EARLY EDUCATOR INVESTMENT COLLABORATIVE

2026 PROGRESS REPORT

Collaboratively investing in equitable compensation, vital support, and quality preparation for those who care for and educate our youngest learners.



The Collaborative and contributors to its *A Decade of Change* paper series featured as plenary speakers at the 2026 National Early Childhood Education Workforce Convening

A MESSAGE FROM OUR EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Dear Reader,

As we reflect on the past year, we are reminded that the work of strengthening the early childhood workforce requires both urgency and a long view. At the Early Educator Investment Collaborative (The Collaborative), we remain grounded in a simple but powerful belief: **to achieve our collective aspirations for all young children in this country, we have to attend to the adults who care for and educate them.**

This year, we have continued to advance our focus on compensation, recognizing that **while there are many important levers for strengthening the workforce, fair and sustainable pay is foundational**. Low compensation continues to impact children, families and employers. We cannot ask educators to invest more in their preparation, take on greater responsibility, or remain in the profession without addressing the economic conditions that shape their lives and work.

This report highlights the investments and partnerships that are strengthening our understanding of what it takes to turn compensation strategies into lasting change.

How we get the work done is through relationships. We have continued to see that meaningful systems change is built through partnership, shared learning, and collective action. That is why we intentionally foster community through our work, including investing in Communities of Practice that create space for leaders and funders across states, sectors, and communities to share ideas, learn from one another, and strengthen their work together.

It is also why we are so excited to share our progress with you, the momentum we've been building throughout the year, and to showcase our investments in action.

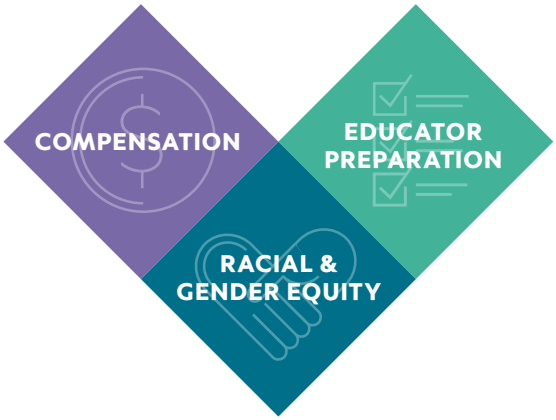
We are proud to be part of this growing community and invite you to learn with us, share what you are discovering, and help build a future where early educators are valued and compensated for the essential work they do.

Onwards,

Ola J. Friday | **OLA J. FRIDAY, ED.L.D.,** *Executive Director*

We believe:

1. That early childhood educators deserve professional recognition and fair **COMPENSATION**.
2. That strong **PREPARATION** programs drive better outcomes for children.
3. That racial and gender **EQUITY** must guide the field.



We invest in:

GRANTS to support innovative strategies that serve as proof-points for systemic funding.

RESEARCH to support policy decisions and the implementation of actionable strategies.

FIELD ENGAGEMENT that convenes and brings together partners to facilitate learning, sharing, and strategies.

COMPENSATION

COMPENSATION CAPACITY BUILDING GRANTS

Now in the third year of The Collaborative's Compensation Capacity-Building Grants, grantees are making meaningful progress toward stronger and more sustainable compensation for early educators.

IN COLORADO, the Department of Early Childhood (**CDEC**) developed and secured endorsement of **comprehensive recommendations** for a scalable initiative to increase early educator pay. A **Teacher Salary Grant Pilot** provided more than 300 early childhood teachers and assistant teachers with wage increases of $2.99–$7.58 per hour. **Evaluation findings** showed reduced material hardship, increased job satisfaction, and improved teacher well-being, and helped shape Colorado's new compensation recommendations. The CDEC also implemented a **$1,200 refundable Care Worker Tax Credit** for eligible early educators.

IN TARRANT COUNTY, TEXAS, **Child Care Associates** is advancing strategies that connect early educator credentials, career pathways, and compensation. Building on their **Prime Early Learning pilot**, CCA is leveraging pre-K investments and credential incentives to support higher compensation. CCA's work also includes the **Center for the Early Educator**. This year, CCA was selected as a state pre-K intermediary, creating new opportunities to strengthen the early childhood workforce, community-based pre-K, and educator pay.

IN DC, the **Office of the State Superintendent of Education** is strengthening implementation of the **Early Childhood Educator Pay Equity Fund**. Research partnerships with **Urban Institute** and **Mathematica** are also documenting the Fund's impact and building the evidence base for continued investment in early educator compensation.

IN LOUISIANA, the **Louisiana Policy Institute for Children** is partnering with early childhood educators and grantees through demonstration projects and a community of practice to advance compensation strategies. Business coaching initiatives have contributed to increased salaries for early childhood educators, while the project is **documenting lessons** and system-level changes to inform future scaling and **statewide compensation efforts**.

This **case study** captures lessons from grantees who are testing strategies to increase educator compensation.

IN MINNESOTA, the **Department of Children, Youth, and Families** is advancing compensation strategies through **Great Start Compensation Support Payments**, the newly launched **Early Childhood Workforce Benefits Pilot**, and their continued work on wage scales and credential-linked compensation. Evaluation of the **Pay Equity Pilot** found that 89% of follow-up participants remained in the same job and role one year later, providing important evidence to inform further efforts to strengthen compensation and benefits for the early childhood workforce.

"We really appreciate this funding, which has been very valuable to putting in place capacity we needed internally to implement our workforce compensation initiatives successfully and learn from them to improve our work and inform the field."

COMPENSATION CAPACITY GRANTEE



IN CHILD CARE ASSOCIATES' PRIME EARLY LEARNING PILOT

Base wages increased from between **$12–$14 per hour to $16–$18 per hour.**

PAY EQUITY FUND DRIVING LOWER EDUCATOR TURNOVER

For providers not participating in the Fund: **51% turnover**

For participating providers: **37% turnover**



COMPENSATION *(continued)*



COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

In partnership with the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (**CSCCE**) at UC Berkeley, the **Compensation Capacity-Building Community of Practice** continued to bring together six state and local teams through quarterly convenings, working to advance bold approaches to early educator compensation. Over the past year, the CoP moved from building community to deepening shared learning and collaboration.

Learn more from the CoP's shared learning through **quarterly newsletters**, **grantee spotlights and resources**, including our January 29 **webinar** and **Minnesota case study**.

WORTH MORE: ADVANCING ECE COMPENSATION SUMMIT

In September, CSCCE and The Collaborative hosted Worth More: Advancing ECE Compensation, an in-person summit that brought 11 state and local teams together with national experts and leaders from additional states and communities. The convening deepened the work already underway while expanding the conversation about how states and localities can build the capacity and political will to make meaningful, sustained improvements in early educator compensation.

This year, technical assistance remained an important part of the work. In partnership with participating teams, The Collaborative and CSCCE identified areas where targeted support could help convening participants strengthen their strategies. These conversations also helped surface broader questions facing the field, from sustainable financing and benefits to working conditions, career pathways, and the policies needed to support lasting compensation reform.

Click **here** to learn more about the summit and the community of practice.

"That's what's so important about a summit like this. Because then we have states from all of these different contexts coming together and talking about what has worked or what hasn't worked in their contexts, which helps us all together think through what are those underlying aspects that work, even if you're in Massachusetts and in Louisiana. And I think we're excited to take those learnings and share them out and really help all states think about how to address the early care and education compensation crisis."

CAITLIN MCLEAN
DIRECTOR OF MULTI-STATE & INTERNATIONAL PROGRAMS AT CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF CHILD CARE EMPLOYMENT

NARRATIVE CHANGE CAMPAIGN

This year, the **In Our Hands campaign** moved from research to action, in partnership with Community Change, Inc. We translated the messages we tested into the 2026 In Our Hands Organizing **Toolkit** and brought research findings directly to the field, including at the **2026 National Childcare Convention**.





IN OUR HANDS CAMPAIGN: KEY LEARNING

In Our Hands

Providers are among our most trusted messengers, and organizing is a powerful vehicle for narrative change.

Supporting early educators as leaders and messengers equips them with the tools to reach communities, change hearts and minds, and mobilize for greater public investment in child care.

EDUCATOR PREPARATION

INNOVATION GRANTEES: LEAD TEACHER PREPARATION PROGRAMS

As our Innovation Grantees move toward the completion of their grant activities, **UP-LIFT California** and **RESPECT Across Nebraska** continue to demonstrate new approaches to strengthening pathways into the early childhood profession.

"If it was not for The Collaborative, institutes of higher education, who serve diverse populations of students, would not have made the collective gains we did to transform our early childhood education preparation programs and compensation/ financing systems."

INNOVATION GRANTEE
THERESA LOCK
UNIVERSITY OF HAWAI'I AT MĀNOA
COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

UP-LIFT CALIFORNIA concluded five years of **grant activities** in June 2026, strengthening higher education partnerships to make early educator preparation more accessible, aligned, and responsive to the existing ECE workforce.

In April, UP-LIFT convened 92 stakeholders, including higher education leaders, policymakers, employers, and advocates, to advance California's new **PK-3 credential** and address implementation challenges.

Sacramento State · California State University Bakersfield · Cal Poly Pomona

Over the life of the grant, UP-LIFT expanded from **three lead CSU–community college teams** to 15 intersegmental teams, advanced competency-based curriculum and assessment practices, and strengthened pathways for early educators. The partnerships and resources established through the grant will help sustain this work, including through the CSU Chancellor's Office's new **SPARK Center**.

UP-LIFT CALIFORNIA'S GRANT-FUNDED ACTIVITIES (2023-2025): KEY RESULTS

More than **2,000 students supported toward AA attainment.**

More than **4,200 students supported toward BA attainment.**



RESPECT Across Nebraska

RESPECT Across Nebraska is advancing workforce pathways through its apprenticeship program and RESPECT Across Nebraska Scholars Initiative. This year, RESPECT Across Nebraska also convened higher education and early childhood partners to explore Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) as a strategy for converting educators' existing knowledge and experience into college credit, thus creating more accessible degree pathways.

RESPECT CONVENING: KEY LEARNING

Research highlighted that leveraging a prior learning assessment **increases adult learners' likelihood of completing a credential by 17%.**





RACIAL & GENDER EQUITY

MARY PAUPER PAPERS 2.0

In partnership with **Child Trends**, The Collaborative is advancing **Mary Pauper 2.0**, building on the policy recommendations from the **original Mary Pauper papers**. This next phase of research examines the conditions that support or inhibit Black and Indigenous women from becoming effective agents of ECE policy change and assuming and sustaining leadership roles.

This year, the research team began interviewing ECE leaders to explore their career trajectories and the systems, structures, and supports that shape their leadership experiences. Findings will deepen our understanding of the experiences of women of color in early childhood leadership and help inform The Collaborative's ongoing work.

"Though very early on, we are seeing hints in our data that Black and Native American women are having different leadership experiences and journeys. Work culture and institution type also seem to be playing a role in how leadership is supported. Given policy shifts around issues related to diversity, equity, and inclusion, understanding the mechanisms for and the ways in which the field values and supports Black and Native American leaders is both timely and necessary."

CHRISHANA LLOYD
RESEARCH SCHOLAR, CHILD TRENDS

WELLNESS RETREAT AND PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION SERIES FOR ECE LEADERS

In February, The Collaborative supported **Early Learning Access's** 2nd Annual Wellness Retreat for Early Childhood Education leaders in Carefree, Arizona. Through coaching with Didier Sylvain of **The Presence Project**, restorative practices, and peer connection, 12 executive leaders, many of whom were women of color, enjoyed dedicated time to reflect, recharge, and strengthen the relationships that sustain their work.

As an extension of the **retreat**, The Collaborative launched a virtual retreat series to continue supporting this community of leaders. The series creates space for them to explore wellness, healing, and the challenges of systems-change leadership through facilitated conversations, peer exchanges, and individualized coaching.



"It was truly an incredible experience. I left feeling rested, reflective, and deeply empowered. It was such an honor to be part of such a thoughtful, well curated gathering of inspiring leaders. Your leadership and vision really came through in every detail. I'm so grateful for the opportunity."

WINONA HAO
DIRECTOR OF EARLY LEARNING, NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF STATE BOARDS OF EDUCATION

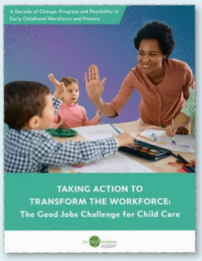
TRANSFORMING THE WORKFORCE: PAPER & WEBINAR SERIES

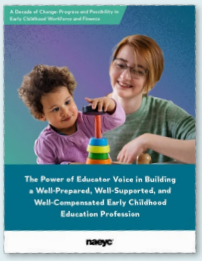
To mark the 10-year anniversary of **Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation** and **Transforming the Financing of Early Care and Education**, The Collaborative released the *A Decade of Change* paper and webinar series in 2025, highlighting progress, lessons learned, and possibilities for the future of the early childhood workforce and financing.

In April 2026, The Collaborative extended this conversation as a featured plenary at the National Early Childhood Education Workforce Convening, hosted by Early Years. Titled *A Decade of Direction: Reflecting on and Renewing the Call to Transform the ECE Workforce*, the session brought together national leaders to reflect on a decade of progress and renew the call for continued action to strengthen the early childhood workforce.

A DECADE OF CHANGE PAPER AND WEBINAR SERIES

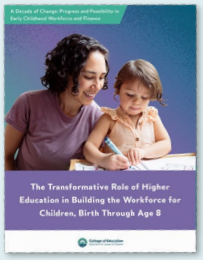
Click on thumbnails to read the reflection papers











LOOKING AHEAD

IN OUR HANDS CAMPAIGN

The next phase of In Our Hands will take this narrative change research across the country, working with grassroots partners to develop state-specific narrative strategies, put validated, provider-led messaging into practice, and strengthen providers as trusted messengers of larger efforts to advance compensation.

HIGHER EDUCATION LEADERSHIP NETWORK

The Collaborative, in partnership with School Readiness Consulting, will launch a new Higher Education Leadership Network, backed by a $1.5 million investment, to strengthen leadership and collaboration across higher education and advance the institutions that prepare the early childhood workforce.

LEARNING ABOUT OUR MODEL

The Collaborative is undertaking a strategic direction exercise to shape the next chapter of our work and refine how we can have the greatest impact on the early educator workforce. In partnership with **Engage R+D** we are examining our pooled funding model and the impact of our investments. Early findings, alongside input from grantees, partners, and Collaborative members are already shaping the strategy process and helping inform our next round of priorities and investments.

CHILD TRENDS RESEARCH

ECE Workforce Pell & Title IV Initiative: The Collaborative is funding new research with **Child Trends** to examine how changes to federal higher education policy could affect early childhood educator preparation and access to credentials.

The **research** will explore whether Workforce Pell Grants can help more educators access short-term training and credentials, and how new federal accountability rules could impact college programs that prepare early childhood educators.

The goal is to help the field understand these changes and identify ways to maintain and expand opportunities for people entering the early childhood workforce.

> *"One of the things I value most about The Collaborative is that it gives philanthropy the ability to take thoughtful risks and learn together at a scale that's difficult for any one funder to do alone. Just as important is how strategically those investments are designed, bringing together different funder perspectives and field expertise to shape who needs to be at the table, how the work is paced, and how grantees learn from one another. The design is part of what makes the investments so powerful."*
>
> **LIS STEVENS,** STEERING COMMITTEE CHAIR



OLA J. FRIDAY, ED.L.D.
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



TANYA CASTIN
PROGRAM MANAGER



LIS STEVENS
STEERING COMMITTEE CHAIR

FUNDERS FUELING THE COLLABORATIVE

Bezos Family Foundation
Buffett Early Childhood Fund — investing in the early years
HEISING-SIMONS FOUNDATION
imaginable futures
STRANAHAN FOUNDATION

For questions or additional information, please contact us at **info@earlyedcollaborative.org**