

INTRODUCTION

A high-quality early childhood education (ECE) provides lifelong benefits and sets an essential foundation for children's success in later school years. Students enrolled in a high quality ECE program show higher gains in math, literacy and language skills. Research has also shown that success outcomes for children are strongly influenced by the quality of programs they attend and that children who have access to high-quality ECE programs have lower misconduct rates and better health outcomes than children who do not attend such programs.

In 2019, New Mexico had 217 vacancies for elementary and early childhood/pre-kindergarten teachers and 30 vacancies for educational assistants for elementary and early childhood classrooms, which accounted for 23 percent of all educator vacancies in the state.¹ That same year, Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham inaugurated the new Early Childhood Education and Care Department (ECECD) in order to create a more equitable and cohesive early childhood system and to strengthen the early childhood education workforce in the state.

We are early childhood educators and Teach Plus New Mexico Policy Fellows committed to improving the recruitment and retention of high quality early educators in New Mexico. In the fall of 2020, we surveyed 266 birth-through-PreK teachers in our state in order to identify the areas that directly impact the recruitment and retention of early childhood educators in New Mexico. In this brief, we present our findings and recommendations based on our research.

Findings

1. The majority of teachers believe that filling early childhood positions at their site presents a significant challenge.
2. Teachers point to salary, planning time, and workload as key areas of concern that impact the recruitment of early childhood educators. Recruitment is especially challenging among special education teachers and educational assistants.
3. The majority of early childhood educators are satisfied with their current position and workplace, with site leadership considered a major factor in the overall satisfaction.
4. When it comes to the recruitment and retention of early childhood educators, no one incentive is more in use than another.

Recommendations

1. Survey district and school leadership on the incentives currently offered. Highlight and share the most effective incentives in order to recruit and retain early childhood educators.
2. Create a statewide committee to develop specific recommendations for an improved pay system for early childhood educator workforce and share with the ECECD.
3. Develop an accountability framework for site leaders, including regular opportunities for educator feedback, to identify strengths and create tools for improvement.
4. Dedicate funding to develop and implement an ECE marketing campaign to inform and recruit potential applicants into the ECE workforce.
5. To support a balanced workload, require sites to contractually safeguard a minimum of five hours per week of uninterrupted, protected planning time.

METHODOLOGY

In the fall of 2020, we conducted a survey of 266 early childhood educators in New Mexico about their experiences related to the recruitment and retention of the ECE workforce. Our goals were to:

- + Gauge teachers' perceptions on filling vacant positions at their site.
- + Learn more about specific challenges in the workplace.
- + Examine incentives used to recruit and retain early childhood educators.
- + Identify specific strategies to improve the recruitment and retention of the ECE workforce.

The respondents are current teachers at public preschools (69.9 percent), private preschools (9.0 percent), child care centers (16.2 percent), home-based childcare providers (0.4 percent), and Head Start (10.5 percent) programs in New Mexico.² Among the respondents, more than half identify as a lead teacher.³ The average years of teaching experience of respondents is 14 years, with the level of experience divided into the following areas: 23.4 percent less than 4 years, 26.1 percent 4-9 years, 15.3 percent 10-14 years, and 35.3 percent 15 or more years.⁴

FINDINGS

1. The majority of teachers believe that filling early childhood positions at their site presents a significant challenge.

More than 68 percent of respondents in our survey indicated that filling positions at their site is difficult.⁵ These challenges differ based on location, position, site leadership, and other factors. One respondent stated, *"Hiring can be difficult due to the fact we are a very rural school. So finding an educator or even administrator that 'fits' our community has proven to be very challenging. An understanding of a new community culture has proven to be quite difficult for most and they do not last."* Although each site has its unique circumstances, commonalities include concerns about compensation, finding interested candidates, and frustration with

working conditions. Teachers believe that the leading causes of unfilled positions are compensation, location, and certification.

Given educators' many responsibilities, many felt that their pay was noncommensurate. Respondents reported that they are not adequately compensated to handle their large workloads and lack support with large class sizes or caseloads. When it comes to location, while there is a concern about the lack of applicants across the state, there is a particular difficulty in filling positions in rural communities. Many of these communities are far from colleges and access to teacher preparation programs. There are also no meaningful incentives for educators to relocate to a rural community or retain them long term. According to one respondent, *"Very difficult because we are in a rural small town. People are not going into education and do not want to move to the small town."*

This theme also emerged from our survey's open-ended responses. Teachers indicated that it is difficult to find applicants who are interested in becoming highly qualified to work in the early childhood environment. A position may remain vacant for an extended period of time because there are no applicants for it or interested applicants are not willing to meet the requirements in order to gain employment. According to one teacher: *"It's a little challenging because there are not many applicants and it is nearly impossible to find someone who has done FOCUS before."*

2. Respondents point to salary, planning time, and workload as key areas of concern that impact the recruitment of early childhood educators. Recruitment is especially challenging among special education teachers and educational assistants.

As compared to ECE teachers' level of satisfaction with access to materials, support from peers and administrators, and paid time off, among other areas, teachers had the highest level of dissatisfaction with their salary and compensation with 40 percent of respondents somewhat or very dissatisfied.⁶ Salary ranges can vary greatly depending on positions, locations and whether they are public or private sectors. The following are examples of pay for various ECE roles:

- + According to Payscale.com (2020), public special educational assistant salaries average at \$20,073.⁷
- + Lead public preschool teachers range between \$23,720 - \$39,389 with a state-average at \$29,042 as reported by Salary.com.⁸
- + Head Start teacher salaries that are not aligned to public school teacher pay rates vary greatly depending on the reporting site and the years of experience. Entry-level pay is around \$17,682-\$20,470 and experienced pay ranges from \$20,073 to \$41,241 as reported in an article by Robbie Bruens on ResilientEducator.com (2020).⁹
- + Public PreK teacher salaries aligned with the 2019 increases of the New Mexico three tiered licensure system at a starting rate of Level 1 at \$41,000, Level 2 at \$50,000 and Level 3 at \$60,000 (2019).¹⁰

Base lead teacher pay is directly impacted by the school location, their years of experience, level of education and licensure level. The average annual cost of living wage for New Mexicans is \$48,050. On average, that puts entry level teachers' salaries approximately \$3,000-\$28,000 below the rate of a livable wage in New Mexico per the Quarter 3 of 2020.¹¹ Even more alarming, this places educational assistants between \$15,000-\$34,000 below a livable wage. With the New Mexico 2000

Census reporting 34.7 percent of households having children under the age of 18 and 13.2-49.6 percent being single-parent households, educators and educational support staff cannot adequately provide for living expenses on an educational salary alone.¹²

ECE positions are challenging to retain overall, and are even more challenging when it comes to special education teachers and support staff like educational assistants (EA). Survey respondents shared that EAs in particular, are not making a living wage in many instances and are required to obtain specific requirements for employment that do not align with the low pay. Individuals in these positions leave because they gain different employment with a higher pay or cannot remain in the position due to not obtaining required credentials. *“It can be difficult to find people who have the right qualifications and experience. We have had a lot of trouble with hiring people and then having them leave part way through the school year. I think a lot of people think that teaching preschool is “easy” and they aren’t able to handle the more difficult aspects of the job. The public perception of early childhood workers needs to change,”* stated one respondent.

More than 30 percent of the survey respondents were also dissatisfied with time for planning, preparation, and their workload.¹³¹⁴ In particular, special education teachers may have an increased workload due to additional meetings, paperwork requirements, and overall strategies for teaching. These factors can cause special education employees to be overwhelmed and experience stress. Many respondents emphasized the importance of having EA’s in ECE classrooms to support effective and safe learning environments.

3. The majority of early childhood educators are satisfied with their current position and workplace, with site leadership considered a major factor in the overall satisfaction.

Overall, our survey respondents reported satisfaction with their current workplace, with 8 out of 10 respondents being very or somewhat satisfied.¹⁵ According to one respondent, *“My satisfaction in my career stems from interactions with children and watching them grow. The FOCUS criteria has increased the quality of education in our classrooms.”* Respondents pointed out that having an administrator knowledgeable in ECE who is also supportive and understanding is a key factor. A community atmosphere where teachers, educational assistants, and administrators work together and do whatever it takes for the students often leads to high job satisfaction and lower turnover. Additional efforts to support planning and collaboration contribute to workplace satisfaction. Some sites are providing a full planning day once a month or weekly collaboration times on top of daily independent planning time. Efforts like this contribute to a positive work experience.

While administrative support was often highlighted as a key positive – *“Our school has a great administration and a supportive faculty that make people want to stay working here.”* – a lack of such support was an area of concern. *“I am dissatisfied with the lack of knowledge in early childhood education from the administration that rolls through my district. And with administration also having the lack of knowledge of what the PreK program is about has also led to a misunderstanding of what is happening or needs to happen with these students,”* one respondent shared. A site leader is a major influence in the overall culture within the workplace and site leader’s skills, policies, and supports are factors that contribute to a positive or negative job satisfaction.

4. When it comes to the recruitment and retention of early childhood educators, no one incentive is more in use than another.

In an effort to support recruitment, retention, and/or satisfaction in the workplace, some sites offer some type of incentive to staff. However, when given a list of incentives, fewer than half were identified as in use by sites.¹⁶ One respondent noted, *“Our Board of Directors appreciates our staff and tries its best to meet our needs as far as salary, benefits, and teacher support.”*

Below is a list of incentives in use as identified by respondents, organized from most-in-use to least-in-use.

Incentives	Identified incentive by respondents
Paid time off for training	35.0%
Paid classes/fees towards additional degrees or licenses	30.8%
Ability to work from home	22.9%
Opportunities for leadership/ advancement	19.9%
Stipends for extra duties	19.6%
No incentives given	19.6%
Scholarships/stipends to support requirements for licensure/certification	18.4%
Flexible work schedule	15.4%
Child care support during remote learning	12.4%
Other - Write In	9.8%
Yearly financial bonus	6.0%
Teacher housing	4.9%
Sign-on bonus	4.5%
Relocation bonus	1.5%

Incentives can be a tool that is used to create interest, reduce barriers, and enhance the workplace. If appealing and effective incentives are used and shared out, it could help with staffing across positions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Survey district and school leadership on the incentives currently offered. Highlight and share the most effective incentives in order to recruit and retain early childhood educators.**

The state should survey schools and districts on the range of incentives they currently offer to recruit and retain the ECE workforce. Once surveyed, the findings should be shared publicly in order to highlight the most effective incentives offered. The ECECD should make the full list of incentives offered by various communities available on its website in order to attract new applicants and all stakeholders would benefit from having access to annual data showing trending incentives. We recommended that schools and districts document and upload the incentives used to recruit and retain ECE employees to a statewide database on the ECECD website. This data, collected on an annual basis, will provide all stakeholders vital information on how to attract and retain high quality educators, therefore boosting program effectiveness.

- 2. Create a statewide committee to develop specific recommendations for an improved pay system for early childhood educator workforce and share with the ECECD.**

Although there have been numerous efforts by the state and ECE organizations to appoint committees in an effort to improve ECE across the state, we need to be more explicit about targeting the issue of equitable compensation. We recommend appointing a statewide committee representing a diverse set of voices from a variety of ECE programs, including paraprofessionals, support staff, and other school personnel, whose sole focus is to develop recommendations on best ways to improve the ECE pay system. The committee should work to identify specific barriers that individual entities might face with funding the compensation and develop solutions to overcome these.

- 3. Develop an accountability framework for site leaders, including regular opportunities for educator feedback, to identify strengths and create tools for improvement.**

The state should develop and distribute an annual survey to set and benchmark site leadership goals and help improve the overall culture of the ECE workplace. The survey would give ECE staff a voice in the overall effectiveness of their leadership and help ensure the site leaders' accountability and continuous growth as they work to improve systems and processes at the workplace. Through the survey, the state will be able to gather data, provide support for leaders based on needs, and provide funding as needed.

4. Dedicate funding to develop and implement an ECE marketing campaign to inform and recruit potential applicants into the ECE workforce.

We recommend that ECECD develop and implement a marketing campaign to increase interest in early childhood education and actively recruit highly qualified, new applicants in the field. The campaign would feature the job opportunities throughout the state, connect individuals with teacher preparation and certification programs, and highlight incentives used at various locations. This public service campaign should not replace district or private recruitment practices but instead support efforts by generating interest from young professionals across the state. The campaign would further cement the relationship between the ECECD and NM teacher preparation programs and certification programs by creating an opportunity for improved communication and partnership to engage more candidates interested in pursuing ECE positions.

5. To support a balanced workload, require sites to contractually safeguard a minimum of five hours per week of uninterrupted, protected planning time.

Currently, ECE educators do not have adequate preparation time to effectively plan for instruction, assessment, or complete required paperwork. Early childhood sites may set aside time specific to prepare and plan each week, but this time is often infringed upon with other duties. Educators are expected to attend staff meetings, professional development sessions, or IEP meetings during this time, resulting in educators using countless hours of personal time outside of contract hours (i.e., evenings and weekends) in order to complete required work. The preparation and planning time needs to be protected and used for its intended purpose in order to minimize the time spent outside of contract hours. The state should require a minimum of five hours of planning time for ECE sites statewide in order to ensure quality teaching and support a positive work environment. The state should only approve ste licensure and program plans if these include a minimum of five hours of weekly uninterrupted planning time in their schedules and/or learning plans.

CONCLUSION

Research indicates that a child develops most in their early years and that having access to a quality education, most importantly access to effective educators, ensures all children have the opportunity to succeed. We call on our state leaders to improve the policies and systems that support the recruitment and retention of highly qualified ECE educators and other educational staff in New Mexico.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Boren, Degardin, Lawson, Mendoza, & Perez (2019) 2019 New Mexico Educator Vacancy Report. Retrieved from <https://alliance.nmsu.edu/files/2019/10/2019-New-Mexico-Educator-Vacancy-Report.pdf>
- ² Question: "What type of early childhood site are you currently employed in? (Check all that apply)" Responses: (n = 266) "Public preschool" (69.9 percent), "Private preschool" (9.0 percent), "Child Care center" (16.2 percent), "Home based childcare" (0.4 percent), "Head Start program" (10.5 percent)
- ³ Question: "What is your current role in early childhood education? (Check all that apply)" Responses: (n = 266) "Lead teacher" (57.1 percent), "Assistant teacher" (15.4 percent), "Paraprofessional" (5.6 percent), "Owner / director / administrator" (12.4 percent), "Licensed home care provider" (percent)
- ⁴ Question: "How many years have you been an early childhood educator?" Responses: "Less than 4 years" (61), "4 - 9 years" (68), "10 - 14 years" (40), "15 or more years" (92)
- ⁵ Question: "In general, how difficult is it to fill vacant positions at your site?" Responses: "Very difficult" (27.8 percent), "Somewhat difficult" (40.2 percent), "Not very difficult" (13.9 percent), "Unsure" (10.9 percent).
- ⁶ Question: "We are interested in learning more about your satisfaction with various programs components. Please rate your level of satisfaction with each of the following: Question 7k. Salary and compensation." Responses: "Very satisfied" (14.7 percent), "Somewhat satisfied" (30.2 percent), "Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied" (12.8), "Somewhat dissatisfied" (22.3 percent), "Very dissatisfied" (18.5 percent), "Not applicable" (1.5 percent).
- ⁷ (Dec. 13, 2020) *Special Education Paraprofessional Hourly Rate*. Payscale.com Retrieved from https://www.payscale.com/research/US/Job=Special_Education_Paraprofessional/Hourly_Rate
- ⁸ *Lead Preschool Teacher Salary in New Mexico*. Salary.com. Retrieved December 20, 2020 from <https://www.salary.com/research/salary/posting/lead-preschool-teacher-salary>
- ⁹ Bruens, Robbie (Sep, 2020). *Head Start Teacher: Education, Job and Salary Information*. *Resilient Educator*. Retrieved from <https://resilienteducator.com/teaching-careers/head-start-teacher/>
- ¹⁰ Lee, Morgan (April 2019). New Mexico governor signs spending, pay increases. <https://apnews.com/article/544eed07f6164a15b7945ea9846d35d0>
- ¹¹ World Population Review (2020). *Cost of Living Index By State 2020*. Retrieved from <https://worldpopulationreview.com/state-rankings/cost-of-living-index-by-state>
- ¹² U.S. Census Bureau (2000). *New Mexico Census Data: Households & Families*. Retrieved from https://www.census-charts.com/HF/New_Mexico.html
- ¹³ Question: "We are interested in learning more about your satisfaction with various programs components. Please rate your level of satisfaction with each of the following: Question 7o. Appropriate time for planning and preparation." Responses: "Very satisfied" (19.8 percent), "Somewhat satisfied" (31.9 percent), "Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied" (11.8), "Somewhat dissatisfied" (17.1 percent), "Very dissatisfied" (18.3 percent), "Not applicable" (1.5 percent)
- ¹⁴ Question: "We are interested in learning more about your satisfaction with various programs components. Please rate your level of satisfaction with each of the following: Question 7p. Sufficient staff to manage workload" Responses: "Very satisfied" (20.4 percent), "Somewhat satisfied" (31.7 percent), "Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied" (13.2), "Somewhat dissatisfied" (20.4 percent), "Very dissatisfied" (13.2 percent), "Not applicable" (1.1 percent)
- ¹⁵ Question: "Overall, to what degree are you satisfied or dissatisfied with your current role and site in which you are working?" Responses: "Very satisfied" (45.7 percent), "Somewhat satisfied" (37.0 percent), "Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied" (7.2 percent), "Somewhat dissatisfied" (7.2 percent), "Very dissatisfied" (3.0 percent)
- ¹⁶ Question: "Question 12. Check any of the following incentives that are offered at your site"