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Building the Conditions for Early Educator Compensation: Lessons From Louisiana

Early Educator Compensation Case Study Series

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Introduction

Background

Louisiana offers a compelling example of how long-term investments in governance, infrastructure, and local leadership can sustain and advance early care and education (ECE) priorities during periods of fiscal uncertainty. This support for ECE is especially important for states as access to federal pandemic funding has ended and responsibility for maintaining public social services like Medicaid and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) has increased (Bloom, 2025; Roberson & Martin, 2025). A strong and well-supported workforce is central to the sustainability of the early childhood systems, and the contributions of early educators extend beyond early learning to the well-being of children, families, and the broader economy.

Early childhood educators are a multicultural, multilingual, and multiracial workforce that closely reflects the diversity of the children and families they serve (McLean et al., 2024a). Early educators are committed professionals with diverse skillsets who play an integral role in young children's cognitive, emotional, and social development (McLean et al., 2024a). Yet, despite the importance of their work, compensation and workplace supports in ECE have historically lagged behind those of other occupations requiring comparable skills and responsibilities. Many educators continue to experience low wages, limited access to benefits (such as health insurance and retirement plans), and emotionally and physically demanding working conditions. Nationwide, early educators earn among the lowest wages in the labor market, with a median hourly wage of \$13.07, and nearly one half of the ECE workforce relies on one or more public assistance programs (McLean et al., 2024b). Such conditions reflect the historical systemic devaluation of care work (Center for the Study of Child Care Employment [CSCCE], 2022).

For more than a decade, Louisiana has invested in building the infrastructure to strengthen its ECE system and support local leadership. Beginning with the [Early Childhood Education Act \(Act 3\)](#) in 2012, the state established a framework for coordinating previously fragmented early childhood programs and funding streams (Louisiana State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education [BESE], n.d.). Subsequent initiatives—including the [Early Childhood Education Fund](#), created in 2017, and [Ready Start Networks](#), launched in 2019—further expanded opportunities for communities to shape local early childhood systems through coordinated investment and community partnerships (Louisiana Act No. 353, 2017; Louisiana Act No. 639, 2018).

However, these investments alone did not resolve longstanding challenges related to educator compensation and workforce stability. While Act 3 and subsequent reforms improved coordination, accountability, and local capacity, efforts to improve compensation remained dependent on separate policy decisions, funding commitments, and workforce-specific investments. Louisiana's experience illustrates an important distinction between building the infrastructure necessary to support early childhood systems and creating the dedicated mechanisms required to improve educators' wages and working conditions.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought these workforce challenges into sharper focus while creating an unprecedented opportunity for states to invest in early childhood systems. COVID-19 federal emergency funding provided much-needed short-term supports for temporary pay increases, program stabilization, and efforts to prevent widespread program closures (McLean et al., 2024d).¹ As federal funding sunsetted, states' efforts to maintain temporary supports varied (Sun, 2024). While some states have continued and/or expanded initiatives and programs to address compensation and conditions for the ECE workforce, others have returned to pre-pandemic levels of supports.

Within this national landscape, Louisiana demonstrates how governance structures, state-local partnerships, financing strategies, and advocacy initiatives can support efforts to strengthen compensation and recognition for the ECE workforce while also illustrating why structural capacity alone is insufficient to sustain crucial investments in the workforce.

Defining the Early Childhood Workforce

This case study uses "early childhood workforce," "early care and education (ECE) workforce," and "early educators" to describe individuals working directly with children from birth to age five in caregiving and teaching roles.

We use "program leaders" to refer to individuals in leadership positions regardless of early childhood setting. These individuals are typically responsible for administrative and business operations in ECE programs. For program leaders who operate home-based ECE settings, we use the terms "home-based providers" and "family child care providers."

¹ The major emergency funding streams included the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security ([CARES](#)) Act in 2020, the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations ([CRRSA](#)) Act in 2021, and the American Rescue Plan Act ([ARPA](#)) in 2021.

About This Case Study

This case study examines Louisiana's efforts to strengthen its early childhood systems and the ways long-term investments in governance, infrastructure, and partnerships have created conditions for local innovations and community-driven workforce strategies. In the early 2010s, Louisiana began reshaping its ECE system through governance reforms designed to better align programs, coordinate decision making, and strengthen connections between states and local partners. These investments created a foundation that helped communities respond quickly during the pandemic when unprecedented federal relief funding created new opportunities to support early educators and stabilize early childhood programs. We document Louisiana's efforts to strengthen compensation and recognition for the ECE workforce and how local leaders, advocates, and educators have leveraged existing systems and partnerships to advance these goals.

Louisiana's experience raises important questions for the field. What enables communities to continue advancing workforce priorities in a challenging funding environment? How can state investments in governance and infrastructure support local action? And what lessons can other states learn from communities that have built the capacity to pursue workforce goals over time? This case study explores these questions through the experiences of policymakers, advocates, and educators across Louisiana, highlighting key lessons for other states and localities.

Methodology

This case study is informed by a review of publicly available documents and interviews with policymakers, advocates, intermediary organizations, and early educators. From April through June 2026, we conducted interviews with four individuals representing key advocacy and nonprofit organizations, intermediary organizations, and an ECE agency in Louisiana. These interviews helped us better understand the policy, fiscal, and governance contexts shaping workforce initiatives in Louisiana, as well as the opportunities and challenges associated with implementing compensation-related reforms. Our interviews also drew our attention to efforts to strengthen compensation and recognition for the early childhood workforce. These conversations likewise provided insights into the opportunities and challenges associated with advancing workforce initiatives, as well as the role that local communities can play in supporting early educators.

We also spoke with four early educators working in a variety of settings to learn about their experiences with workforce initiatives and their perspectives on future compensation reforms. They represented center-based programs, family child care homes, and school-based pre-kindergarten programs. While these educators were not

intended to fully represent the broader ECE workforce in Louisiana, their experiences provided important insights.

Given the localized nature of many workforce efforts and the limited availability of statewide outcome data, this case study does not seek to evaluate the impact of compensation initiatives across Louisiana. Rather, this report aims to document implementation experiences and offer lessons for states and communities seeking to strengthen compensation and working conditions for the ECE workforce.

Overview of Findings

Over the past decade, Louisiana has pursued a long-term systems-building approach that strengthened coordination across programs, empowered localities to lead implementation, and created multiple pathways for financing workforce investments. Together, these efforts enabled Louisiana to respond quickly to emerging opportunities and expand compensation initiatives across its mixed-delivery early childhood system.

Key contributors to progress include:

- **Alignment of early childhood systems:** Louisiana's Act 3 transformed a fragmented early childhood framework into a unified governance structure, enabling strong coordination of policies, accountability, funding, and local program implementation (BESE, n.d.).
- **Investment in local governance structures:** The state's investment in [Ready Start Networks](#) has allowed parishes (Louisiana's equivalent to counties) to coordinate local priorities and partnerships (Louisiana Act No. 639, 2018).
- **ECE leadership perspectives elevated through advocacy and intermediary networks:** Intermediary partners—like [For Providers By Providers \(4PXP\)](#), the [Louisiana Policy Institute for Children \(LPIC\)](#), and the [Geaux Far Louisiana](#) coalition—have helped bring ECE program leaders' experiences and concerns into statewide policy discussions, connecting the realities of program operations with broader efforts to strengthen Louisiana's early childhood system.
- **Strategic layering of financial strategies:** Louisiana has blended diverse funding sources, including tax incentives, state and local funds, philanthropy, and federal relief funding, to expand workforce investment.

Key challenges that remain:

- **Governance reform alone does not ensure compensation improvement:** Although governance reform can create the institutional conditions for coordinated action, it does not automatically lead to the sustained, long-term investments needed to improve educators' wages and benefits.
- **A fragmented, short-term compensation vision:** Despite having the framework necessary to support workforce investments, Louisiana's current compensation strategy relies on short-term initiatives that are unevenly available across roles, early childhood settings, and parishes.
- **Uneven local capacity to leverage workforce investments:** Louisiana's local partnership model depends in part on parishes' ability to mobilize funding. However, parishes vary in their financial resources, which impacts their administrative infrastructure and ability to generate revenue to access matching state funds.
- **Limited direct representation of educators in compensation policy:** The perspectives and experiences of staff employed in ECE programs remain less directly represented in compensation discussions than those of employers, small business owners, and other system stakeholders. This can result in strategies that are shaped primarily by program sustainability and business needs, with less direct incorporation of employees' experiences with wages, benefits, working conditions, and economic pressures.

Louisiana's Approach

Pre-Pandemic System Building and Compensation Challenges

Long before the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the fragility of the early childhood system nationwide, Louisiana's ECE system was already grappling with many of the same structural challenges that would become more widely recognized throughout the country (McLean et al., 2021). Low wages, limited benefits, high turnover, and unstable funding streams created persistent barriers to workforce recruitment and retention (Louisiana Policy Institute for Children [LPIC], 2022). At the same time, however, Louisiana was undertaking significant governance reforms that positioned the state differently from many of its peers.

A major turning point occurred in 2012 with the passage of Act 3, which consolidated Louisiana's previously fragmented early childhood programs under the Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE) and the Louisiana State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) (Bassok et al., 2019; Louisiana Act 3, 2012). Prior to Act 3, publicly funded ECE programs operated through multiple systems with varying standards, funding streams, and accountability requirements. The legislation created a more unified governance structure that aligned publicly funded child care, Head Start, and school-based pre-kindergarten programs under a common framework for quality improvement and accountability (Bassok et al., 2019). This governance structure also enabled the creation of parish-level Ready Start Networks, which bring together local stakeholders to coordinate services, support quality improvement efforts, assess community needs, and align local implementation with state priorities. Over time, these networks have become an important mechanism for local planning, community engagement, and communication between state and local actors (Michie et al., 2021).

Alongside these governance reforms, Louisiana also developed innovative financing approaches intended to recognize the value of the early childhood workforce and encourage investment in ECE quality. One notable example, the [School Readiness Tax Credits or SRTCs](#) (now known as the Workforce Child Care Tax Credits) represented one of the nation's earliest state-level efforts to use tax policy as a tool for supporting early childhood systems. In 2008, the SRTCs created a package of tax credits for families, home-based providers, center directors and staff, and businesses that support ECE (Louisiana Department of Revenue, n.d.).² These credits were designed to encourage

² Included in the package were the [Child Care Expense Tax Credit](#), the [Child Care Provider Tax Credit](#), the [Child Care Director and Staff Tax Credit](#), and the [Business-Supported Child Care Tax Credit](#).

investment in high-quality ECE programs, support participation in Louisiana's Quality Start Child Care Rating System, recognize early childhood professionals' educational advancement, and expand families' access to quality care.

While these financing approaches provided additional incentives and resources for programs and educators, they did not establish a dedicated or stable source of workforce funding. Instead, early childhood programs continued to rely on a combination of funding sources to sustain operations and support their workforce, including Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) subsidies, parent tuition, Head Start funding, philanthropic grants, and local contracts (Children's Funding Project, 2022; Louisiana Department of Education [LDOE], n.d.c; LDOE, 2025; Louisiana Legislative Fiscal Office, 2023; LPIC, 2024). As an ECE advocate and center director put it, "I've always had to braid funding to make ends meet." This structure has been characterized as administratively complex and financially unstable, requiring program leaders to continuously coordinate across funding sources to sustain operations in the absence of a single predictable revenue base (Bipartisan Policy Center, 2021b; Daughtery, 2026).

The tax credit approach represented an early recognition that strengthening ECE systems required investment beyond traditional program funding. In particular, the tax credit for center directors and teaching staff created a mechanism for directly recognizing early childhood professionals through financial incentives tied to educational attainment and professional development pathways. However, while the SRTC provided meaningful recognition and financial incentives for ECE professionals, they did not fundamentally alter the structural conditions contributing to persistent wage inequities among early educators (McLean et al., 2024b). The credits operated within a broader financing structure that continued to rely primarily on parents' ability to pay and therefore limited ECE program leaders' ability to offer competitive wages and benefits.

The governance reforms introduced through Act 3 were accompanied by increases in accountability and quality expectations. Louisiana implemented a unified Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), expanded the use of Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS®) observations, and strengthened quality improvement systems statewide (LDOE, n.d.d). These reforms contributed to measurable improvements in program quality throughout Louisiana (Bassok et al., 2021). However, they also increased expectations for educators without corresponding increases in compensation (Bassok et al., 2021). As a result, ECE program leaders faced growing pressure to recruit and retain qualified educators within a compensation structure that remained largely unchanged.

Wages for early childhood educators in Louisiana averaged approximately \$9.13 per hour prior to the pandemic (McLean et al., 2021). In many parishes, early educators were expected to meet increasingly rigorous standards while earning wages that remained near or below living wage thresholds (LPIC, 2022; McLean et al., 2024c).

"At least in the last 10, almost 15 years now, [...] the credentials are required, but the pay, the rate of pay, just there was a very great disparity between the two."

—ECE Advocate & Home-Based Provider

Louisiana's early childhood workforce also faced substantial compensation inequities relative to the K-12 education system. Prior to the pandemic, early educators holding bachelor's degrees earned approximately 22.4 percent less than similarly educated K-8 teachers, while the poverty rate among early educators reached 18 percent—more than five times the rate observed among K-8 teachers (McLean et al., 2021). These disparities reflected longstanding differences in how ECE and K-12 education were financed and valued within public systems. The wage gap also underscores that workforce recruitment and retention challenges were driven not only by low wages overall, but also by persistent wage inequities across educational sectors.

These wage inequities contributed to substantial workforce instability across Louisiana's early childhood system. Approximately 35 percent of early educators in Louisiana left their sites annually, with turnover rates reaching roughly 44 percent in child care centers (LDOE, 2021). Financial insecurity appeared to be an important contributor to these patterns. By the eve of the pandemic, Louisiana had established a strong governance framework and was experimenting with new financing approaches for investment in ECE. However, these efforts had not resolved the longstanding compensation and workforce challenges that threatened the sustainability of the sector.

Louisiana's COVID-19 Response

The COVID-19 pandemic created significant instability within Louisiana's early childhood sector. In a survey of educators in Jefferson and Rapides Parishes conducted during the early months of the pandemic, approximately three quarters of child care sites experienced temporary closures, about one third of early educators reported being laid off, and more than one half experienced reductions in weekly earnings (Markowitz et al., 2020). At the same time, the crisis elevated public awareness of the essential role that child care plays in supporting families, workforce participation, and economic recovery (Bipartisan Policy Center, 2021b; Kathleen Babineaux Blanco Public Policy Center & LPIC, 2021).

Louisiana's response built on governance structures, local partnerships, and stakeholder relationships being strengthened since 2012. Existing partnerships among the LDOE, local networks, program leaders, advocacy organizations, and intermediary groups enabled rapid communication and policy coordination during a period of extraordinary uncertainty (Louisiana Act 3, 2012; LDOE, n.d.e). Rather than operating through a fully centralized model, Louisiana's early childhood governance system relies on a distributed set of

institutions that link state agencies with actors at the regional and program leadership levels, allowing policy to be informed by on-the-ground implementation realities (LDOE, n.d.e).

Within this system of governance, intermediary organizations played a particularly important role in elevating the experiences and concerns of ECE program leaders within policy discussions.

- [4PXP](#)—founded by a group of Louisiana center directors and family child care providers serving low-income children of color in the New Orleans area—built a collective advocacy voice for ECE program leaders through policy advocacy calls, peer-to-peer technical assistance, and an annual conference convening several hundred program owners, directors, and teachers from across the state.
- [Geaux Far Louisiana](#)—a statewide initiative led by the LPIC in partnership with [Wilcox Academy of Early Learning](#)—took a parallel approach centered on parent and program leadership, with a steering committee composed primarily of parents and program leaders rather than policy professionals (Bezos Family Foundation, 2026; Geaux Far Louisiana, n.d.). Since its 2021 launch, Geaux Far Louisiana has documented policy engagement across several areas, including state budget appropriations for early childhood, the continuation of the [Early Childhood Care and Education Commission](#), and revisions to employer-supported child care tax credits.
- These efforts also complemented formal advisory structures such as the [Early Childhood Care and Education Advisory Council](#) and regional [Ready Start Networks](#), which were designed to incorporate feedback from ECE program leaders and community members into policy design and implementation (SEE-Partnerships, n.d.b).

One of the most consequential policy changes during the pandemic period involved reforming child care subsidy payments and practices (Wilensky et al., 2023). Historically, program leaders were reimbursed based on children's attendance, meaning that program revenue fluctuated whenever children were absent. During the pandemic, when attendance became highly unpredictable due to illness, quarantine requirements, and family circumstances, this reimbursement model became financially untenable (Child Care Aware of America, 2021). Louisiana responded by shifting toward enrollment-based reimbursement approaches (First Five Years Fund, 2026). This change recognized that ECE program leaders continue to incur fixed costs regardless of daily attendance levels and provided significantly greater revenue stability during a period of ongoing uncertainty.

At the same time, Louisiana expanded access to child care assistance by modifying eligibility requirements, extending eligibility periods, and implementing policies intended to reduce disruptions in families' subsidy participation (Bipartisan Policy Center, 2021a; LDOE, n.d.b). These changes helped further stabilize enrollment while improving access for families affected by pandemic-related economic disruptions.

During the pandemic, reimbursement rates increased substantially. Louisiana raised Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) daily maximums, and some program categories reached about \$68 per child per day for infant care and \$42 for toddler care (LDOE, 2022a; LDOE, 2022b). Coupled with the shift to enrollment-based reimbursement, these changes provided greater revenue stability and additional flexibility for ECE program leaders to invest in their workforce, although reimbursement rates continued to fall below the true cost of care (LDOE, 2024). One of our interviewees let us know how she felt about increased reimbursement rates:

"I've been in business 20 years, and [after the increased reimbursement rates] literally was the first time that I could catch my breath."

—ECE Advocate & Center Director

In addition to efforts to stabilize ECE program revenue, Louisiana used federal relief funding to support direct investments in educator compensation through the Teacher Support Grants initiative. Developed in response to mounting concerns about workforce instability, low wages, and high turnover among child care educators, the initiative distributed more than \$28 million in Teacher Support Grants to CCAP-participating center-based child care programs during 2021-2022 (LDOE, 2022c). The grants required participating program leaders to use the funding for one-time stipends or wage supplements for educators, rather than supporting general operational expenses. State leaders described the grants as a strategy to support the ECE workforce and recognize educators who continued serving children and families through the pandemic, while also helping ECE program leaders address staffing challenges (Bassok et al., 2024).

Federal relief dollars also supported a workforce compensation initiative: the [Louisiana Child Care Teacher Supplemental Pay Pilot Program](#). Launched in September 2022 through a partnership between the LDOE and a Louisiana university-based public policy research center, the pilot tested whether ongoing supplemental compensation could improve workforce retention and stability among teachers at CCAP-participating centers. Funding was distributed through the centers' payroll systems to provide wage increases for eligible educators. Participating centers were assigned to one of two compensation models: a fixed annual payment of approximately \$2,080 or a wage increase equivalent to about 10 percent of pay. Findings suggested that educators valued the additional compensation, but that one-time supplemental payments alone were unlikely to address

deeper retention challenges (Thibodeaux et al., 2026). Even so, the pilot represented one of Louisiana's first statewide efforts to evaluate a direct compensation strategy for early educators.

The pandemic period also accelerated policy experimentation with alternative funding strategies. One major development was the expansion of a Birth-to-Three (B-3) contracted seats pilot, which provided programs with more predictable per-seat funding during the crisis (LDOE, 2021). In the 2020-2021 school year, 660 B-3 seats had been funded across 13 Ready Start Networks. By 2021-2022, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education had awarded more than \$30 million in combined CRRSA and PDG renewal grant funding to support approximately 2,970 B-3 seats across 22 parishes statewide, more than quadrupling the total number of children served (Children's Coalition for Northeast Louisiana, 2021).

Through this expansion, the state increased its reliance on contracted slots as a mechanism to stabilize program revenue, shifting away from more volatile attendance-based subsidy structures toward a model that guaranteed funding based on enrollment capacity rather than daily utilization (Bipartisan Policy Center, 2021a). This approach allowed participating centers to secure more consistent monthly revenue, which in turn supported efforts to improve staffing stability, offer more competitive wages, and maintain classroom continuity during periods of fluctuating enrollment (Sklar et al., 2021).

"When the B-to-3 CCAP came in, that was amazing help. When first introduced, it was paying more than regular CCAP.... So that was a big help where I was able to catch up on things and not be behind."

—Family Child Care Provider

Overall, the pandemic demonstrated that strengthening Louisiana's early childhood workforce required more than one-time wage supplements. Truly supporting ECE educators called for predictable financing and institutional stability. As federal relief funding began to expire, Louisiana entered a new phase of balancing the continuation of pandemic-era innovations with the challenge of developing more sustainable long-term approaches to supporting the ECE workforce.

Post-Pandemic Scenario

Sustained and Expanded Efforts

One of the most significant accomplishments in the post-pandemic era was the retention of enrollment-based reimbursement policies. Unlike many pandemic-era initiatives that ended with relief funding, enrollment-based reimbursement became embedded within Louisiana's financing structure (First Five Years Fund, 2026).

Louisiana also continued pursuing ECE workforce development initiatives designed to strengthen recruitment and career advancement. Efforts included [apprenticeship programs](#), [credential pathways](#), [professional development systems](#), and [partnerships with workforce development agencies](#). These initiatives reflected a growing recognition that workforce shortages cannot be addressed through compensation policies alone, but require broader investments in career pathways and professional infrastructure (LDOE, 2025; Northwestern State University of Louisiana, n.d.).

As Louisiana transitioned beyond emergency relief funding, these efforts reflected a broader shift from short-term stabilization toward long-term workforce sustainability. Building on lessons from the pandemic, the state increasingly focused on strengthening the systems and infrastructure needed to support a more stable and professionalized early childhood workforce, while recognizing that lasting compensation improvements would require sustained public investment beyond temporary federal relief.

Ongoing Gaps and Challenges

Despite substantial progress, significant challenges remain. Although several structural reforms remained in place, key compensation initiatives like the Teacher Support Grants and Teacher Supplemental Pay Pilot Program lacked dedicated long-term funding streams. This deficit raised concerns about whether workforce gains achieved during the pandemic could be maintained.

The trajectory of B-3 contracted seat expansion shows how powerful yet fragile time-limited funding can be. Federal relief funding enabled Louisiana to rapidly expand contracted seats during the pandemic, giving programs a more predictable stream of revenue. In response, program leaders hired additional staff, raised wages, and opened new classrooms, assuming that these contracted seats would continue. When the temporary funding began to phase out, however, reductions or rebalancing of contracted seats left financial gaps that some programs could not absorb (LDOE, 2021).

Louisiana's 2023 Market Rate Survey documented these pressures directly, finding that staffing and the ability to pay competitive wages remained program leaders' single greatest operational challenge, even during the period when ARPA supplemental payments—averaging approximately \$61,752 per Type III center³—were helping to offset annual losses (LDOE, 2024). The fiscal consequences of funding discontinuity were also visible at the system level: when the first round of relief funding expired, Louisiana was forced to open a waitlist for its CCAP subsidy program in October 2022 (Small & Fortner, 2024). Taken together, these dynamics show that while contracted-seat financing can provide greater funding stability than attendance-based reimbursement—a reliance on short-term funding to fuel long-term expansion creates significant risks for both program leaders and families.

Geographic inequities also persist. Interviews conducted for this case study highlighted variation in local capacity to generate additional funding for early childhood programs across parishes, reflecting broader differences in local economic conditions. In many parishes, particularly those with fewer economic resources, local fundraising capacity is limited. The scale and sources of local funding can vary considerably, with some rural parishes relying on small-scale fundraising efforts and community contributions.

In contrast, ECE programs in urban parishes—particularly those with established governance infrastructure such as Orleans—often benefited from stronger institutional partnerships and philanthropic investments (Kathleen Babineaux Blanco Public Policy Center & LPIC, 2021; SEE-Partnerships, n.d.b). Interviewees explained that New Orleans has developed compensation and workforce supports through voter-approved dedicated tax millage for early childhood education combined with state matching resources and philanthropic partnerships (Children's Funding Accelerator, n.d.). The millage generates about \$21 million annually, expands child care seats, unlocks state matching funds, and allows the program to boost teacher wages and maintain lower teacher:child ratios (Abugov, 2023).

Differences across program types also remain significant. Type III centers participating in Louisiana's publicly funded accountability and quality system generally had greater access to public resources and structured quality improvement supports than programs operating outside these systems (Louisiana Act No. 3, 2012).

³ There are [three types](#) of early learning programs in Louisiana: Type I, Type II, and Type III. Type III programs receive additional state or federal public funding beyond federal food and nutrition programs, must meet the state's performance and academic standards, and can participate in programs such as the CCAP.

Administrative burden continues to challenge program leaders, as well. Many ECE programs operate with limited administrative staff while managing increasingly complex reporting, compliance, payroll, licensing, and grant requirements. These responsibilities consume resources that might otherwise be invested directly in workforce supports.

Most importantly, retention remains an unresolved issue (LPIC, n.d.a). Our interviewees shared that although compensation has improved in some settings, educators continue to leave for occupations offering higher wages, stronger benefits, and more predictable schedules.

"Teachers are leaving to go work for Home Depot, Target, Starbucks because they can not only get higher pay, they get benefits."

—ECE Advocate

At the same time, much of the advocacy framing around compensation has emphasized the relationship that wages, workforce recruitment, and retention have with program sustainability (For Providers By Providers [4PXP], 2026). While these concerns are essential for program stability, this framing does not always fully capture compensation as a fair valuation of early educators' skills, experiences, and contributions (McLean et al., 2024a). Future workforce strategies could build on existing advocacy efforts by broadening public narratives about compensation beyond recruitment and retention to strengthen recognition of early educators as skilled professionals (Whitebook & Williams, 2022).

The state's experience suggests that long-term workforce sustainability will require not only continued attention to wages, but also durable financing mechanisms, stronger benefit structures, expanded career pathways, and policies that address persistent geographic and program-level inequities. In this respect, Louisiana's post-pandemic efforts represent an important transition from short-term stabilization toward the longer-term challenge of building a sustainable early childhood system and a supported workforce (The Louisiana Association of Business and Industry, 2025).

Elements for Louisiana's Success

While challenges remain, Louisiana's experience shows how long-term investments in governance, partnerships, financing, and local leadership helped build a foundation for advancing the early childhood workforce and systems. These investments have strengthened the state's capacity to develop and implement workforce strategies, respond to new opportunities such as federal COVID-19 relief funding, and continue making progress beyond periods of temporary investment. The following four points highlight the key elements of Louisiana's approach that have supported this progress and offer lessons for other states working to strengthen early childhood systems.

1. Unified Governance and State–Local System Alignment

Louisiana's financing and workforce initiatives were made possible by more than a decade of governance reform that aligned a historically fragmented ECE system (Kaufman et al. 2018; New America, 2026; SEE Partnerships, n.d.a). Unlike many states where child care, publicly funded pre-kindergarten, and Head Start operate through separate governance systems with different priorities and funding mechanisms, Louisiana established an integrated governance structure that is capable of coordinating policy, accountability, funding, and local implementation across programs (BESE, n.d.).

This unified governance model reduced fragmentation within the state's ECE system. Common quality expectations, coordinated accountability measures, shared planning processes, and coordinated oversight under the LDOE created greater consistency across publicly funded early childhood programs while preserving multiple funding streams (BESE, n.d.; LDOE, n.d.a; LDOE, 2019; LDOE, 2026). Interviewees described this alignment as one of Louisiana's outstanding long-term achievements because it created clearer communication channels, reduced duplication of effort, and enabled state and local partners to work toward shared priorities.

Importantly, this governance infrastructure also increased Louisiana's capacity to respond when new opportunities emerged. During the COVID-19 pandemic, existing relationships among state agencies, intermediary organizations, program leaders, and local networks allowed the state to communicate rapidly, implement stabilization policies efficiently, and coordinate new workforce investments without creating entirely new administrative structures (LDOE, 2022c). In this sense, the pandemic did not create Louisiana's collaborative capacity—it tested infrastructure that had already been developed over the previous decade.

2. State–Local Partnership Infrastructure Through Ready Start Networks

Louisiana has strengthened its early childhood system by investing in local governance structures that empowered parishes to identify priorities, coordinate partners, and advance workforce strategies within a shared statewide framework (LDOE, n.d.f).

Rather than relying solely on centralized decision making, Louisiana developed a governance model that distributed leadership across state and local levels. Ready Start Networks became a key mechanism for translating statewide priorities into locally responsive implementation by bringing together school systems, child care program leaders, Head Start agencies, businesses, philanthropy, higher education institutions, and community organizations (LDOE, n.d.f).

Interviewees emphasized that these partnerships extended beyond program coordination. Ready Start Networks created durable relationships that enabled parishes to respond collectively to emerging workforce challenges, helped parishes identify and coordinate local funding opportunities, and aligned investments across organizations that otherwise operated independently (LDOE, n.d.f). Because local partners had already established collaborative planning processes before the pandemic, many parishes were better positioned to continue pursuing workforce initiatives.

Another important contribution of the Ready Start Networks model was its ability to create regular communication between state leaders and local parishes. Conversations with stakeholders highlighted how these relationships provide important channels for sharing information about local needs and implementation experiences, which can in turn inform future grant opportunities and policy discussions. Local implementation experiences inform state policy discussions while statewide priorities provide a common framework for local planning. This reciprocal relationship strengthens policy implementation by allowing state leaders to better understand local conditions while giving parishes greater ownership over early childhood workforce and system priorities.

3. ECE Program Leadership Voice Through Advocacy and Intermediary Organizations

Louisiana's progress was supported not only by formal governance structures, but also by intermediary organizations and advocacy networks that helped connect policymakers with program leaders, families, local leaders, and community partners. Organizations such as 4PXP, LPIC, Geaux Far Louisiana, and other intermediary partners served as important connectors within the ECE system, creating channels for program leaders, families, local leaders, researchers, and policymakers to share information and coordinate around emerging priorities.

"We sit as an intermediary in so many of these spaces. [We are the] connective tissue bringing people together."

—ECE Advocate

Rather than functioning solely as advocacy organizations, these intermediaries help bridge the gap between policy development and implementation. Their ongoing relationships with program leaders and state leaders create mechanisms for bringing implementation challenges into policy discussions and ensure that workforce issues—such as staffing shortages, program sustainability, and educator compensation—were informed by experiences from the field.

"I always say if you don't have a seat at the table, you're on the menu. And we could no longer afford to be on the menu. We needed our voice heard. And the people? It's us."

—ECE Advocate & Center Director

The role of intermediary organizations extends beyond representing program leaders' perspectives—they also shape who participates in early childhood policy conversations. By elevating the operational realities of child care programs and expanding public engagement around early childhood investment, these organizations have strengthened Louisiana's capacity to develop policies that are more closely connected to implementation realities.

4. Layered Financing Strategies Within a Constrained Funding Environment

Louisiana's experience shows how states and localities can use multiple financing strategies to advance ECE workforce investments within a constrained fiscal environment. Rather than relying on a single funding source, Louisiana developed a combination of state appropriations, local matching mechanisms, tax incentives, philanthropic investments, and temporary federal relief funding to create additional opportunities for supporting early childhood priorities (Children's Funding Project, 2022; LDOE, 2025; Louisiana Legislative Fiscal Office, 2023; LPIC, 2024).

Interviewees described local leaders as braiding funding sources to support workforce initiatives. Parishes combined available resources to respond to local priorities while adapting to changing fiscal conditions. During the pandemic, federal relief funding provided unprecedented opportunities for direct compensation investments (Small & Fortner, 2024). As those temporary resources expired, many parishes drew upon previously established partnerships, local matching mechanisms, and other funding sources to continue supporting early childhood priorities, even if at smaller scales (Small & Fortner, 2024).

The Louisiana experience also demonstrates the value of creating financing structures that encourage shared responsibility across levels of government and community partners. Programs such as the Early Childhood Education Fund incentivize local investment by matching community contributions, allowing state dollars to leverage additional public and private resources (LDOE 2025; U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, n.d.a). This approach expanded local ownership of early childhood investment while reducing dependence on a single funding source.

What's Next for Louisiana?

As Louisiana moves beyond the era of federal COVID-19 relief funding, the state continues to face the challenge of sustaining progress in the absence of federal investments. While the governance structures, partnerships, and financing strategies built over the past decade provide a strong foundation, interviewees emphasized that continued progress will depend on how Louisiana strengthens compensation, expands equitable access to resources, and sustains long-term investments in the early childhood workforce. Our background research and interviews illuminate key considerations and potential next steps for the state as it continues to strengthen its ECE compensation policies and vision.

Solution 1. Leverage existing systems to advance long-term compensation reform.

Louisiana has built many of the institutional conditions necessary to support ECE workforce investments. The next step is making sure those structures lead to lasting improvements in educator compensation. While governance reforms have strengthened coordination and implementation capacity, governance structures alone do not improve educator compensation. The importance of ensuring that these investments translate into meaningful recognition and compensation for the ECE workforce emerged as an important theme in our interviews.

This solution may include establishing shared statewide goals for educator compensation, strengthening coordination across available funding streams where feasible, and continuing to integrate workforce priorities into broader ECE system planning. The opportunity now lies in ensuring that educator compensation becomes a sustained and intentional component of the state's long-term early childhood agenda rather than a series of individual initiatives.

Solution 2. Preserve local innovation while advancing equity.

One challenge that emerged through the interviews is that not every parish has the same capacity to benefit from Louisiana's partnership-based approach. Parishes like Orleans, with stronger institutional partnerships and administrative infrastructure, were generally better positioned to leverage available opportunities than parishes with fewer local resources. For example, participation in the state's Early Childhood Education Fund, which matches local contributions dollar for dollar, expanded from four participating parishes in 2022-23 to just 14 of the state's 64 parishes by 2024-25 (Gray, 2025; Leaders for a Better Louisiana, 2025), indicating that many parishes continue to face challenges in accessing or generating matching funds.

Moving forward, Louisiana's challenge is not to replace local flexibility with greater centralization, but to ensure that parishes have the support needed to benefit from the state's partnership-based approach. Continued technical assistance, planning support, and targeted investments for parishes with fewer resources could help expand equitable access to workforce initiatives while preserving the local innovation that has become a hallmark of Louisiana's governance model. Such efforts may also help reduce disparities in parishes' ability to leverage funding opportunities and sustain workforce investments over time.

Solution 3. Expand educator-centered advocacy.

Louisiana has built strong mechanisms for program leader engagement through intermediary organizations and Ready Start Networks, creating important channels for program leaders and community partners to participate in policy discussions. However, there are limited opportunities for staff employed in ECE programs to participate directly in policy discussions. Expanding opportunities for early educators to engage alongside program leaders could help ensure that future compensation initiatives more fully reflect educators' professional experiences, workplace realities, and economic needs.

Interviews conducted for this report highlighted the importance of creating more direct opportunities for educators to share their perspectives with policymakers and other stakeholders. Existing avenues, including periodic surveys conducted by advocacy organizations and state-level entities, provide some opportunities for educator input, though awareness and participation may vary.

As educator participation expands, Louisiana may also have opportunities to broaden how advocacy efforts frame compensation. While much of the state's advocacy has successfully emphasized recruitment, retention, and program sustainability, future efforts could more explicitly position compensation as an issue of professional recognition, equity, and the fair valuation of early educators' expertise and labor.

Solution 4. Strengthening statewide financing for sustainable workforce compensation.

Louisiana can build upon its existing financing strategies by strengthening stable public investments that sustain compensation improvements over time while continuing to leverage local and philanthropic partnerships. The state's financing approach has expanded opportunities for ECE workforce investment, but does not eliminate challenges associated with long-term sustainability and differences in local fiscal capacity.

Compensation improvements that depend heavily on local matching, philanthropic partnerships, or time-limited grants are vulnerable to funding cycles and shifting priorities. Moving forward, Louisiana's challenge will be to anchor compensation gains in more durable recurring public funding streams so that improvements made today are not at risk of eroding once current partnerships or grant periods end.

Louisiana's experience shows that strengthening the early childhood workforce requires long-term investments in governance, partnerships, financing, and collaboration that make future workforce improvements possible. While challenges related to compensation, equity, and sustainable funding remain, Louisiana demonstrates how building system capacity over time can help states respond to new opportunities and continue moving ECE workforce policies forward. States seeking to strengthen their own early childhood systems may find Louisiana's experience instructive: durable reform is achieved not through a single policy or funding stream, but through sustained investments in the systems that make compensation reform possible.

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Appendix

Table A1. Timeline of Key Initiatives in Louisiana, 2008-2025

Month, Year	Program Description
January 2008	Louisiana launched the School Readiness Tax Credits, including refundable tax credits for teachers and directors working in eligible child care centers, with amounts tied to education and credentials.
April 2012	The state legislature passed the Early Childhood Education Act (Act 3), unifying governance and establishing a system that links funding and accountability to program quality.
June 2015	Bulletin 140 established a unified statewide QRIS, linking publicly funded programs to a common quality framework and reinforcing workforce credential and quality expectations.
June 2017	Act 353 established a state-controlled Early Childhood Education Fund, explicitly designed to match local funds for early care and education.
July 2019	Louisiana required all lead teachers in publicly funded child care centers to obtain an Early Childhood Ancillary Certificate (ECAC), establishing a minimum qualification standard aligned with workforce professionalization.
March 2021	Louisiana announced Child Care Stabilization Grants using federal relief funding, supporting staffing costs, providing educator stipends, and stabilizing program finances during the COVID-19 pandemic.
May-June 2021	The legislature directed additional revenue streams to the Louisiana Early Childhood Education Fund, including 50% of NBA Pelican specialty license plate revenue (May) and 25% of sports betting revenue, up to \$20 million annually (June).
July 2021	The state launched Teacher Support Grants, providing \$28 million to child care centers for two rounds of noncompetitive wage supplements for teachers and other nonadministrative staff. Funded by the federal CRRSA Act and ARPA, the temporary pandemic-era program concluded in 2022.
June 2022	The state budget (HB 1) included \$44 million in early care and education funding, with investments to expand access and increase payment rates for programs.
July 2022	An additional \$40 million in one-time funding was allocated to the Early Childhood Education Fund to incentivize local investment in early care and education.
September 2022	The Louisiana Department of Education partnered with the Kathleen Blanco Public Policy Center at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette to design a grant program to evaluate temporary wage increases for center-based teachers. Centers were randomly assigned to two pilot groups: Group 1 received funding to provide a fixed \$2,080 per teacher (equivalent to a \$1/hour wage increase for a full-time worker), while Group 2 received funding to provide a 10% pay increase per teacher. A third group of centers did not receive any funding for pay increases, acting as a control group for the study.
June 2025	Louisiana renamed and expanded the School Readiness Tax Credit as the Workforce Child Care Tax Credit, increasing eligible business-related child care expenses and strengthening workforce-support incentives.

Table A2. Summary of State-Level Compensation and Financial Relief Initiatives in Louisiana, 2008-2025

Type of Strategy	Name of Initiative	Timeframe	Payment Amount	Participants	Funding Mechanism	Funding Source
Tax Credit	Workforce Child Care Tax Credit	Jan. 2008 - Present	\$2,192 to \$4,381	4,427 to 8,860 (2023)	Individuals claim this refundable credit through their state tax filing.	CCDF Funds; General Funds
Program Grant	Teacher Support Grants	Jul. 2021 - Jan. 2022	\$3,200 per classroom The amount that staff received was at the discretion of the center's directors.	More than 600 child care programs (Round 1, Aug. 2021); more than 700 programs (Round 2, Feb. 2022)	The state awarded centers \$3,200 per open classroom to compensate non-admin staff and teachers	CARES Funds; CRRSA Funds; ARPA Funds
Program Grant / Wage Increase Pilot	Teacher Supplemental Pay Pilot	Sep. 2022 - Sep. 2024	\$2,080 per year (2,878 teachers) OR 10% pay increase (2,732 teachers)	2,732 educators received the 10% supplement; 2,878 educators received the \$2,080 lump sum payment. 2,469 educators were in the control group and did not receive funds	Centers received funding to disburse the additional pay at least monthly.	ARPA Funds