and compensating cooperating teachers; employing coaching, video tools, and reflective practices; and utilizing data to assess and improve placement quality and candidate experience.

For example, the **University of Colorado Denver** led the Colorado Higher Education Consortium to develop partnerships with local organizations to create a mentor community that recruits community-based working professionals into degree programs and supports students’ practicum and teacher residency experiences.

## 4 Build an interdisciplinary foundation in higher education for child development.

Higher education needs to support a cross-departmental, cross-disciplinary child development foundation that produces specialized degree and certificate programs for various specialized professional roles relating to work with young children from birth through age 8 in education, social services, and health / allied health. This foundation should incorporate knowledge about the interaction of biology and the environment, the science of brain development for all children from birth through age 8, and the impacts of adversity and toxic stress on children.

For example, the **University of Massachusetts Amherst** offers an online bachelor's degree in interdisciplinary studies on children's learning and development, for adults interested in working for agencies and programs serving children, youth, and families. This non-teacher license program exemplifies how higher education can break down silos and elevate the science and artistry of early childhood practice.<sup>20</sup>

## 5 Develop and enhance programs in higher education for ECE professionals.

High-quality programs in higher education are those that provide a formally defined, accredited course of study in child development, early learning, and instruction. This course of study could be a specified degree or major, a concentration, or a certificate in child development, early learning, and instruction that a student would complete alongside another major or as a postbaccalaureate program. An accredited course of study in child development, early learning, and instruction can lead to various career paths in the ECE field. These programs are often offered at the associate's, bachelor's, or master's degree levels, and some also offer specialized certifications. Accreditation ensures the program meets specific quality standards and can be a valuable asset when seeking employment or further education. An example of this is the NAEYC's higher education accreditation system.<sup>21</sup>

**This section will analyze the 2 of 10 recommendations that are relevant for higher education from the *Transforming the Financing of Early Care and Education* report.**

- 1. Because compensation for the ECE workforce is not currently commensurate with desired qualifications, the ECE workforce should be provided with financial assistance to increase practitioners' knowledge and competencies and to achieve required qualifications through higher education programs, credentialing programs, and other forms of professional learning.**

### **T.E.A.C.H. comprehensive scholarships and supports for states.**

The T.E.A.C.H. (Teach Education And Compensation Helps) Early Childhood Scholarship Program, which began in North Carolina in 1990, is a national, evidence-based strategy that creates access to higher education for teachers, directors, and family child care providers working with young children in out-of-home settings. T.E.A.C.H., which operates in more than 20 states, provides comprehensive scholarships to enable these early educators to take coursework leading to credentials and associate's and bachelor's degrees by making it possible for them to afford both the time and expense of going to school, covering tuition, books, travel, and paid release time. At the same time, T.E.A.C.H. helps states leverage the financial resources necessary to provide access to higher education and support for the ECE workforce and creates new and diverse teachers and program leaders. From building capacity in higher education to helping individuals attain their educational and career goals, T.E.A.C.H. is a change agent for the ECE workforce and system. North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Florida, for example, have well-established T.E.A.C.H. programs.<sup>22</sup>

### Savings through alternative pathways, student loan repayment, and ECE scholarships.

There are “grow your own / stackable credential models” that aim to recruit, train, and retain individuals from the local community, often providing alternative pathways in which students earn certificates, then associate’s degrees, and later bachelor’s degrees, often with credit for prior learning and coaching support. One example is the Illinois Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity, which unites 2- and 4-year institutions to streamline transfer pathways for incumbent ECE workers, with tuition support and evening and/or weekend classes.<sup>23</sup>

**Vermont’s** Student Loan Repayment Assistance Program for Early Childhood Educators, which was established in May 2021, provides up to \$4,000 annually to reduce the student debt of full-time educators who earned an early childhood–related degree.<sup>24</sup>

Through **New Mexico’s** Early Childhood Education and Care Department (ECECD), early childhood scholarships are available for New Mexico early childhood educators, administrators, and program directors who are working toward an early childhood degree or New Mexico Child Development Certificate. Recipients need to be enrolled in a qualifying New Mexico higher education institution and work a minimum of 20 hours per week at a New Mexico licensed or registered home child care program, a state-funded Pre-K or early Pre-K program in a community-based or public school setting, Head Start or Early Head Start, a state-funded Home Visiting Program, or a Family Infant Toddler program.<sup>25</sup>



## **2. States and the federal government should provide grants to institutions and systems of postsecondary education to develop faculty and ECE programs and to align ECE curricula with the science of child development and early learning and with principles of high-quality professional practice. Federal funding should be leveraged through grants that provide incentives to states, colleges, and universities to ensure higher education programs are of high quality and aligned with workforce needs, including evaluating and monitoring student outcomes, curricula, and processes.**

Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) funds through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services allow states to direct funds toward higher education system improvements, including scholarships, curriculum development, coaching supports, and faculty development.

In the state of **Washington**, there are community and technical college ECE grants administered by the Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) for faculty stipends, curriculum alignment with the state’s Early Achievers quality standards, stackable credentials, and articulation agreements.<sup>26</sup>

**New Mexico’s** ECECD offers funds to higher education faculty for professional development; compensation incentives; and coursework development to meet bilingual, rural, and tribal ECE workforce needs.<sup>27</sup>

# WHAT STILL STANDS IN THE WAY

Higher education is a key player in the ECE ecosystem, working closely with early educators, employers, government (federal, state, and county) agencies, and other partners, to address structural inequities that prevent the transformation of the ECE workforce into one that is diverse, effective, and fairly compensated.

However, some IHEs might not recognize or acknowledge the systemic barriers that prevent the ECE profession serving children from birth through age 8 from becoming a cohesive workforce, and some IHEs might not understand the importance of professionalizing the ECE workforce. Furthermore, often the voices and expertise of ECE faculty in IHEs are constrained by limited time, heavy teaching loads, lack of financial resources, and limited access to negotiate with IHE leaders who are needed to facilitate the redesign and improvement of ECE preparation programs. Without the voices and active engagement of both higher education ECE faculty and their IHE leadership in addressing institutional and higher education system barriers, overdue reforms to ECE programs, policies, and systems will not be achieved to serve the diverse ECE workforce needs of the greater community.

Moreover, IHEs striving to transform the early childhood workforce and the financing of early childhood education need a permanently funded and coordinated mechanism to work together as a consortium to conduct research, share data, and advocate with partners—including policymakers—to establish a well-prepared, well-supported, and well-compensated ECE profession for America's young children from birth through age 8.



# SHAPING THE NEXT DECADE

Higher education is a critical catalyst for professionalization of ECE. Here are action steps:

- **Prepare confident and skilled early educators** by recommending that ECE faculty and leadership in higher education adopt and align courses in their ECE preparation programs with the 2020 NAEYC *Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators*, serving children from birth through age 8. These professional standards and competencies describe the body of knowledge, values, skills, and dispositions demonstrated by early childhood educators to effectively promote young children's development, learning, and well-being. These standards and competencies can be used to

develop expectations of what high-quality clinical experiences would look like for teacher candidates and then can be shared with mentor teachers and their leadership in cooperating schools and programs.

ECE faculty in higher education preparation programs can also support ECE teacher candidates by incorporating the 2017 *Building Blocks: Four Elements of Effective Teacher Preparation* from Deans for Impact (DFI), an organization that guides pathways into teaching. These building blocks—the four elements of effective teacher preparation—consist of (1) modeling, by matching teacher candidates with high-quality mentor teachers and offering mentor teachers high-quality professional learning opportunities; (2) practice, by being purposeful and deliberate, weaving

practice opportunities throughout a teacher's preparation experiences; (3) feedback, which is targeted toward developing a specific skill, is timely (preferably given immediately after the skill is practiced), and allows for opportunities to practice the skills again after the feedback is given, with the novice adjusting his or her performance based on the feedback; and (4) alignment, which occurs when preparation programs thoughtfully design the preparation process to build teacher candidates' knowledge, skill, and understanding over time, aligning theory to practice and creating a coherent experience for every teacher candidate.<sup>28</sup>



- **Create internal messaging across the university to elevate ECE accomplishments**, drawing attention to early childhood and opening doors to resource access. One strategy is highlighting the vital role of deans in colleges of education in IHEs who support the needs of ECE faculty, ECE students, and the broader ECE community. Another strategy is for deans of colleges of education to be part of DFI, which can promote practical strategies for supporting faculty to scale innovation while working with system leaders. Deans can provide valuable perspectives on shaping the future of ECE teacher preparation programs and early childhood policy leaders. Another strategy is to highlight the science of child development and early learning as foundational to young children's well-being and trajectory in life and the need for funding for ongoing professional development for ECE higher education faculty.
- **Design and offer leadership development programs** for racially and linguistically diverse early educators by offering advanced credentials and applied learning opportunities. For example, Leading for Change in Early Care and Education (LfC) is a research-based 40-hour leadership development course for family child care providers, early educators, program administrators, and other ECE professionals through the Early Education Leaders Institute at University of Massachusetts Boston. LfC participants gain a deeper understanding of themselves as leaders and change agents, and explore concrete ways to improve professional practice and early education quality and to promote social and racial justice in programs and systems serving young children and families.<sup>29</sup>

- **Cultivate the future generations of early childhood policy leaders** to design, analyze and advocate for constructive early childhood policies driven by research, evidence-based practice, and a commitment to equity, inclusion, and social justice by joining the Early Childhood Policy in Institutions of Higher Education (ECPIHE) initiative.<sup>30</sup> This initiative, which was designed and established by Dr. Sharon Lynn Kagan and Dr. Kathy Thornburg, seeks to address the demand for the study of early childhood policy in American IHEs as well as the study of experiences related to early childhood policy. Through ECPIHE, individuals will be prepared to (1) assume early childhood policy roles in order to forge new pathways toward more equitable and inclusive early childhood systems; (2) develop and disseminate a core body of early childhood policy knowledge that can prepare those individuals and their successors to effectively address early childhood policy and its systemic issues and inequalities; and (3) instantiate the study of early childhood policy durably in IHEs throughout America by creating institutionalized and sustained programs, degrees, and centers.

One example is the University of Washington College of Education’s Center for Early Childhood Policy and Equity, which prepares individuals to be early childhood policy leaders while providing research, policy development, leadership development, and technical assistance within the state to improve ECE services, programs, and systems.<sup>31</sup>

- **Conduct or commission research to bolster advocacy efforts** to improve compensation policies that are grounded in data and fair practices. This research can eventually support public financing reforms that fund pay parity between early childhood educators and comparable K–12 teachers. For example, the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa commissioned the RAND Corporation to conduct a study and final report, *Early Childhood Educators in Hawai‘i: Addressing Compensation, Working Conditions, and Professional Advancement*, which was released in October 2022.<sup>32</sup> This report included a road map of policy options to improve wages, benefits, and working conditions. This road map continues to be utilized to coordinate state advocacy efforts and engage policymakers and partners in support of public financing reforms for Hawai‘i’s ECE workforce.

By redesigning preparation programs, expanding equitable pathways, advocating for compensation reform, and cultivating leadership and partnerships, colleges and universities can shape a workforce that is diverse, skilled, and empowered. The children, families, and communities of this nation deserve nothing less.



# 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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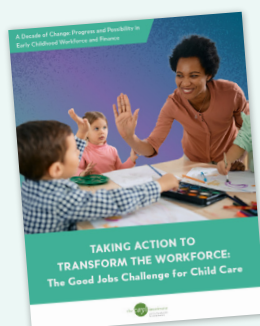


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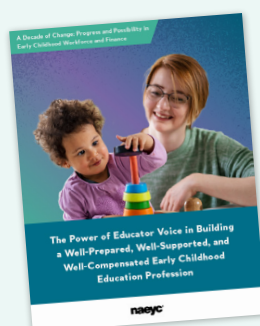
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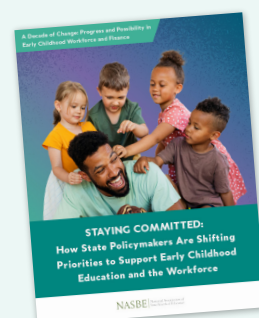
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