



BASE Theory of Change Series | OPRE Report 2025-110

Using Scholarships in Child Care and Early Education



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Scholarships are commonly used in the child care and early education (CCEE) field as a way to boost educator credentials and qualifications by increasing their participation in educational opportunities. The goal is to improve the quality of care provided and to increase the recruitment, retention, and advancement of qualified educators.¹ In the long term, a more stable and qualified CCEE workforce may lead to increased parental participation in the labor force and improved child outcomes.²

The term “scholarship” is used in this brief to refer to financial support for educators to take part in postsecondary educational coursework. Scholarships include partial or full tuition for relevant coursework and occasionally include additional stipends or ancillary support, such as mentoring or cohort programs.

This document uses a theory-of-change model to describe how and why scholarship strategies aimed at members of the CCEE workforce may lead to positive outcomes for the CCEE field, such as increasing educators’ qualifications and thereby increasing the quality of care provided. Theory-of-change models aim to outline the resources needed to support strategy implementation, the key

The Building and Sustaining the Child Care and Early Education Workforce (BASE) project aims to increase knowledge and understanding in child care and early education (CCEE) by documenting factors that drive workforce turnover and by building evidence on current initiatives to recruit, advance, and retain a stable and qualified CCEE workforce.

¹Gardner, Melnick, Meloy, and Barajas (2019); Campbell, Entmacher, Blank, and Matsui (2015); CMS Alliance to Modernize Healthcare (2019).

²Powell, Thomason, and Jacobs (2019).

activities to be implemented, the expected outputs of those activities, and the desired outcomes of the strategy.³

This brief is part of the Building and Sustaining the Child Care and Early Education Workforce (BASE) Theory-of-Change Series, intended for readers who are interested in designing and evaluating their own workforce development strategies. CCEE system leaders and strategy developers may find it useful to tailor this theory of change to reflect their own local context and define their overall strategy and goals. This series presents theories of change that guide three current types of workforce development strategies: wage supplements, apprenticeship models, and scholarships. The sources for these theory-of-change models and this brief are a [literature review, an environmental scan](#), and additional follow-up interviews with leaders from agencies implementing various workforce development strategies.⁴ The model presented in this brief is focused on scholarship strategies.

What is Known About Scholarship Strategies in the CCEE Field

The BASE project's [environmental scan](#) identified 11 examples of scholarship strategies as part of a review of the CCEE workforce landscape conducted between March 2021 and January 2022.⁵ These identified scholarships, operating across 27 states and Washington, DC, vary in size, structure, and implementation method. Some scholarships cover up to 100 percent of tuition and fees for CCEE-relevant postsecondary educational coursework. Many scholarships allow participants to participate in such coursework at any accredited higher education institution or training organization, though some strategies involve partnerships with specific institutions or organizations. Scholarship strategies often include ancillary support like individual coaching or counseling for participants, typically geared toward supporting the participant in completing coursework, but the intensity of this support varies. Low-intensity counseling support, offered by strategies such as the Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) Scholars, might involve a designated contact, such as a program representative affiliated with the implementing agency or a scholarship counselor affiliated with the degree-granting institution, whom participants can reach out to when needed. Higher-intensity counseling support could be a series of required individual counseling sessions.⁶ Other possible ancillary supports, such as those offered by Chicago Commons Pathways for Parents, include peer-to-peer support via a cohort approach or financial support for transportation to and from class or to cover child care for participants during class time.⁷ Some strategies also offer incentives (often around \$500) as awards for different levels of completion. These incentives often increase when coursework is completed and may result in a larger bonus when a degree is earned.

³Connell and Kubisch (1998); Hirschon Weiss (1995).

⁴Bernardi, Hsueh, Roach, and Rau (2024); Maier and Roach (2024).

⁵Bernardi, Hsueh, Roach, and Rau (2024).

⁶The Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) funds the DECAL Scholars program, which provides tuition assistance and stipends for early childhood educators to obtain certificates and college credentials and degrees.

⁷Chicago Commons, a nonprofit community organization and network of CCEE centers, offers fully subsidized college courses and comprehensive supports to cohorts of current or past parents who are interested in becoming CCEE educators as part of their Pathways for Parents program.

Scholarship strategies are typically geared toward center-based teachers, assistants, and directors, although some scholarship strategies are open to educators in home-based settings. Eligibility requirements for scholarship recipients typically include a certain number of hours of CCEE employment per week, a minimum number of credits per semester, and a commitment to remain in the CCEE field after graduation. Some strategies require employer sponsorship, and employers and educators may need to participate in their state’s quality rating and improvement system.⁸

Evidence about the efficacy of these types of scholarship strategies is promising but limited. The BASE literature review only found one study of a scholarship strategy. This study examined the T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood Scholarship Program, which operates in 22 states and Washington, DC and awards over 17,000 scholarships per year.⁹ This study followed T.E.A.C.H. participants in Pennsylvania over five years, found positive effects on educational achievement (the attainment of an associate’s degree in early childhood education or Child Development Associate credential) as well as higher wages for participants who completed the program and reduced center-level turnover. In the classroom, the study found positive effects on developmentally appropriate teacher beliefs and instructional activities, as well as positive effects on the overall quality of care.¹⁰ However, while a sizeable percentage (20 percent) of T.E.A.C.H. participants gained additional credentials, many participants withdrew from or dropped out of the scholarship program before obtaining a credential, with 43.5 percent of participants withdrawing from the program during their first year of participation. Completion rates varied by participant background characteristics, with Black or Hispanic participants, participants with less education, and aides, directors, and assistant directors being more likely to withdraw or drop out of the program. Evidence related to the implementation of CCEE scholarship strategies to explain these findings is limited. More research is necessary to understand the barriers that scholarship participants face, as well as the supports that could potentially eliminate such barriers, such as flexible class schedules or academic counseling. This research could inform the kinds of supports scholarship strategies employ to improve completion rates.¹¹

Further, the literature points to the complicated nature of higher education, career advancement, and economic mobility in the CCEE field. While educators’ earnings do generally increase in line with their education levels, their income gains are lower in CCEE than in other fields.¹² It is also possible that educators who obtain higher education credentials may then leave the CCEE field for more lucrative fields. Some studies suggest that CCEE educators with higher education levels have higher rates of teacher turnover than their counterparts with lower education levels, but other studies suggest the opposite.¹³ The T.E.A.C.H. study described above found that participants had increased compensation. This is an expected

⁸A Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) is a rating system, typically used statewide, that assesses CCEE settings using a defined set of quality standards. The standards are designed to assist families comparing CCEE settings and to help providers improve and communicate their quality. QRIS standards and participation requirements vary across states.

⁹The T.E.A.C.H. (Teacher Education and Compensation Helps) Early Childhood Scholarship Program covers a large percentage of education costs and offers participants bonuses upon completing a certain number of credits annually. T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood National Center (2025).

¹⁰Miller and Bogatova (2009).

¹¹Though the BASE literature review did not find any other studies of the type of scholarship strategy outlined in this brief, a study of a newly implemented mandatory credential in Louisiana found barriers to completion that may be relevant to scholarship strategies. Such barriers include difficulty balancing the time required for coursework with ongoing personal and work responsibilities, as well as challenges preparing a required credential portfolio and passing the credential exam. See Bassok, Smith, Markowitz, and Miller-Bains (2021).

¹²Maier and Roach (2024).

¹³Totenhagen et al. (2016); Caven, Khanani, Zhang, and Parker (2021); Gable, Rothrauff, Thornburg, and Mauzy (2007); Gable, Rothrauff, Thornburg, and Mauzy (2010).

finding, because the T.E.A.C.H. model requires that participants' sponsoring employers give participants an annual bonus or a raise upon completion of yearly education requirements. Research examining the effects of a scholarship strategy that is not tethered to compensation increases is necessary to shed light on the relationship between scholarship strategies, credential attainment, and compensation.

More research is also needed to understand which educators participate in other scholarship strategies, which of those educators earn credentials or degrees, and where those educators work (and how much money they earn) after credential or degree attainment.

A Theory-of-Change Model Showing How Scholarship Strategies Aim to Impact the CCEE Workforce

Figure 1 illustrates how scholarship strategies are designed to increase CCEE educator advancement and retention and improve classroom quality in CCEE settings. This theory of change includes the following elements:



Inputs are the resources needed to implement a strategy, such as staff member time and knowledge, physical facilities, and funding for participant tuition and fees. For scholarships, inputs can include the administrative and technical systems required to manage applications and track and distribute scholarship money. A scholarship program also often requires the availability of CCEE-relevant coursework at an educational institution. Occasionally, scholarship programs require the endorsement and support of a participant's employer. At a broad level, scholarship strategies require funders to prioritize and direct resources toward the CCEE workforce.



Activities are the actions taken to use inputs to implement a strategy. For scholarship strategies, the primary activities are enrollment in and completion of relevant coursework by participating CCEE educators. Implementing programs may need to actively recruit and market the strategy to eligible participants. They often must track participation and compliance with program requirements. Mentoring, individual educational counseling, and cohort support are other potential strategy activities.



Outputs are the intermediate results caused by the strategy's activities. Outputs are expected to lead to later outcomes. The primary output of a scholarship strategy is the educational credit a participant earns toward a degree or credential, and often the issuance of a bonus or reward payment upon completion.



Outcomes are the desired short- and long-term effects of a strategy. Shorter-term outcomes may be noticeable soon after a strategy is implemented. For scholarship strategies, potential shorter-term outcomes could include a participant achieving a targeted degree, enabling them to meet higher education requirements for a particular role in the CCEE field. For employers, these programs could increase the overall educational attainment level of the educators they employ, potentially increasing the quality of CCEE settings or the quality of educators' interactions with children. Longer-term outcomes may occur after months or years and could include participants advancing in the CCEE field and obtaining higher compensation. This

career advancement could lead to increased longevity in the field and higher quality of care provided in the CCEE setting. For employers, increased employee educational attainment levels could also potentially improve retention at a particular workplace, decreasing the costs associated with high levels of turnover. Such increased educational attainment could also increase the number of qualified educators in the field overall, making it easier for employers to recruit educators with higher education levels and a commitment to the field.

Though scholarships can potentially contribute to these outcomes, it is unlikely that scholarships alone can achieve the longer-term outcomes of improving educator recruitment and retention and classroom quality. This theory-of-change model illustrates that scholarship strategies are one component of a larger landscape of well-designed workforce strategies available to educators and designed to improve recruitment and retention in CCEE. Such strategies could include, for example, wage supplements and apprenticeship programs, which are the focus of the other theory-of-change briefs in this series.¹⁴

The **root causes** underlying this theory of change refer to the problems that a scholarship strategy is ultimately aiming to address. Due to low levels of compensation throughout the CCEE field, CCEE educators often lack sufficient financial resources and the knowledge needed to navigate higher education systems. Educators also often lack the time to pursue additional coursework and credentials.¹⁵ Without additional qualifications, educators may be unable to advance in their careers and obtain higher compensation.¹⁶ This cycle may lead educators to leave the CCEE field entirely, increasing turnover and decreasing the quality of care in CCEE settings.

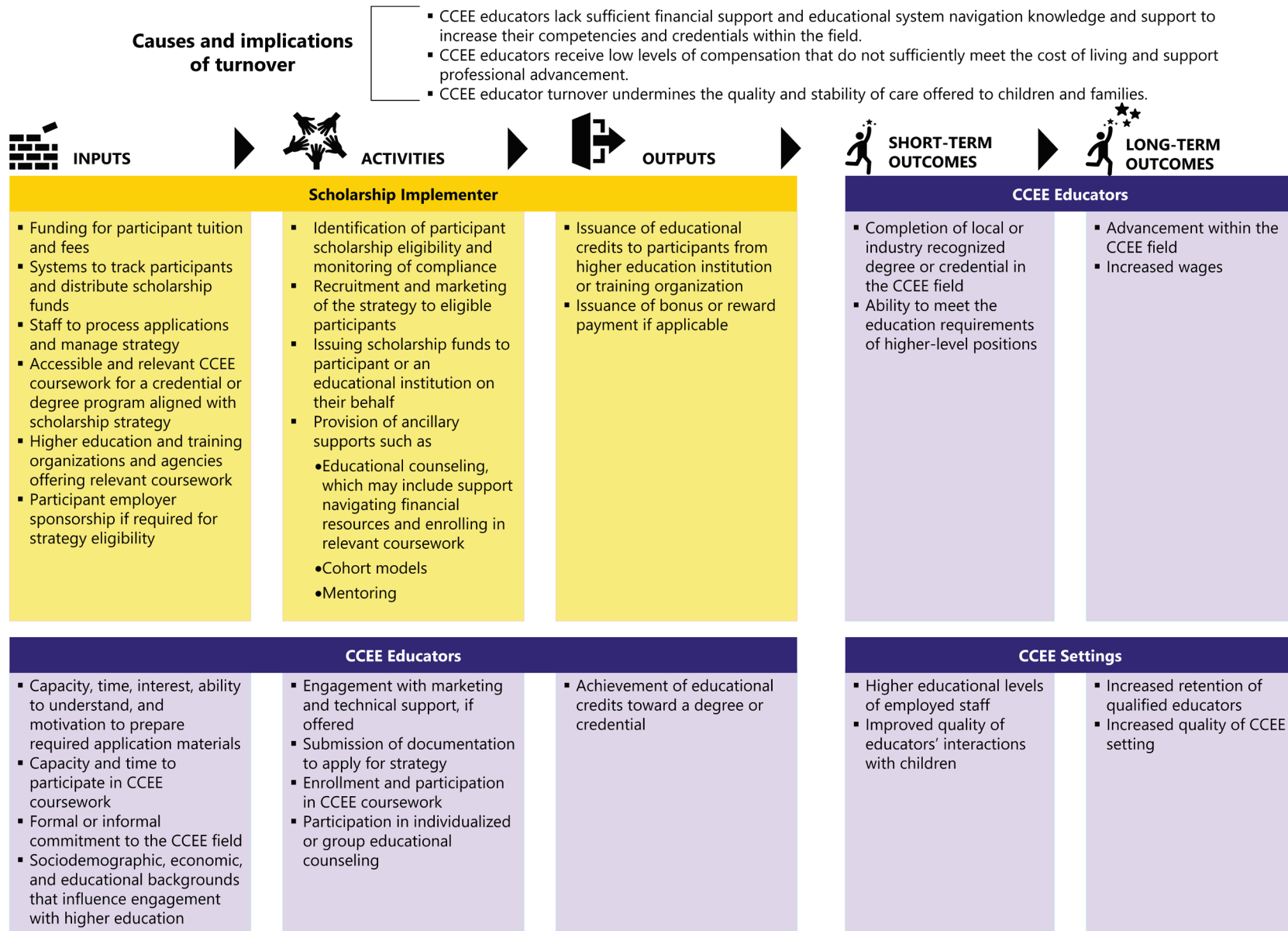
¹⁴See other publications from the BASE project.

¹⁵Bassok, Smith, Markowitz, and Miller-Bains (2021); Gardner, Melnick, Meloy, and Barajas (2019).

¹⁶Boyd-Swan and Herbst (2018).

Figure 1





A General Theory-of-Change Model for Scholarship Strategies



Adapting the Theory-of-Change Model to Help Define, Implement, and Evaluate a Scholarship Strategy

Leaders of CCEE systems seeking to implement or design their own scholarship strategy may find it useful to tailor the theory-of-change model shown in Figure 1 to reflect the constraints and needs of their local context. To do so, CCEE leaders and strategy developers can begin by exploring answers to the guiding questions outlined in Table 1. Using their answers to these questions, CCEE leaders can adjust the general theory-of-change model to reflect the intended inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes of their local scholarship strategy.

Table 1. Guiding Questions to Tailor the Theory-of-Change Model to Fit a Context-Specific Scholarship Strategy

Component of General Model	Examples of Guiding Questions
<p>Inputs</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which staff members are available and have the relevant skills to carry out the scholarship strategy? Will it be necessary to hire additional staff members? • What resources are needed (or available) to ensure that the scholarship strategy can be implemented and sustained? • What information technology systems and technical assistance supports are needed to process applications and manage the scholarship strategy? • What barriers can be removed to increase CCEE educators' motivation and ability to prepare and submit the required application materials? • Are there local higher education and training organizations and agencies that offer CCEE-relevant coursework? • What credentials, degrees, or other qualifications are required for CCEE employment in the state or locality? • What barriers can be removed to increase CCEE educators' ability to enroll in and complete coursework?
<p>Activities</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the appropriate amount of tuition and course materials that the scholarship should cover? • In which courses and at which institutions may educators enroll using the scholarship? • Who will be eligible for the scholarship and how will eligibility be determined? For example, will educators be required to work a certain number of hours per week to remain eligible for participation? Will an employer have to sponsor their participation? • How might the scholarship intersect with other policies, such as the state's quality rating improvement system or child care subsidy system? • How can the scholarship strategy use individualized or group counseling to best assist participating educators? • How can the scholarship be targeted to improve outcomes for particular groups of CCEE educators?
<p>Outputs</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How will the completion of credits and degrees be tracked and verified? • What ongoing information or documentation is necessary to collect to support implementation?
<p>Outcomes</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the shorter- and longer-term goals of the scholarship for CCEE educators, for certain types of CCEE settings or employers, and for the CCEE field? Is the goal to promote advancement and retention in individual CCEE settings, for educators with certain characteristics, or in the CCEE field more generally? • What kinds of data would help assess progress toward these goals? What kinds of data are already being collected? What kinds of data would it be helpful to start collecting? • What are the potential unintended consequences of a scholarship? For example, will educators leave the CCEE field after obtaining degrees that can be used in other fields with higher pay?

Creating a context-specific model may help CCEE system leaders and developers clearly define their strategy, plan ahead for potential implementation challenges, determine how to best monitor progress, and assess the potential impact of the strategy by ensuring there is strong alignment between the local strategy's planned activities and the desired outcomes. This may require adjustments to strategy inputs and activities. For example, a strategy that provides scholarships exclusively to full-time CCEE educators might lead to low completion rates if participants do not have the time to complete required coursework. This could be a particular barrier if the local population of CCEE educators consists primarily of those with parenting or caregiving obligations, leaving them unable to complete coursework outside of the workday. CCEE strategy implementers might consider providing substitute coverage or reducing the number of required employment hours in order to enable more participants to earn credits. As another example, a strategy that aims to reduce turnover but that does not require participants to stay in the CCEE field or guarantee wage increases upon completing a degree may have unintended consequences if a newly credentialed educator leaves the CCEE field for higher compensation elsewhere, an effect that could be exacerbated in a local labor market that rewards such credentials with increased wages. To address this issue, implementers and employers might pair a scholarship with a guaranteed wage increase upon completion of a credential or degree in order to incentivize retention and advancement within the CCEE field.

This brief has presented a theory of change for scholarship strategies, highlighting the inputs and activities that may be needed to achieve the desired outcomes. Reflecting on the model presented here and adapting it to the constraints and needs of the local context can help identify where in the theory-of-change model additional planning and consideration are needed and can inform how to evaluate the strategy once implemented.

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Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank several Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation staff members for their thoughtful feedback and contributions to the preparation of this publication, including Jenessa Malin, Project Officer, Ann Rivera, former Project Officer, and Krystal Bichay-Awadalla, Dianna Tran, Brian Tchen, and Tutrang Nguyen, Project Team Reviewers. We thank our MDRC colleague Sharon Huang, who reviewed the brief and provided valuable comments. We also recognize several BASE team members whose work contributed to this brief: from MDRC, Caitlin Anzelone, Alexandra Bernardi, Michelle Maier, Cynthia Miller, Frieda Molina, Victor Porcelli, Daniel Rocha, Kelsey Schaberg, Harrison Taylor, Carolyn Thomas, and Jillian Verillo; and from MEF Associates, Lorraine Perales, Marisa Putnam, Lisa Rau, and Kate Stepleton. We thank the members of the BASE expert advisory group, Juliet Bromer, Debra Pacchiano, Aisha Ray, Amy Roberts, and Diana Schaack, for providing guidance on all aspects of the project. Finally, we express deep gratitude to the child care and early education practitioners, administrators, and teachers who participated in the project and allowed us to learn from their knowledge and experiences.

OPRE Report 2025-110
August 2025

Authors: Sydney Roach.

SUGGESTED CITATION: Roach, Sydney (2025). *Using Scholarships in Child Care and Early Education*. OPRE Report 2025-110. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Available at:

<https://www.acf.gov/opre/project/building-and-sustaining-early-care-and-education-workforce-base>

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Contract #: HHSP233201500059I

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