





STRENGTHENING THE FOUNDATION:

PENNSYLVANIA'S EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS

on Improving Early Education and Caring for Those Who Care for Our Youngest Learners













"Most of us are here because we love the work, but we can't pay our bills with that passion. It would be nice to be suitably compensated for the hard work we do."

"My hope is that we start to value early childhood education as the important foundation it is for all other learning. That we as a society would appreciate, through compensation and recognition, those who care for and teach our littlest citizens every day."

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INTRODUCTION

A strong early childhood education system is critical to a thriving society. Education begins in infancy, with the most rapid period of brain development occurring in the first five years of life. The dedicated professionals who work with our youngest learners are building a foundation for future academic and personal success. Early childhood programs are also vital to working families in our communities. The general public acknowledges these facts: 98% of Pennsylvania voters agreed that early childhood education is important and supported state investment in early childhood programs.²

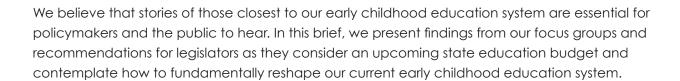
Despite this near-unanimous public support, Pennsylvania's early childhood care and education system faces many challenges. Staffing shortages have remained higher than ever post-pandemic: in a February 2023 poll of early learning providers, 85% of respondents reported staffing shortages, and respondents reported over 4,000 open staffing positions across the commonwealth.³ In addition to this affecting the quality of programs, it creates a supply crisis for families: nearly 35,500 children are currently on waiting lists for child care, and nearly 3,000 children are on waiting lists for Pre-K Counts or Head Start Supplemental Assistance Program classrooms.⁴

These challenges are driven primarily by low compensation for early childhood educators. Despite one-time pandemic relief funding for the child care sector, early childhood educators still face lower wages and fewer benefits compared to their K-12 peers. The average salary for early childhood educators in Pennsylvania is estimated at \$25,844, translating to \$12.43 per hour. Low compensation has been cited as the reason that many educators are leaving the field and is the reason that so many children in Pennsylvania are underserved due to staffing shortages. This crisis has led to a breakdown in the early childhood system in Pennsylvania, with lasting effects on early childhood educators, families, and children.

While these statistics are jarring, we wanted to understand how these realities feel to those closest to the system: early childhood educators. Despite the importance of early childhood education, people often overlook those who provide care and education for children ages birth to eight. How do early childhood educators perceive the needs and barriers facing them in their classrooms and across the system, and what solutions do they identify?

We are a group of Teach Plus Policy Fellows working in early childhood settings across Pennsylvania. We have experienced the challenges of low pay, staffing shortages, and long waitlists firsthand, and we wanted to amplify the voices of early childhood educators across the state and identify any recurring themes, recognizing that regional and program-type needs and barriers may vary. To that end, we held focus groups with early childhood educators seeking to understand their perspectives on the challenges and opportunities facing their field as we move into a new gubernatorial administration and legislative session.

The stories we heard from early childhood educators across Pennsylvania were powerful, bringing to life the most significant barriers to equitable access and staffing in early childhood programs. The educators we spoke to also presented many innovative potential solutions to these challenges and shared ideas for how to ensure that early childhood educators feel valued and respected in their careers.



FINDINGS

1. Overwhelmingly, early childhood educators believe that compensation in their profession is woefully inadequate, and that higher wages and better benefits would lead to higher rates of staff recruitment and retention and higher morale within the field.

3. Early childhood educators value formal post-secondary education, on-the-job training, and mentorship to develop as professionals and want more equitable opportunities to pursue such professional development.

2. Early childhood educators believe the general public does not understand the importance, complexity, and difficulty of their work, leading to diminished professional respect.

4. Early childhood educators want more high-level training in communicating and engaging with families, cultural competency, child development and developmentally appropriate practices, and classroom management strategies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Increasing compensation for early childhood educators should be a top priority in upcoming state budgets, moving toward a defined salary scale and income parity between early childhood and K-12 educators with the same degrees.

3. Policymakers should increase funding for the early childhood educator pipeline to support postsecondary education, on-the-job training, and mentorship.

2. Policymakers should take steps to make early childhood education funding more stable, predictable, and sustainable through shifts toward grant payments and cost-of-care models.

4. Early childhood education providers and the Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL) should ensure that all early childhood educators have access to ongoing professional development in communicating and engaging with families, cultural competency, child development and developmentally appropriate practices, and classroom management strategies.

METHODOLOGY

To better understand the perspectives and experiences of early childhood educators in Pennsylvania around professional compensation and recruitment and retention of high-quality educators and caregivers in early learning environments, we designed a qualitative research methodology. Through a multimodal and culturally responsive approach, we gathered information through a series of focus groups from 35 early childhood educators working directly in the field across Pennsylvania. Participants were recruited via social media, professional networks among Policy Fellows, and through Start Strong PA partners. Interested participants were asked to sign up online for one of the fourteen sessions conducted in February. Participation was voluntary, and focus groups were intentionally small, with one to five participants per group, to encourage rich discussion.

During the focus groups, participants responded to questions verbally and through an accompanying online questionnaire. Questions fell into the following categories: General Early Childhood Education Discussion, Compensation, Family Engagement, and Prioritizing Improvements to Early Childhood Education. The questions were open-ended to encourage and appreciate diverse feedback and to learn about early childhood educators' thoughts and aspirations for the profession.

The written responses obtained through the online questionnaire and recordings of the sessions provided the research data. We analyzed the data using an open response approach to identify common themes and ideas, which we then supported using direct quotes from participants. Our findings and recommendations were supplemented by data and information from partner early childhood organizations in Pennsylvania.





FINDINGS

FINDING 1. Overwhelmingly, early childhood educators believe that compensation in their profession is woefully inadequate, and that higher wages and better benefits would lead to higher rates of staff recruitment and retention and higher morale within the field.

Nearly all focus group participants expressed that early childhood educator compensation is inadequate, particularly given the critical importance of the profession and the level of skill and dedication required. Respondents emphasized the importance of higher wages, merit increases, cost of living adjustments, and bonuses and stressed that salaries should be equitable to those of K-12 educators.

"I'm so proud of what I do in my classroom. I wish I could feel that same pride at the dinner table with my extended family when they ask me why I stay in a job that doesn't pay enough."⁶

"We are shaping the future, working our tails off before, during, after, and on weekends and getting little recognition and/or appreciation of the huge things we do for the children and education system."

Participants noted that in a competitive labor market, early childhood educator compensation compares unfavorably to other jobs requiring similar training, and even to other jobs requiring significantly less skill and training:

"I think it's nearly impossible to recruit people to a field where a 4-year degree is required, but the pay is nowhere near equal to our similarly educated peers. We need valuable educators and in order to get them, we need to compensate them fairly and equitably."

"We are responsible for little humans and you can get comparable or better pay working at a Target."

Within the education profession, participants noted that early childhood educator pay is significantly lower than that of K-12 educators, leading qualified professionals to leave early childhood for higher wages in K-12 schools and districts.

"Once a certified teacher reaches level 2 [certification], they leave for the school district [due to better] benefits, retirement, salary."

"[Early childhood] educators have similar degrees to those in school districts but are expected to do more and do not receive the recognition or compensation that teachers in a school district do."

Specifically, participants noted that compensation was too low to sustain a family and cover basic expenses such as owning a home and paying off student loans. These comments are supported by a recent study, which found that 21 percent of Pennsylvania's child care workforce relies upon Medicaid and SNAP benefits.⁷

"Benefits are minimal and there is little future planning retirement. As a single person will I be able to buy a house or save for a house?"

"How are you to try and pay off student debt at \$14 per hour?"

"Some of my staff qualify for state insurance or child care assistance. This is no way to compensate people doing the important work they are doing."

Overall, the opinions of early childhood educators are clear: higher compensation and better benefits are necessary to attract and retain high-quality educators and to support families and the community.

FINDING 2. Early childhood educators believe the general public does not understand the importance, complexity, and difficulty of their work, leading to diminished professional respect.

The level of compensation in an industry is often reflective of the level of value, prestige, and respect with which that industry is viewed by society. As they reflected on the low compensation of early childhood educators, participants connected that to misconceptions people outside the field hold about early childhood education.

First, participants commented frequently about the critical importance of early childhood education and a need for the public to better appreciate the positive impact of high-quality early childhood education on families and the community.

"I hope to see value added to the importance of early childhood education (ECE) in the United States. I think that putting the proper emphasis on the work done in ECE would benefit the country as a whole because research has shown that quality ECE is the foundation of learning and works the best to set learners up for a successful path in their future education."

"ECE is the foundation of our economy. By having stable childcare, our economy can have a stable workforce."9

Additionally, participants expressed that they are not given the same level of respect as other professionals in education and that outsiders do not fully comprehend the complexity and difficulty of their work and the impact they have on children's lives.

"[We need] more acceptance as actual teachers [and] understanding that we are educated professionals and not babysitters."¹⁰

"I hope that ECE will be known as the true education profession that it is. I hope that it becomes a respected career choice for educators and that the world finally understands the need for ECE just like it does for K-12!"11

Overall, early childhood educators strongly desire not only better compensation but also greater respect and recognition for their work, with many emphasizing the critical role of early childhood education in shaping children's futures and the broader benefits to society.





FINDING 3. Early childhood educators value formal post-secondary education, on-the-job training, and mentorship to develop as professionals and want more equitable opportunities to pursue such professional development.

When asked to identify the best training or preparation they had received in their path to becoming early childhood educators, participants most frequently cited formal post-secondary education opportunities, hands-on training in early childhood settings, and support from experienced mentor teachers.

Many participants pointed to the value of formal higher education experiences, and several noted the value of financial support they received to access that education through T.E.A.C.H. scholarships and apprenticeship programs. Early childhood educators actively emphasized the importance of affordable and equitable opportunities to pursue post-secondary education, including associate's, bachelor's, and master's degrees, as well as targeted special education training.

"Many, many years ago, I took classes toward my [Child Development Associate credential] at Harrisburg Area Community College, Lancaster Campus. The instructor that I had did a phenomenal job of really digging into teaching about the whole child. I continue to use that knowledge today."

"The best preparation that I received was obtaining my associate degree at Westmoreland County Community College. [Instructor name] was THE absolute best instructor and she taught almost all of the classes. All of her tests were in essay form, and she set very high expectations. She made sure that you were going into this field for all of the right reasons."

"The scholarship programs [1] received were most helpful."12

Additionally, participants greatly valued on-the-job experience, with the vast majority pointing to this hands-on training as some of their most valuable learning. Many also expressed the value of mentoring from more experienced supervisors and colleagues.

"My best training came from my first-hand experiences in the classroom and as a mother of young children."¹³

"I remember the most from mentor teachers. I had a teacher take me under her wing and helped to guide me in finding the answers I needed to help my classes grow."

"When I first started with Head Start, my first job outside of college, I was set up with a co-teacher that walked me through all that was being thrown at me, especially when it came to the paperwork aspect."

"The best training I received was through observing staff who worked at the center and in a classroom."

Based on these responses, we conclude that access to affordable and high-quality postsecondary education is essential to attracting and retaining new talent in the early childhood education field. Importantly, however, this formal classroom learning must be supplemented with meaningful onthe-job learning that gives educators the opportunity to apply the theories they are learning in their higher education classes. Apprenticeship is a promising approach for combining hands-on training with related technical instruction in an earn-as-you-learn model.

"I am a part of an apprenticeship program at Carlow and have loved the on-theiob classes."¹⁴

Finally, policymakers should recognize the value of high-quality mentorship in the preparation and continued development of early childhood educators. Several participants called for stipends for mentors and other ways of formalizing mentor programs to support rookie teachers.





FINDING 4. Early childhood educators want more high-level training in communicating and engaging with families, cultural competency, child development and developmentally appropriate practices, and classroom management strategies.

Early childhood educators were vocal about their need for relevant and high-level professional development training to improve their skills and enhance the quality of their work. When asked what topics they would prioritize for professional learning and development, they most frequently highlighted the importance of training in communication and engagement with families, cultural competency, child development, developmentally appropriate practices, and classroom management strategies. Among these areas, child development and classroom management strategies were identified as top priorities by those interviewed.

"[We need additional training in] child development—the why behind what the kiddos are doing and a better understanding of age-appropriate activities."

"I would prioritize working with diverse abilities and challenging behaviors. Today's students are presenting with more diagnoses and needs like speech, [occupational therapy], [physical therapy], behavioral health."¹⁵

As one professional aptly put it,"There should be a course called 'Everything They Didn't Teach You in College.' I don't need to know more about how to teach subjects; I need to know more about how to teach my students." This sentiment echoed the broader desire among participants for professional development training that is relevant to their work and helps them to better support children's development and learning.

Overall, participants' responses underscored the importance of high-quality and relevant professional development training for early childhood educators, particularly in child development and classroom management strategies. These training opportunities are essential for ensuring that professionals have the necessary skills and knowledge to provide high-quality care and education for young children.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings from our focus groups, we offer the following recommendations to policymakers considering how to reform our current early childhood education system:

RECOMMENDATION 1. Increasing compensation for early childhood educators should be a top priority in upcoming state budgets, moving toward a defined salary scale and income parity between early childhood and K-12 educators with the same degrees.

When asked what they would prioritize if additional financial resources were made available to support early childhood education, 100% of participants named increasing compensation for early childhood educators as one of their top priorities:¹⁷

"1. Compensation, 2. Compensation 3. Compensation. These (mostly) women are damn near killing themselves working long hours to make non-livable wages."

Many participants also spoke to the need to improve non-wage benefits such as health insurance, retirement, and tuition reimbursement.

In the short term, state lawmakers and Governor Shapiro can work toward the goal of improved compensation by adopting Start Strong PA's recommendation of a \$430 million investment in the 2023-24 budget to implement a child care teacher wage scale. Such a scale would make pay for child care educators more competitive in today's market and recognize their hard-earned credentials by increasing pay to \$15 per hour for professionals with at least a high school diploma or equivalent, \$19 per hour for professionals with at least an associate's degree, and \$21 per hour for professionals with at least a bachelor's degree.¹⁸



In the long run, participants aspire to a system in which early childhood educators are paid on par with K-12 teachers in their same district or region with comparable levels of education – typically between \$40,000 and \$60,000 for starting teachers, with a subsequent salary schedule based on both education and experience – along with a benefits package that includes health, dental, and vision insurance. Given that early childhood educators make, on average, about \$20,000 less than kindergarten teachers in their own district, despite often holding the same educational and training credentials, this change will likely take years to implement; however, given the critical importance of the early years and the need to improve recruitment, retention, and diversity of the early childhood workforce, policymakers must work toward this end goal of income parity between early childhood and K-12 educators over the next decade.

RECOMMENDATION 2. Policymakers should take steps to make early childhood education funding more stable, predictable, and sustainable through shifts toward grant payments and cost-of-care models.

If Pennsylvania is to achieve a vision for an early childhood education system in which educators are compensated as professionals and high-quality options are available for every family, the current broken funding system must be changed. Presently, subsidies follow the qualifying child to the program of the parent's choice, and providers are usually only reimbursed based on the qualifying child's daily attendance, which can lead to instability and uncertainty for providers. Additionally, state-subsidized early childhood programs are funded at a set percentage of the market rate, which does not reflect the true cost of high-quality care, including adequate educator compensation.¹⁹

To make early childhood education funding more stable and predictable, policymakers should institute greater use of grant payment as a payment methodology. In a grant payment system, providers receive funding for a specified number of slots over a specified period of time and are responsible for filling their slots with eligible children; this system, which was used in the OCDEL Infant/Toddler Contracted Slots Pilot, has been shown to provide financial stability for providers while increasing quality and stabilizing enrollment. The General Assembly should expand the use of grant payments across all state-supported early childhood education programs in Pennsylvania, including Child Care Works and Pre-K Counts.

Finally, Pennsylvania should begin working toward a funding methodology based on the true cost of high-quality early childhood education rather than the market rate. In the short term, the General Assembly should continue to increase the reimbursement rates for Child Care Works, Pre-K Counts, and Head Start Supplemental Assistance to come closer to the actual cost of care, while in the long run, OCDEL should pursue future rate setting based on a cost-estimation model rather than a market rate survey, as has been explored in the District of Columbia and New Mexico.²¹

RECOMMENDATION 3. Policymakers should increase funding for the early childhood

educator pipeline to support postsecondary education, on-the-job training, and mentorship.

In order to attract more highly-qualified and diverse educators into the early childhood profession, policymakers must continue to increase access to high-quality preparation while reducing financial barriers. Funding should be provided to subsidize the cost of Child Development Associate, associate's degree, and bachelor's degree programs in early childhood education, such as through the T.E.A.C.H. Scholarship program²² and the Early Childhood Education Professional Development Organization (ECEPDO) system.²³ These programs, along with early childhood career-and-technicaleducation programs in high schools, should also be sufficiently advertised so that potential early childhood educators are aware of the opportunity to earn their credentials for free or close to free.

Additionally, policymakers should invest in opportunities for early childhood educators to engage in high-quality on-the-job training and mentorship by experienced and highly effective early childhood educators. In particular, state policymakers should increase funding for early childhood apprenticeship programs and ensure funding to provide stipends for mentor teachers.

Giving future early childhood educators more aptitude in providing high-quality care and education experiences in early childhood programs will improve recruitment, retention, and program quality, and is an important investment.



RECOMMENDATION 4. Early childhood education providers and the Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL) should ensure that all early childhood educators have access to ongoing relevant professional development in communicating and engaging with families, cultural competency, child development and developmentally appropriate practices, and classroom management strategies.

Participants expressed a strong desire for training within the early childhood field that reaches beyond physical health and safety to other necessary areas such as trauma-informed care, communicating with families, and diversity, equity, and inclusion practices. Many participants noted that they felt students' mental health and safety were equally important as students' physical health and safety, but that current training requirements, especially for new staff, focused only on physical health and safety.

While policymakers should be mindful of time limitations when setting requirements for professional development – participants also expressed concerns about the feasibility of current professional learning requirements – it is important to ensure that required training covers important topics such as communication, cultural competency, child development, and classroom management. The field of early childhood education must be dynamic and adaptive to both local community needs and emergent pedagogy. State policymakers should examine current professional development requirements and ensure they are balanced and comprehensive without being overly onerous and burdensome for providers and educators.



CONCLUSION

Pennsylvania's early childhood educators are hopeful about the future of their field; they recognize the economic importance of families counting on high-quality, affordable care, and they want the tools, funding, and support to continue to serve Pennsylvania's diverse communities. They understand the incredibly positive impact their work has on and in communities, and they want the communities they serve to recognize them as professionals and experts in their field.

If Pennsylvania wants to have a thriving early childhood education sector that allows for a thriving economy and society, our state leaders must listen to the professionals who are on the ground. Policymakers and their staff can highlight the importance of early childhood education by creating initiatives touting the benefits of high-quality early education, meeting with early childhood educators in their districts, and visiting the classrooms of our youngest learners. Most importantly, long-serving early childhood educators are overwhelmingly calling for increased pay and benefits, a more sustainable funding structure for early childhood education, and affordable and high-quality education and professional learning opportunities for early childhood educators. Investments in wages will begin to solve the problem of recruitment and retention and, ultimately, help to increase access for families and ensure affordability doesn't become more of an issue for middle-class working families due to providers needing to raise tuition.

Early childhood educators know the incredibly difficult, nuanced, and rewarding work that goes into children's education from birth to eight. Legislators need to step into the programs in their districts and see this work firsthand: the knowledge, care, pedagogy, planning, and love that go into making this profession. Policymakers need to listen to the professionals supporting communities for decades, and finally provide compensation and support that allow them to thrive and flourish.

ENDNOTES

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 Slots; Over 38,000 Children Sit on Waiting Lists
 Low Wages to Blame.
- 4. Ibid.
- 5. Miksic, M. (2023). Children First. <u>The High Cost</u> of Working in Early Childhood Education.
- 6. All questions from this section are in response to this question: "Do you believe that compensation (wages and benefits) within the Early Childhood profession is adequate to recruit and sustain a competitive workforce within the field? Please give 2-3 reasons for your answer."
- 7. Miksic, M. (2023). Children First. <u>The High Cost of Working in Early Childhood Education</u>.
- 8. Question: "When you think about early childhood education in the United States, what are your hopes and aspirations for the future of the field and the profession?"
- 9. Ibid.
- 10. Question: "What suggestions might you have for recruitment and preparation of early childhood teachers?"
- 11. Question: "When you think about early childhood education in the United States, what are your hopes and aspirations for the future of the field and the profession?"
- 12. All three quotes were in response to this question: "When you think about your own

- path to becoming an Early Childhood Educator, what was the best training or preparation you received?"
- 13. Ibid.
- 14. Question: "Why do you choose to stay in early childhood? What suggestions might you have for recruitment and preparation of early childhood teachers?"
- 15. Both quotes are in response to the question: "When you think about professional learning and development opportunities for Early Childhood Educators, what are the top two to three topics you would prioritize?"
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Teach Plus is dedicated to the mission of empowering excellent, experienced, and diverse teachers to take leadership over key policy and practice issues that advance equity, opportunity, and student success. Since 2009, Teach Plus has developed thousands of teacher leaders across the country to exercise their leadership in shaping education policy and improving teaching and learning, to create an education system driven by access and excellence for all.

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ABOUT START STRONG PA:

Start Strong PA is an initiative of Early Learning PA. Through a statewide collaboration of partners, Start Strong PA aims to support healthy child development, working families, and the economy by increasing access to and affordability of high-quality child care programs for young children. <u>www.startstrongpa.org</u>



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