

## **Executive Summary**

### **Early Educator Voices in Florida: Flagler and Volusia Counties**

Early educators are the key to quality early care and education (ECE) services. There is broad consensus that high-quality care and learning environments for young children depend on educators who are skilled at nurturing children’s development and learning. Yet, inadequate working conditions and low pay routinely hamper educators in their efforts to apply effective teaching and caregiving practices (Institute of Medicine and National Research Council, 2015; McLean et al., 2021). Likewise, assessments of work environments have routinely been overlooked in quality improvement efforts. Transforming the way in which the ECE system values and supports the working conditions of early educators requires sustained strategies on multiple levels.

As a part of ongoing efforts to provide supports to their workforce, the Early Learning Coalition of Flagler and Volusia Counties (ELCFV) in Florida commissioned the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (CSCCE) to implement a SEQUAL study to better understand the work environments of the more than 1,300 early educators working in programs that receive School Readiness and/or Voluntary Prekindergarten (VPK) funding. Similar to other states throughout the nation, Florida is facing a child care crisis: a workforce shortage resulting in inadequate staffing that was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

To capture early educators’ work assessments of their work environments, CSCCE developed the Supportive Environmental Quality Underlying Adult Learning tool (SEQUAL). Between October 2022 and March 2023, CSCCE surveyed early educators employed in center-based programs throughout Flagler and Volusia Counties about their experiences. This report examines the responses of 240 early educators, including program leaders, lead teachers, and assistant teachers working in those programs.

## Key Findings

### Staffing

- Program leaders in Flagler and Volusia Counties worried about hiring new staff and turnover of existing staff. They also reported having to close classrooms because they did not have adequate staff coverage.
- Teaching staff echoed these staffing challenges throughout the survey: they noted that there was insufficient staffing to provide children with individualized attention, and they lacked access to qualified substitutes when staff were absent.

### Targeting Training and Support

- A majority of teaching staff noted that some children in their classrooms spoke another language, however only 25 percent of teaching staff were multilingual. Furthermore, less than one half of educators agreed that they had sufficient training in working with children who are dual language learners.
- More than one third of teaching staff reported that there was not sufficient training available for working with children with challenging behaviors, which was also echoed in the open-ended responses.

### Increasing Opportunities for Input

- One third of educators reported that their leader did not always consider their input regarding classroom or program policies, and almost one half did not feel that there was a clear process for them to have a say in decisions that impact their work.
- Nearly two thirds of teaching staff report they are not given opportunity to offer input into decisions about which children should be assigned to their classrooms, despite their knowledge of children and their experience in early care and education.

### Supporting Economic Well-Being

- The hourly median wage in Flagler and Volusia Counties was \$13.75 for teaching staff and \$19.81 for program leaders. Many early educators struggled to afford housing, health care, sufficient food, and other basic necessities for themselves and their families, and a majority of early educators relied on at least one form of public support.

- Many early educators reported that they could not rely on compensation policies to support their well-being, and very few educators reported that their programs offered health insurance or a retirement/pension plan.
- Few teaching staff members surveyed agreed they could depend on being paid to participate in professional development or work outside of their regular hours nor did they receive an increase for being promoted to a position with more responsibility.
- Teaching staff also reported conditions that threatened their health and safety, most notably not being able to take breaks during the workday (although required by law to do so) and not being able to take paid sick leave.

### **Recognizing and Alleviating Trauma**

- A large portion of educators indicated that they continue to fear becoming infected with COVID themselves and/or infecting others.
- Educators reported changes in their sleep and eating habits, as well as difficulty concentrating and feeling negative and/or anxious about the future.

### **Supported Staff Want to Stay**

- We found that educators working in programs with higher mean scores across several SEQUAL domains were more likely to indicate they would still be working at the same program in three years. Thus, programs that strive to meet the standards outlined in the SEQUAL domains may be more likely to retain staff.

## **Recommendations**

### **Recommendation 1: Bolster Training and Support**

- Offer more frequent and on-going trainings for teaching staff relevant to the populations of children and families they serve, e.g., dual language learners and their families, or children engaging in challenging behaviors;
- Create additional opportunities for peer-to-peer learning, coaching, and sustained dialogue with ECE colleagues, so that educators can learn from and support one another in implementing best practices learned through professional development opportunities; and
- Provide opportunities for staff to engage in ongoing learning and development, for example, through apprenticeship or other paid internship models.

### **Recommendation 2: Increase Opportunities for Input**

- Provide clear information on the areas of classroom and programmatic decisions about which teaching staff can offer input; and
- Regularly collect data to assess how educators experience their working conditions and workplace climate and use these findings to institute strategies that engage early educators in quality improvement processes that enhance their work environments and better support their teaching practices.

### **Recommendation 3: Support Economic Well-Being**

- Look to and learn from [wage initiatives](#) like those in New Mexico, Illinois, and Washington, D.C., and utilize the knowledge gained to develop statewide or countywide wage initiatives;
- Ensure that early educators who attain higher levels of education or additional credentials receive an appropriate increase in compensation to further incentivize additional training and qualifications;
- Work to support centers overall by undertaking a comprehensive workforce study to assess the wages and benefits of early educators across programs, settings, and funding sources; and
- Revisit the state's Child Care Cost of Quality Study (Aigner-Treworgy et al., 2022) and consider the costs of care from a sustainable and systemic perspective that integrates appropriate compensation and benefits for the workforce, along with workplace supports outlined in SEQUAL.

### **Recommendation 4: Nurture Positive Program Climate**

- Develop and implement training programs that support program leaders, supervisors, and coaches in addressing work environment issues, as they require support and training on how to implement and sustain these types of changes;
- Provide funding for institutions of higher education and training programs to develop and offer classes and workshops related to work environment standards, rights of teaching staff on the job, and the critical importance of economic, emotional, and physical well-being among adults in the workplace;
- Embed work environment standards in quality improvement efforts to emphasize their importance, direct quality improvement resources toward improving working conditions, and ensure that programs cannot achieve the highest ratings without addressing work environment standards;

- Include a provision to care for existing and ongoing educator trauma in work environment standards, along with training in trauma-informed care, so that educators might better support the children and families they educate; and
- Provide financial resources and other assistance specifically designed to enable programs and providers to comply with work environment standards in a reasonable period of time.

### **Recommendation 5: Enhance Working Conditions**

- Foster opportunities for center-based staff and administrators to utilize the Model Work Standards for Teaching Staff in Center-Based Child Care<sup>1</sup> to assess their work environments and identify areas of growth for the program;
- Develop and implement training programs that support program leaders, supervisors, and coaches in addressing work environment issues, as they require support and training on how to implement and sustain these types of changes;
- Provide funding for institutions of higher education and training programs to develop and offer classes and workshops related to work environment standards, rights of teaching staff on the job, and the critical importance of economic, emotional, and physical well-being among adults in the workplace;
- Embed work environment standards in quality improvement efforts to emphasize their importance, direct quality improvement resources toward improving conditions, and ensure that programs cannot achieve the highest ratings without addressing work environment standards;
- Include a provision to care for existing and ongoing educator trauma in the work environment standards, along with training in trauma-informed care, so that educators might both be supported and also be better able to support the children and families they serve; and
- Provide financial resources and other assistance specifically designed to enable programs and providers to address and improve work environment standards in a reasonable period of time.

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<sup>1</sup> The current and prior versions of the Model Work Standards, as well as versions for Family Child Care Programs are available at <https://cscce.berkeley.edu/publications/report/creating-better-child-care-jobs-model-work-standards/>.

## References

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### Suggested Citation

Schlieber, M., Copeman Petig, A., Valencia López, E., & Pufall Jones, E. (2023). *Executive Summary: Early Educator Voices in Florida: Flagler and Volusia Counties*. Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley. <https://cscce.berkeley.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/CSCCE-SEQUAL-Florida-Executive-Summary.pdf>

### Acknowledgments

This study and report were generously supported by the Early Learning Coalition of Flagler and Volusia Counties (ELCFV).

Special thanks to the program leaders and teaching staff who gave so generously of their time to take part in this study. Additional thanks to the ELCFV for their support of this project. We are also grateful to our colleagues Lea Austin, for guidance and feedback throughout the study, Jenna Knight and Tobi Adejumo, for assistance throughout the study, and Claudia Alvarenga, for guidance and assistance in the design of this report.

The views expressed in this commentary are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent collaborating organizations or funders.

**Editor:** Deborah Meacham

## About CSCCE

The Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (CSCCE), founded in 1999, is the national leader in early care and education workforce research and policy. CSCCE provides research and analysis on the preparation, working conditions, and compensation of the early care and education workforce. We develop policy solutions and create spaces for teaching, learning, and educator activism. Our vision is an effective public early care and education system that secures racial, gender, and economic justice for the women whose labor is the linchpin of stable, quality services.

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