

Early Childhood Educators Set California Kids on the Path to Success

A highly-qualified, well-compensated teaching staff is key to quality early care and education



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Authors:

Sandra Bishop, Ph.D., Chief Research Officer

Contributors:

McKenzie Richardson, Senior Associate, Mobilization

Tom Garrett, Communications Director

Mariana Galloway, Art Director

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-5%
**the reduction in
California child care
teachers since the
start of the COVID-19
pandemic**

Summary

Quality early care and education (ECE) can strengthen California's current and future workforce, contribute to a strong state economy and public safety, and enhance national security. Unfortunately, California's early education system does not meet the needs of children, families or educators. When families do not have the child care they need, parents' work productivity falls, resulting in costs to parents, their employers, and, ultimately, taxpayers. Lack of access to preschool places children from families with low incomes at risk of starting school already behind their more advantaged peers. Inadequate compensation and subpar working conditions for educators results in high levels of turnover, impacting the quality of programs.

There are other consequences as well. California jails are full of people convicted of serious and costly crimes. It doesn't have

to be that way. Providing at-risk children with high-quality ECE opportunities can help reduce the human and fiscal costs of crime in the future, by setting children up for success in school and beyond. Further, our national security relies on qualified young adults who are ready, willing, and able to serve in the U.S. military. However, educational deficits, health issues, and other problems (substance use and crime) currently prevent 71 percent of California youth from qualifying for service.¹ Healthy early development sets the stage for children's future success. Without improvements to the ECE system, our nation risks having an even smaller military recruiting pool in the future.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated longstanding challenges faced by California's early learning system. Many California child care providers closed temporarily during the pandemic and thousands closed permanently. In addition, the child care teacher

workforce has shrunk by 10 percent, further impairing a sector that cannot meet the overwhelming demand for its services. Many state preschool programs also closed temporarily and some shifted children to online learning.² Even among the ECE programs that have reopened, many are operating at reduced capacity, due to COVID-related precautions and/or staff shortages. As a result of these shortcomings, many parents, especially mothers, have been forced to reduce their work hours or leave the workforce entirely.

As our state responds to the challenges presented by the pandemic, policymakers must continue to grow access to quality early learning programs. **A fundamental feature of ECE quality is highly-qualified teachers who are well-trained both before and during their service and who need to be adequately compensated.** California policymakers must address the needs of the ECE workforce to ensure that families have the programs they need, parents can return to their jobs, and children can be set on the path to success. In particular, California's ECE workforce solutions must include increased access to competency-based education, training, and professional development; multiple pathways to achieving competencies and varied methods of demonstrating them; financial support for training; and increased compensation commensurate with the levels of training achieved. We also need targeted investments in workforce development for family, friend and neighbor (FFN) care to help build capacity and increase professional development in specialized areas such as trainings, peer mentorship, parent cafes, and play groups. Action and innovation now can improve the experiences of California children today and strengthen our state in the years to come.

Most California parents are in the workforce and need ECE

In California, there are approximately 2.7 million children under age 6, and 65 percent of these children have all available parents in the workforce.³ As a result, many very young children are in child care or preschool while their parents are working to support their families. These ECE settings are a key environment for children, particularly given the importance of the early years for brain development.

Even prior to the pandemic, California's ECE system did not meet the needs of parents, children, or employers. More than half (60 percent) of California residents lived in a child care desert, an area in which there are at least three times as many children as licensed child care slots.⁴ The number of family child care providers in California dropped 30 percent since 2008.⁵ Given the supply of child care in California, more than

“Child care, particularly for infants and toddlers, is unaffordable for many families. The cost of infant care in a California center averages \$18,201 per year, more expensive than in-state public college tuition (\$9,933).”

716,000 California children did not have access, representing a 40 percent need-supply gap.⁶ Availability is especially limited for families who live in rural areas, have infants and toddlers, or work evening and night shifts.⁷ Looking at California state preschool and Head Start, combined, in 2020, only 19 percent of 3-year-olds and 44 percent of 4-year-olds were served.⁸ California is beginning to implement a universal preschool program (UPK) which, by 2025-26 will exist for all 4-year-olds.⁹

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Beyond the negative effects on children and families, problems with child care inflict a huge economic toll. Our new ReadyNation national study of working parents of children under age 3 found that, when families do not have the child care they need, parents' work productivity falls, resulting in costs to parents, their employers, and, ultimately, taxpayers.¹¹ These child care challenges exact an annual cost of \$122 billion in lost earnings, productivity, and revenue. The estimate for California is \$17 billion per year in losses due to the child care crisis for infants and toddlers alone.¹² As this study focused just on infants and toddlers, it severely underestimated the economic impact of shortcomings in the overall ECE system.

COVID-19 exacerbated California's ECE challenges

The effects of the pandemic further stressed an already fragile ECE system, impacting working families and businesses in nearly every sector. In May 2020, two-



thirds of California child care centers were closed, at least temporarily, as were 28 percent of family child care providers.¹³ As centers and family child care homes reopen, they are struggling with decreased enrollment and income, increased costs, and staff shortages.¹⁴ More than 3,000 California child care providers closed permanently between March 2020 and January 2021.¹⁵ Many state preschool programs also closed temporarily and some shifted children to online learning.¹⁶

Early in the pandemic (by April 2020), California lost about one-third of its child care workforce. By November 2022, many of those workers had returned, but the workforce is about five percent smaller than it was before COVID-19.¹⁷ This loss will further impair a sector that cannot meet the overwhelming demand for its services.

Research shows that high-quality ECE supports children's cognitive, social, and emotional development

Studies have shown the benefits of high-quality ECE for children. For example, a longitudinal study of more than 1,300 children found that children in higher-quality child care were better-prepared for school at age 4 than children in lower-quality child care. At age 15, they were still performing slightly above their peers and also experienced significantly lower levels of behavior problems at age 15, compared with children in lower-quality child care.¹⁸ By age 26, participants from families with low incomes who spent two or more years in high-quality child care were more likely to graduate from college and had higher salaries, compared to those who had been in lower-quality care.¹⁹

Decades of research, across numerous states, show the short- and long-term benefits of high-quality preschool for children's development, particularly for children from families with low incomes.²⁰ Children who attend high-quality preschool are more likely to arrive at kindergarten ready to learn, with enhanced early math, language, and literacy skills.²¹ They are also less likely to be held back in school or to need special education,²² and more likely to be proficient in reading and math.²³ Preschool participants also have an increased probability of graduating from high school. Students who participate in high-quality preschool are less likely to have behavioral infractions in elementary and middle school and to be suspended from high school,²⁴ demonstrating the impact of ECE on socio-emotional behavior.²⁵

A smaller, but significant, number of long-term studies directly examine the link between preschool participation and crime prevention. Most recently, an MIT study of the Boston preschool program found that enrollees were less likely to have been incarcerated in a juvenile facility during high school, compared to non-enrollees.²⁶ Children not served by the Chicago CPC early education program were 70 percent more likely to be arrested for a violent crime by age 18.²⁷ By age 24, the people served by the CPC were 20 percent less likely to have served time in jail or prison.²⁸

In sum, ECE programs can set children on a path to successful adulthood. However, ECE must be high-quality in order to help children develop critical skills needed for success in school and life. **Among the most fundamental of these quality features are highly-qualified teachers.**

Teachers are the foundation of high-quality early care and education

The heart of any early childhood education program is the relationship between the teacher and the children.²⁹ Research indicates that a well-qualified workforce is an essential, fundamental component of high-quality ECE. In fact, one study found that the teacher-child relationship was the aspect of preschool quality most closely linked to child learning outcomes.³⁰ Highly-qualified teachers engage in warm, nurturing interactions with the children to support their development in all areas. Excellent teachers also provide developmentally-appropriate instruction in key early literacy, math and other academic skills.³¹ To offer this high-quality experience, early childhood educators must be well-

trained, both before they start teaching and once they are on the job through ongoing professional development.³² Adequate compensation is key to attracting and retaining top talent.³³ Retaining teachers is particularly important for young children, since positive, stable relationships support healthy development.

Key elements of a highly-qualified early care and education workforce

Education

The level of education required for ECE teachers has been a matter of long-standing debate. Much research, including a comprehensive review of 48 studies by the Campbell Collaboration, has found that higher teacher education levels have a strong relationship to higher quality in ECE. California's education requirements for ECE³⁴ teachers vary widely by program setting, based on a mixture of federal, state, and local requirements.³⁵

Professional development

The research around ongoing, in-service training for early education teachers offers more clarity than that on pre-service education.³⁶ Studies show that effective professional development is:

- Classroom-focused: related to what teachers are actually teaching;
- Active: allows for hands-on practice of skills;
- Collaborative: with modeling and/or coaching of skills and feedback provided.

However, providers face barriers to participating in professional development, including long work hours and low compensation.³⁷ Further, investments in professional development can be lost when

teachers leave their jobs, often due to inadequate compensation.³⁸

Compensation

Adequate compensation is required to attract and retain a high-quality child care workforce.³⁹ But ECE teachers typically earn substantially less than other teachers. In California, the annual mean wage for child care teachers is \$35,390, compared to \$42,210 for pre-K teachers, and \$85,760 for kindergarten teachers.⁴⁰ California ECE teachers have a poverty rate of 17 percent, compared to about nine percent for workers overall and nearly seven times higher than K-8 teachers (2.5 percent)⁴¹. More than one-third of California child care workers rely on public assistance to meet the needs of their own families.⁴² Low compensation is a major factor in ECE teachers leaving the field.⁴³

“I see every day the importance of a well-compensated early childhood workforce to our chamber members' ability to attract and retain employees, especially women.”



Cheryl Angeles

President & CEO, San Mateo Area Chamber of Commerce

The path forward for California's ECE workforce

California policymakers must address each of the key elements of ECE workforce quality in a comprehensive strategy. This approach is essential because the elements are interrelated; for example, if compensation remains low, teachers will have neither the means nor the incentive to pursue intensive professional development. Similarly, the type and amount of professional development required will vary depending on the level and quality of teacher pre-service education.

California's Master Plan for Early Learning and Care includes a specific focus on bolstering and supporting the ECE workforce.⁴⁴ In particular, the ECE workforce, in all settings, must have:

- Access to learning opportunities
- Support for pursuing learning opportunities
- Compensation that aligns with qualifications
- Authentic, unbiased, and straightforward pathways to career advancement

To facilitate the ongoing recovery of California's ECE workforce from the

devastation of the COVID-19 pandemic, we must reinstate the Early Learning and Care Workforce Development Grants Program to rebuild and expand workforce capacity to support California's children and families. Specifically, ongoing funding must:

- Equitably support the workforce in achieving their educational and professional aspirations
- Expand the number of early care and education professionals
- Ensure that the workforce has access to training, coursework, and professional development opportunities and resources that will help prepare them to meet the diverse caregiving needs of California families in a developmentally appropriate, inclusive, and culturally responsive way

Bolstering the ECE workforce is particularly important now, as California is beginning to implement UPK and there will be an increased demand for ECE educators. Even with the addition of child care and preschool spaces, children will not have access to care if there is not an adequately compensated workforce to care for them, and infrastructure to support it.

Conclusion

High-quality ECE is a powerful means of supporting children's development while their parents work. However, this potential will only be fully realized when children can attend quality programs with a highly-qualified ECE workforce with adequate education, ongoing professional development, and sufficient compensation.

Supporting the ECE workforce is also a matter of equity, as not only are 98 percent of California ECE teachers women, but more than two-thirds are women of color.⁴⁵ The ECE workforce is the most racially diverse segment of California's teaching workforce.⁴⁶

As our state responds to the challenges presented by the pandemic, policymakers must continue to grow access to ECE and address the needs of the ECE workforce. Support for high-quality ECE is an investment in our future public safety, national security, and economic well-being.

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