

Investing in the Early Care and Education Workforce

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MDRC is dedicated to learning what works to improve the well-being of people in poverty. During these challenging times, our “Ideas and Evidence 2021” briefs provide policymakers with fact-based research and analysis to help them address critical issues in social policy and education.

High-quality, stable early care and education can have [long-lasting benefits](#) for both children and society. The COVID-19 pandemic has reaffirmed the importance of the role early educators play as an essential source of support that anchors our communities. It also has exposed the underlying fragility and economic vulnerability of our early care and education workforce.

Even before the current COVID-19 crisis, early care and education providers faced [challenges](#) attracting and retaining well-trained, qualified early educators who reflect the racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity of the children being served. This deficit of well-trained teachers and staff undermines the ability of early care and education providers to support working families and children’s learning and development. [Inadequate compensation; demanding, often stressful working conditions; and limited opportunities for education and professional development](#) imperil the stability of the early care and education workforce, which already had high rates of stress, burnout, and turnover that are exacerbated by the pandemic.

Innovations at state, local, and provider levels are emerging to meet these challenges. More evidence is needed to understand the effectiveness of these approaches, but many appear promising. This brief focuses on three ways to support the workforce — increasing access to education and career growth, reinforcing workers’ overall economic well-being, and improving working conditions. It integrates evidence-based practices and operational insights from MDRC’s research in early care and education, as well as years of testing workforce development and training programs, which may help inform the selection and implementation of promising approaches to supporting the workforce. The end of this brief offers some recommendations on effectively supporting the early care and education workforce.

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INCREASING ACCESS TO EDUCATION AND CAREER GROWTH

The early care and education field needs well-prepared individuals with the skills and knowledge to create effective learning environments for children of all ages in all types of settings. Several support strategies encourage early care workers to further their own [higher education or pursue professional credentials](#). These include [apprenticeship models](#) that combine on-the-job training and classroom instruction for workers, and scholarships that allow early care and education workers to take coursework leading to credentials and degrees.

In one example, Louisiana devised an initiative that offers subsidized coursework and financial incentives as part of a supported pathway to earning formal professional credentials. Another example is the [T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood®](#) Initiative, now in place in around 20 states nationwide. The 30-year-old program provides scholarships to early care and education teachers, directors, and family child care providers to improve their access to higher education. It gave direct support to about 17,500 scholarship recipients in 2019. Each state's T.E.A.C.H. program specifies its own scholarship model to meet the needs of its early care and education workforce, while addressing obstacles such as a local lack of resources, time, and dependent child care, among possible incentives.

These strategies still require careful implementation to be effective. MDRC's experiences testing workforce development and training programs indicate that many first-time, working students encounter multiple barriers to completing their postsecondary education. Research finds that integrating [multiple and sustained student supports](#) can improve college persistence. This support includes frequent, proactive career [advising and mentoring](#); financial assistance to offset the costs of college engagement (such as tuition waivers); and course enrollment throughout the calendar year to allow for remedial coursework and expedited credit accumulation.

IMPROVING ECONOMIC WELL-BEING

Early care and education workers are among the [lowest paid](#) in the country, particularly workers who care for infants and toddlers, which makes it hard to recruit and retain a qualified workforce. Strategies to address poor compensation include measures to increase salary parity (typically directed toward classroom-based child care teachers and their similarly qualified public-school counterparts) and education-based salary supplements, stipends, [tax credits](#), or financial incentives to stay in the workforce. For example, the [Child Care WAGE\\$®](#) Initiative, now operating in six states, provides salary supplements to early care and education teachers, directors, and family child care providers working in regulated child care settings. The supplements are based on the individual's level of education and tenure in an early care and education program. Five of the six states where WAGE\$ operates also have a T.E.A.C.H. program.

Other strategies aim to ensure sufficient resources for early care and education providers, which can help increase the wages or benefits they offer their staff. One example is a [shared service alliance](#) where groups of early care and education providers collectively manage administrative aspects of their businesses to share or reduce their costs. For instance, the [Children's Home Chambliss Shelter](#), a large nonprofit child development center in Tennessee, provides comprehensive management services to 13 additional community-based child care programs. This alliance allows these programs to use services such as payroll and benefits, maintenance services, and food service support.

These strategies, though, are only effective if providers participate. Many eligible early care and education providers and workers may not know about or take advantage of income support programs. Research suggests that [strong, clear marketing and outreach](#) is needed so that prospective participants are aware of available opportunities and make the most of them. Messaging should outline the potential benefits and specific requirements (especially work requirements) of income support straightforwardly, with explicit, specific action steps — a “call to action” — for potential enrollees to take.

IMPROVING WORKING CONDITIONS

Caring for and educating young children can be stressful and demanding, so workers need professional supports and resources. One promising set of approaches aims to provide on-the-job training and coaching. As an example of how this works, the National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance offers a curriculum series, [Strengthening Business Practices for Child Care Programs](#), intended to increase directors' and providers' knowledge in areas like fiscal management, marketing, and staff recruitment and retention, topics that are critical for supporting providers to sustain their business.

Other approaches seek to create more professionalized work environments through more paid time off, peer-to-peer support, classroom coverage so teachers have time to plan for classroom instruction, and a permanent floater (in center-based providers) or a substitute pool (in home-based providers) to help fill staffing gaps.

MDRC's examination of curricular and professional development models offers insights about important structural forms of support that may help educators pursue professional development more consistently. These include coaching that is coordinated with hands-on curriculum-based training, training on existing professional development days, registering training sessions with state registries so educators may receive credit, setting dedicated planning time so teachers can prepare for classroom instruction, and collecting data on curriculum implementation on an ongoing basis, to inform adaptations and program improvements.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INVESTING IN THE EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION WORKFORCE

Further evidence-building is critical to understand the effectiveness of the innovative approaches underway nationwide in support of developing a high-quality early care and education workforce. A better understanding of the beneficiaries and circumstances of the successes of these strategies will guide the expansion of effective initiatives.

MDRC is launching a new, national project focused on the early care and education workforce and is examining a variety of approaches to building, supporting, and retaining a qualified, healthy, and stable workforce. This work will help inform how states and localities select and effectively expand on promising strategies. Such insights become even more pressing in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the meantime, policymakers can act on the following recommendations:

- 1 Promote higher education and professional credentialing for current or prospective early care and education workers through multiple, sustained types of support, including financial incentives, mentoring, and flexible course enrollment.
- 2 Support investment in improving workers' compensation with programs that market themselves widely and include plans for reaching their targeted recipients.
- 3 Invest in professional development for early care and education workers in all roles and all settings.

Efforts to build a sustained, qualified workforce that provides high-quality care can only succeed if workers are offered livable wages in line with their job responsibilities, demands, and advancement opportunities. As mentioned in the [first part of this series](#), there are still key structural problems in the early care and education field, including the lack of a cohesive infrastructure and inconsistent resources. The recommendations here come from effective use of evidence to target promising strategies and investments aimed at building, supporting, and retaining the early care and education workforce now and for the future.