Centering Quality, Centering Equity: Lessons Learned in Increasing Early Childhood Educator Credentials

A joint report of The Institute for College Access & Success and the Georgetown University Center on Poverty and Inequality

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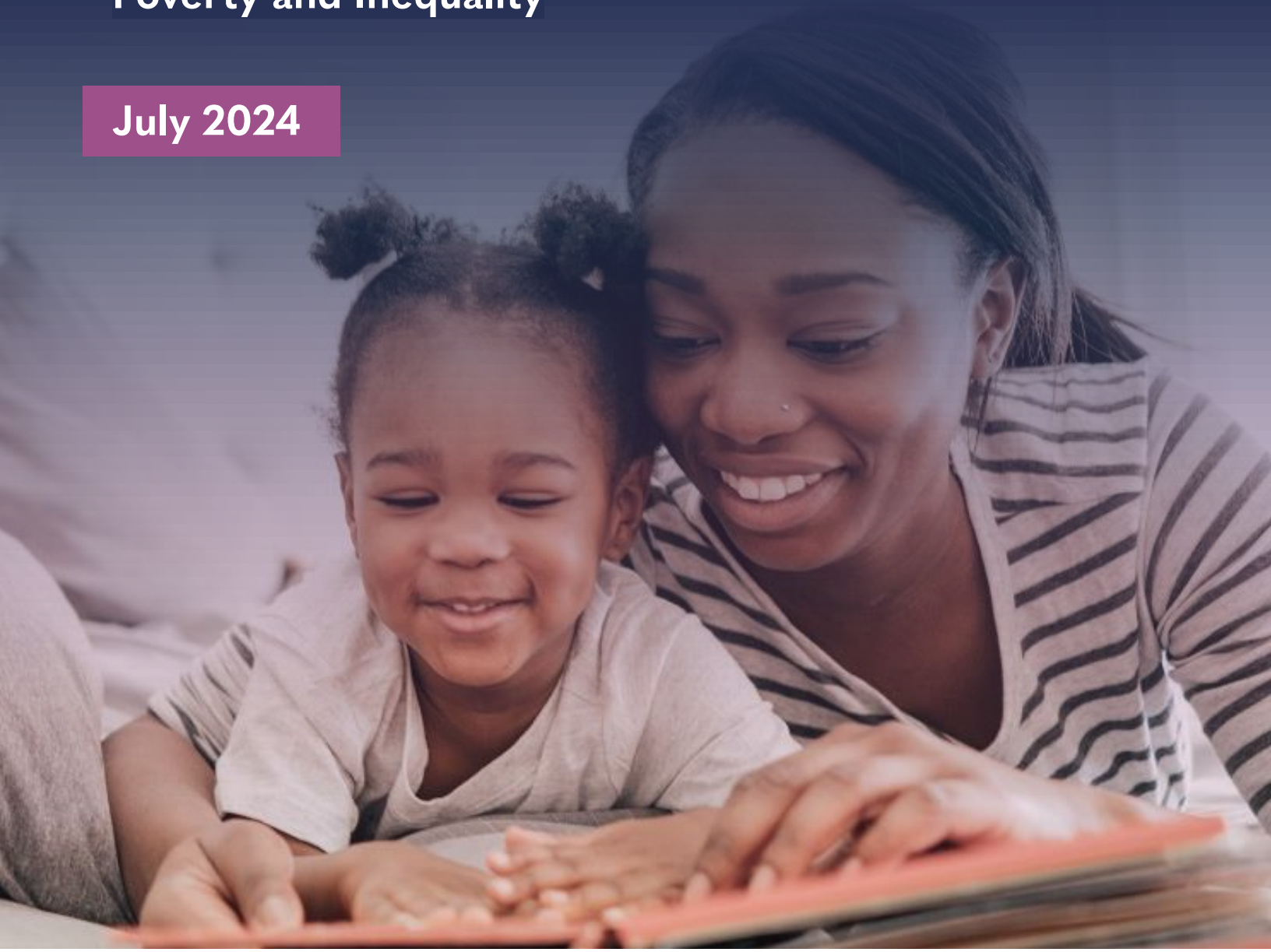

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Introduction

Thriving communities depend on a strong early childhood education (ECE) system—one where both young children and members of the workforce are served and supported. Across the country, state and federal policymakers are prioritizing ECE. In 2023, 22 governors—Democrat and Republican—elevated child care, pre-Kindergarten, and early care and education among their policy priorities within their State of the State addresses.[1] President Biden's *Build Back Better Framework* proposed free, universal, and higher quality preschool education to all three- and four-year-olds.[2] State and federal attention on ECE is expected to continue.

In recent years, state government leaders have increasingly focused on changing qualifications for specific ECE roles, as increasing credential requirements has sometimes been associated with increasing quality.[3] Therefore, it is important that racial and economic equity is centered in policy design and implementation so that workers are not harmed by credential requirement changes and states successfully achieve their goals with as few disruptions[i] as possible.

According to the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, high-quality ECE requires fair compensation and reasonable conditions for educators, but across the country, early educators are paid low wages and many experience economic insecurity.[4] About four out of ten early childhood educators are women of color and they tend to experience even lower wages than their white counterparts in ECE.[5] Black and Latina women are overrepresented in the ECE workforce compared to the overall U.S. population, and are more likely to be working with a high school diploma as their highest level of educational attainment.[6] Black and Latina women are also overrepresented in lower-paid ECE roles, and this is especially the case for those working in home-based centers and unlisted child care homes.[7] The opposite is true for white women, who typically hold the higher-paid educator roles in this profession.[8] The wage gap between white and Black early childhood educators has worsened in the past decade. [9] From 2012 to 2019, a full-time Black female teacher went from earning 84 percent to just 76.3 percent of what her white peers earned.[10] More than half of Latina early childhood educators who are single mothers lived in poverty in 2015 due to low wages.[11]

Workforce barriers are not the only hurdles that early childhood educators of color encounter. Legacies of racism and segregation continue to impact the ECE workforce. Systemic and structural barriers (housing, labor market, and educational discrimination; racially targeted predatory lending; unequal access to secondary and postsecondary education; and underinvestment in communities of color) have contributed to the workforce and educational disparities that we highlight in this report.

Comprehensive data on college retention and student loan borrowing and default rates on early childhood educators are not available. However, examining postsecondary data by race and ethnicity is both appropriate and instructive in highlighting the educational barriers that early childhood educators of color may face when increases in credential requirements require them to pursue a postsecondary credential.[ii]

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[i] Any future disruptions would be on top of the well-documented disruptions on the ECE workforce during the COVID-19 pandemic. See Teken, Erdal, Jacqueline Jones, and Sharon L. Kagan. *Addressing the Impact of COVID-19 on the Early Care and Education Sector*. National Academies Press, January 2022. Available at https://nap.nationalacademies.org/read/26463/chapter/1.

[ii] While there is variation in the years used for this analysis of postsecondary data, it represents the most recent sources of data available at the time of publication.

While white (41 percent), Black (36 percent), and Latinx (33 percent) students enroll in two- and four-year colleges at roughly similar rates, the rates at which they remain enrolled and complete college reveal large racial and ethnic disparities.[12] For students who began college in 2021, 70 percent of white students, 63 percent of Latinx students, and 56 percent of Black students returned for their second year at the same institution (public, private nonprofit, and for-profit).[13] When it comes to six-year completion rates for students who began at a public four-year college in 2017, nearly three in four (73 percent) white students completed a bachelor's degree, compared to 56 percent of Latinx students and 49 percent of Black students.[14]

In some states, early childhood educators will need to earn an associate's degree or a bachelor's degree to keep their jobs and advance in the profession.[15] Individuals who are not able to secure financial support that would help cover the cost of obtaining these credentials are highly likely to take out student loans, particularly people of color. For example, among bachelor's degree completers in 2020, nearly 83 percent of Black students borrowed student loans, compared to 62 percent of Latinx students and 61 percent of white students.[16] About 30 percent of Black borrowers reported defaulting on a federal student loan within 10 years of graduation (2008-2018), compared to nearly 20 percent of Latinx borrowers and 10 percent of white borrowers.[17] The default rates are worse for those who do not complete college: 55 percent of Black borrowers without a degree default on their loans, followed by 41 percent for Latinx borrowers, and 33 percent for white borrowers.[18] Regardless of whether they earn a postsecondary credential, Black students borrow more, owe more, and default at higher rates—likely due to significant racialized barriers to economic security and wealth accumulation.[19]

The data highlighted above reflect the strong connection between educational attainment and earnings in the U.S. workforce. Higher educational attainment is thought to lead to higher wages, but this is not always true for ECE professionals, even those with Bachelor's degrees.[20] While median hourly wages often correlate with educational attainment, ECE professionals earn significantly lower wages than other workers with the same level of education, partly due to wage compression in the ECE field.[21] Education occupations are part of the managerial and professional economy, and include preschool, K-12 teachers, postsecondary teachers, and librarians. The share of workers in education occupations with postsecondary education and/or training is projected to increase from 89 percent in 2021 to 97 percent in 2031. The share of workers in education occupations with a bachelor's degree or higher is projected to increase from 78 percent in 2021 to 88 percent in 2031, while the share of workers with middle skills credentials (associate's degrees as well as industry credentials such as the Child Development Associate), is projected to decrease from 11 percent in 2021 to 10 percent in 2031.[22]

While this recent data is important, it should not obscure the historical roots of the ECE profession in America. Centuries ago, slave owners forced enslaved Black women to provide unpaid caregiving and education to white children.[23] The legacies of racism and segregation persist today, with people of color in the ECE workforce often feeling undervalued and with Black and Latina women in this field—like other women of color in low-wage jobs—experiencing labor and housing discrimination, as well as occupational segregation.[24] Structural racism and systemic barriers are also features of our nation's unequal access to quality secondary and postsecondary education.[25]

Local, state, and federal policymakers must work to remove the systemic postsecondary education, workforce, and economic barriers that low-income and early childhood educators of color encounter when credential requirements in the profession are changing. Increased credential requirements carry the risk of locking out promising and highly qualified educators of color.[26] Without centering racial and economic

equity in the design of credentialing policies, there is a significant risk unintended consequences in states that increase credentialing requirements. [27] Requirement changes—if not accompanied by thoughtful college access and other workforce policies—could exacerbate the existing ECE workforce shortage, threatening employers' ability to recruit, hire, and retain a talented workforce.[28] Changing credential requirements can further exacerbate the child care crisis, which could in turn prevent parenting adults from fully participating in every profession.[29] Taken together, these unintended consequences could hinder the economic competitiveness of states and our nation.

The need to understand and uplift experiences of early childhood educators navigating changing requirements inspired our decision to conduct focus groups of racially and ethnically diverse early childhood educators in California and Washington, D.C. Policymakers may not always know how proposed or enacted changes will impact children, educators, parents, and their communities. We must directly listen to the voices of people who may be negatively impacted. One consistent and persistent complaint of our postsecondary system is how poorly it fares when it comes to enrolling, supporting, and graduating students, including students who are parents, working students, and students of color.[30] Supporting incumbent members of the ECE workforce as they upskill or reskill to meet new requirements within the ECE field is not only essential for achieving racial, gender, and economic equity in ECE, it also holds the promise of bringing our postsecondary and workforce sectors into closer alignment.

Organization of this report

This report contains the following sections:

- ***Introduction*** that sets the context for this report, highlights the workforce and education barriers that early childhood educators of color may face, and identifies the potential unintended consequences if increased credentialing requirements do not center racial and economic equity;
- ***Characteristics of the Early Childhood Education Workforce*** contains demographic, work experience, credentials, postsecondary attainment, wage, and income analysis;
- ***Case Studies: The Evolving ECE Workforce in California and Washington, D.C.*** describes the credentialing changes taking place and features the voices of individuals directly impacted by these changes; and
- ***Conclusion*** that includes Policy Implications.

The report is accompanied by an *Executive Summary* and *Technical Document*, which contains our Methodology and several Appendices. Both documents can be found on the report's landing page.

Characteristics of the Early Childhood Education Workforce

Early childhood educators play an important role in ensuring the health and wellbeing of infants and young children, who begin learning from birth and continue to learn at a rapid pace through their early years.[31] The ECE workforce includes aides, instructors, assistant teachers, lead teachers, and operators in home-based, center-based, and public-school settings.[32]

Quantitative analysis of ECE workforce data can provide important context for understanding the experience of educators navigating changes to ECE credential requirements. This section includes demographic, work experience, educational attainment, and socioeconomic characteristics of early childhood educators at center-based providers serving children from birth through age five, not yet in kindergarten. We focus the quantitative analysis on center-based providers for two reasons: (1) they are more likely to have to meet new credential requirements compared to unlisted home-based providers and (2) they are a much larger group than listed home-based providers.[iii] To be sure, home-based providers play a vital role in ECE, and we included them in our discussion of D.C.'s credential policy changes and in our focus groups.

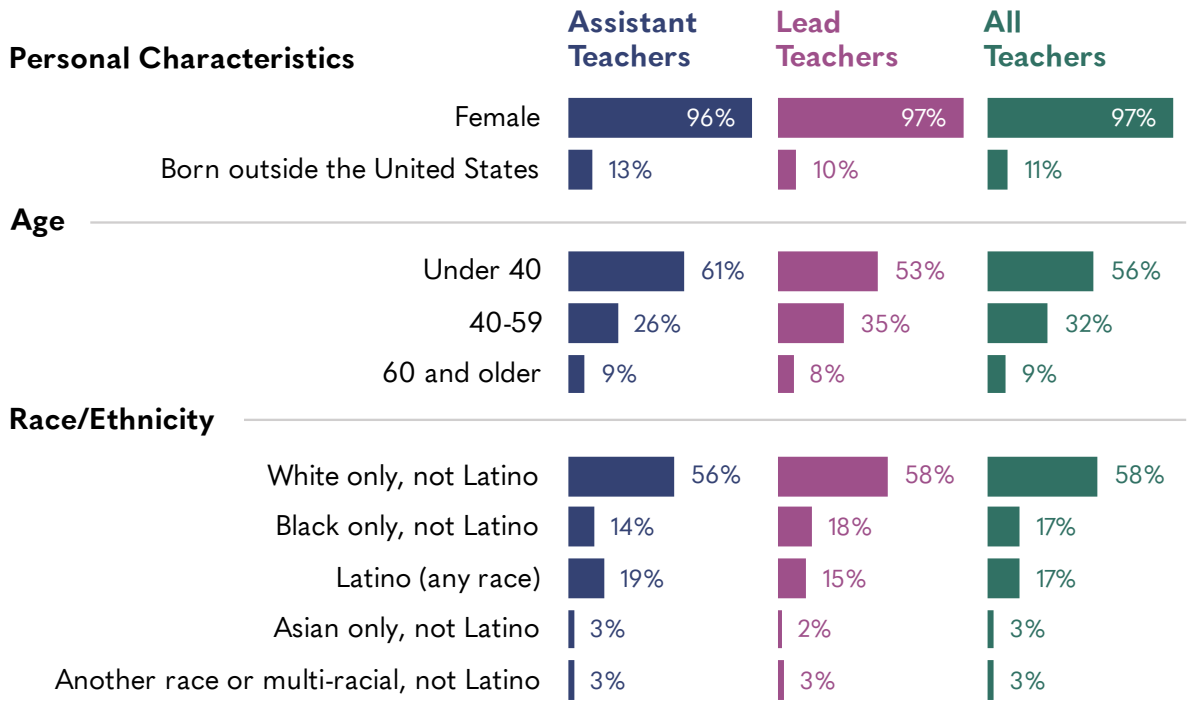
Demographic Characteristics

By and large, early childhood educators are women, younger than 40 years old, and racially and ethnically diverse

In 2019, there were 836,000 teachers (including instructors and lead teachers) and 507,000 assistant teachers (including aides) working in center-based ECE facilities across the nation. Almost all of these educators were women (97 percent), and 40 percent were people of color. About one-tenth were born outside the United States, and over half were younger than 40 years old. Compared to lead teachers, assistant teachers are more likely to be born outside the United States and to be younger. (*See Figure 1 and Appendix B: Center-Based Early Educator Characteristics by Role.*)

[iii] In 2019, there were 1.36 million center-based ECE teachers, lead teachers, assistants, or aides, 1.05 million unlisted paid home-based child care providers, and 91,200 listed home-based child care providers in the United States according to the 2019 National Survey of Early Care and Education (NSECE). Unlisted paid home-based child care providers may be exempt from requiring licenses to operate. For a more detailed description of these different groups, see *Appendix A: Make-up of Early Care and Education Workforce*.

Figure 1. **Demographics of Center-based Teachers**



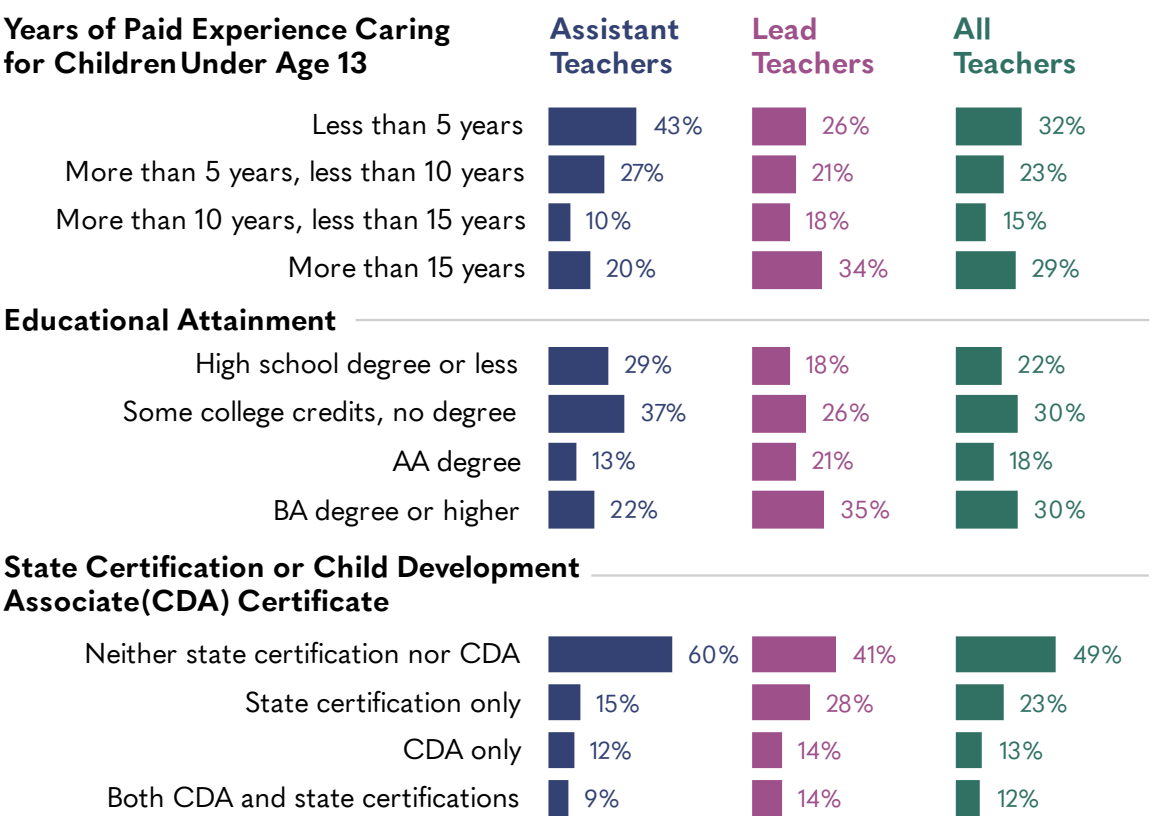
Note: Percentages might not add to 100 due to Don't Know and Refuse responses and records with absent data.
Source: Authors' analysis of 2019 National Survey of Early Care and Education (NSECE) Workforce Survey.

Work Experience and Educational Attainment Characteristics

Many early educators have extensive work experience, relevant credentials, and postsecondary degrees

Over half of lead teachers have accumulated more than 10 years of experience educating children under the age of 13, and more than 40 percent have been employed at their current program for more than five years. Additionally, more than half of lead teachers hold at least an associate's degree, and a similar share of teachers have either a Child Development Associate (CDA) Certificate or some form of state certification. Among assistant teachers, nearly a third have accrued more than 10 years of experience and over a fourth have worked at their current program for more than five years. A third of assistant teachers have at least an associate's degree and more than a third have either a CDA or some type of state certification. (*See Figure 2 and Appendix C: Center-Based Early Educator Work Experience and Credentials by Role.*)

Figure 2. **Experience, Education & Credentials of Center-based Teachers**



Note: Percentages might not add to 100 due to Don't Know and Refuse responses and records with absent data.
Source: Authors' analysis of 2019 National Survey of Early Care and Education (NSECE) Workforce Survey.

Socioeconomic Characteristics

Early educators are paid low wages and many live in low-income households

Pay for early educators is low, and many early educators live in low-income households. In 2019, assistant teachers were paid a median wage of $11 per hour, while lead teachers were paid a median wage of $13 per hour. Over two-fifths of assistant teachers and more than one-third of lead teachers lived in a household with incomes of $30,000 or less in 2018.[iv] Approximately one quarter of teachers reported in 2019 actively seeking new or additional employment in the past three months, with half citing that the primary reason for job searching was to pursue a higher-paying job. (*See Appendix D: Center-Based Early Educator Time Worked, Income, and Wages by Role.*)

[iv] The 2019 NSECE workforce survey asks respondents about their current wages in 2019 and about their total household income in 2018.

Attaining a postsecondary degree poses challenges given early childhood educators' wages, work commitments, and familial obligations

Lead teachers without a postsecondary degree are the group most likely to incur the most costs to meet new credential requirements if they are required to obtain an associate's or bachelor's degree. Assistant teachers, on the other hand, are most likely to be able to meet new credential requirements by obtaining a competency-based credential. Competency-based credentials or pathways place emphasis on the prior work experiences and knowledge of participants. For example, a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential requires much less time and monetary cost than obtaining an associate's or bachelor's degree.

Attaining a postsecondary degree poses challenges for early childhood educators given their low wages, full-time work commitments, and familial obligations. The median hourly wage for lead teachers without a postsecondary degree was $10.75 in 2019 and over half of them lived in a household with $30,000 or less in total income. Over three quarters worked 36 hours or more per week and 41 percent had a child under the age of 13 years old.

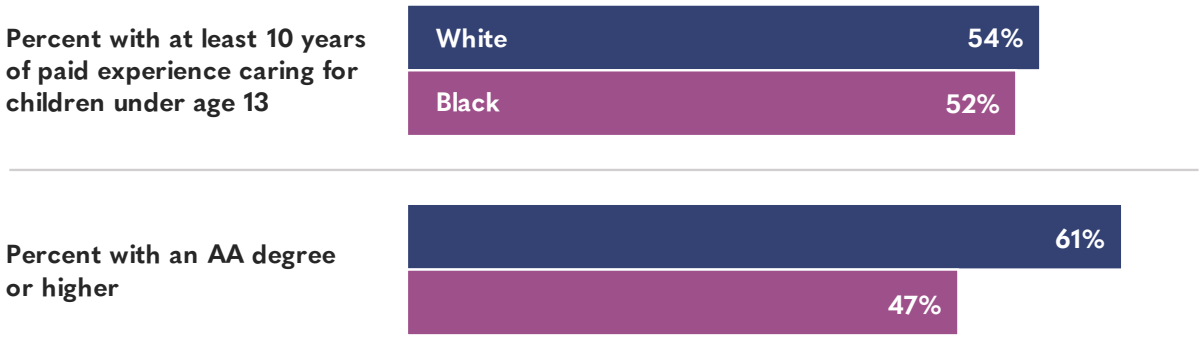
Educators of Color Also Face Systemic Barriers

Some of these challenges are even more profound for teachers of color due to systemic barriers to opportunity.[33] Unequal access to quality secondary education and the financial burdens associated with the costs of postsecondary degrees create additional hurdles for people of color pursing postsecondary education.[34] The resulting educational disparities are rooted in legacies of segregation[35] and the high costs of student loans.[36] Approximately 52 percent of Black lead teachers and 55 percent of Latinx lead teachers do not have an associate's degree or more, compared to 39 percent of white lead teachers.

ECE credential policies that require postsecondary education without accounting for work experience can disproportionately lock out experienced educators of color

White ECE educators are more likely to have attained postsecondary education than educators of color. Because of this disparity, white educators are more likely to be able to maintain their roles in ECE than educators of color when credential requirements are increased. The difference in years of work experience between white and Black educators is narrower than the difference in educational attainment. In fact, a similar percentage of white lead teachers (54 percent) and Black lead teachers (52 percent) have more than 10 years of experience working with children under 13. However, 61 percent of white lead teachers have at least an associate's degree, compared to 47 percent of Black lead teachers. (*See Figure 3 and Appendix E: Lead Teachers' Work Experience and Credentials by Race and Ethnicity.*)

Figure 3. **Differences in Work Experience are Narrower than Differences in Formal Education Between Black and White Lead Teachers**



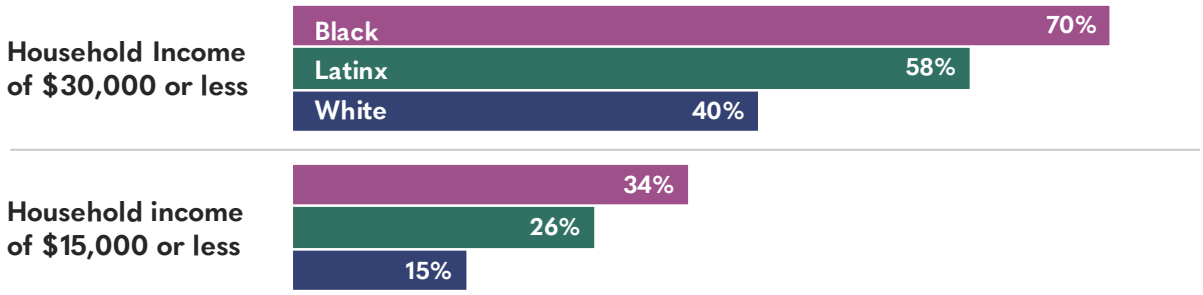
Source: Authors' analysis of 2019 National Survey of Early Care and Education (NSECE) Workforce Survey.

In the case of Latinx lead teachers, 41 percent have more than 10 years of paid experience caring for children. This is lower than Black and white teachers, likely because Latinx lead teachers are more likely to be younger than 30 (31 percent) and foreign born (33 percent). Systemic certification barriers have prevented many foreign-born teachers from accumulating 10 years of work experience. Rigid state licensure and teaching requirements, complicated and time-consuming processes for credential recognition, and state policies that limit opportunities based on documentation status create barriers to opportunity for many foreign-born teachers.[37]

Systemic barriers cause lower incomes for ECE educators of color than their white counterparts

Due to barriers to opportunity, including discrimination and inequities in access to employment and education, early childhood educators of color tend to have lower incomes than their white counterparts. Approximately 70 percent of Black lead teachers and 58 percent of Latinx lead teachers without a postsecondary degree live in households with an income of $30,000 or less, in contrast to 40 percent of white teachers. Furthermore, over a third of Black lead teachers and over a quarter of Latinx teachers without a postsecondary degree live in households with $15,000 or less in income, compared to 15 percent of white teachers (Figure 4). Educators of color are also more likely than their white counterparts to have familial obligations that present cost and time barriers to meeting new credential requirements while working to provide for their families. For example, Black and Latinx teachers without a postsecondary degree are more likely to live in a single-parent household with a child under the age of 13. (*See Appendix F: Lead Teachers Without a Postsecondary Degree, Characteristics by Race and Ethnicity.*)

Figure 4. **Black and Latinx Lead Teachers Without a Postsecondary Degree Are More Likely Than Their White Peers to Live in a Low-income Household**



Source: Authors' analysis of 2019 National Survey of Early Care and Education (NSECE) Workforce Survey.

In response to low wages and economic pressures, many early education teachers—particularly Black and Latinx teachers—look for new or additional employment. About 22 percent of white, 30 percent of Black, and 27 percent of Latinx lead teachers without a postsecondary degree reported looking for a new job in the past three months. Out of those that looked for a new job, 35 percent of white, 57 percent of Black, and 63 percent of Latinx lead teachers without a postsecondary degree reported that the primary reason for job searching was to find a job that pays more. (*See Appendix F: Lead Teachers Without a Postsecondary Degree, Characteristics by Race and Ethnicity.*)

Summary

Across the country, early childhood educators face significant barriers to economic security and continuing education–all while supporting children, parents, and their communities with specialized education services and supports. Key takeaways from examination of the data include:

- Many early educators have extensive work experience, relevant credentials, and postsecondary degrees.
- Early educators are paid low wages and many live in low-income households.
- White ECE educators are more likely to have attained postsecondary education than educators of color. Because of this disparity, white educators are more likely than educators of color to be able to maintain their roles in ECE when credential requirements are increased.
- ECE credential policies that require postsecondary education without accounting for work experience can disproportionately lock out experienced educators of color.

All teachers should have the opportunity to meet new credential requirements. But—as these findings underscore—early educators tend to have limited financial resources and time available to pursue postsecondary education. Due to existing and historical inequities, Black and Latinx teachers are likely to experience even greater barriers to completing new credentials compared to their white peers. ECE advocacy organizations, like the National Association for the Education of Young Children, have stressed the need for ECE educators to receive adequate support in overcoming barriers to attaining new credential requirements.[38] **When barriers to education are removed and appropriate resources are provided, early educators of all races and ethnicities have demonstrated success in earning postsecondary degrees.[39]**

Case Studies: The Evolving ECE Workforce in California and Washington, D.C.

Introduction of Focus Group Research

We explored Early Childhood Education (ECE) credential requirements in California (CA) and Washington, D.C. (D.C.) for two key reasons: 1) both recently raised these requirements and 2) both are in the process of implementing the new changes.

In both CA and D.C., we conducted focus groups of early childhood educators, child care operators, worker advocates (exclusive to D.C.), and policy leaders.[v] Despite variations in the new ECE requirements in both states, focus group participants reported similar experiences and barriers consistent with previous findings on early childhood educators of color.[40]

Three key takeaways emerged from the focus group discussions:

1. Credential requirement policies should provide inclusive supports that break down barriers to success. Flexible class times, the option to acquire new credentials via competency-based pathways, and culturally responsive classrooms were some of the supports that participants recommended.
2. Early childhood educators' prior work experience should be considered in the process to qualify for lead teacher roles.
3. Despite earning relatively higher wages compared to other states, early childhood educators in CA and D.C. reported feeling severely undervalued and underpaid. They expressed the urgency for higher salaries, along with health and retirement benefits. Respondents uplifted the value of collective action and union representation as integral strategies for improving the dignity of their work. (*See Appendix I: Hourly Wages for Early Childhood Educators.*)

Ultimately, participants in both CA and D.C. believed their value should not be tied solely to credentialing but rather extend to the critical role they play in the educational landscape.

[v] As mentioned in the previous section, Appendix A includes descriptions of each type of focus group participant. Our Technical Document contains a detailed Methodology and includes several Appendices, including the focus group interview protocols for California (Appendix G) and Washington, D.C. (Appendix H).

Case Study: California

Overview of Changes to Credentialing Requirements in California

In 2014, the California Legislature voted to set additional requirements for lead Transitional Kindergarten (TK) teachers.[41] Lead TK educators, who were already required to have a bachelor's degree and teaching credential, will be required to complete 24 college units in ECE, earn a Child Development Permit issued by the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CTC), or have equivalent experience as determined by the school district, county office of education, or charter school by August 1, 2025.[42] Elementary school educators who began teaching TK on or before July 1, 2015, are exempt from meeting the additional 24 ECE units.[43] Educators may also be eligible for either a short-term waiver or a variable term waiver to teach beyond their current credential status.[44]

California state government's efforts to expand access to TK has increased demand for ECE teachers. To strengthen the pipeline of pre-K through third grade teachers, California made effective the PK-3 ECE Specialist Instruction Credential pathway.[45] For classroom-experienced ECE professionals with bachelor's degrees, this ECE Specialist Instruction Credential is intended to be a bridge toward meeting new credential requirements to teach TK because it recognizes the value of candidates' prior work and educational experiences.[46] However, members of the incumbent ECE workforce may still be required to enroll in a teacher preparation program, complete a reduced amount of clinical practice hours, and pass the Reading Instruction Competence Assessment. By contrast, K-8 private school teachers may apply for and receive a Multiple-Subject Credential (MSC) and be authorized to teach TK as long as they have completed 24 units of study in ECE—even if their teaching experience is limited to middle school grades.

Lead Transitional Kindergarten (TK) teachers in California earn at least twice the salary of their ECE peers with a bachelor's degree working in other ECE settings in the state. The median salary for a lead TK teacher in California was $84,700 in 2020.[47] In the same year, a family child care provider with a bachelor's degree earned between $27,700 and $39,300, and a center-based lead teacher with a bachelor's degree earned about $42,600.[48]

California's plan to provide publicly funded TK to all 4-year-olds by 2025-26 is projected to grow TK enrollment fourfold between 2019-2020 and 2025-2026.[49] Researchers estimate that the number of lead TK teachers will need to triple or even quadruple from 4,000 (in 2019-2020) to between 12,000 and 16,000 (by 2025-26).[50]

Infrastructure in Place to Support Increased ECE Credentialing Requirements in California

- The ECE courses required to earn a permit are available at community colleges in California at a lower cost than at other institutions of higher education.[51]
- As of 2015, 103 community colleges in California offered an early childhood degree program.[52]
- In 2020–21, about 6,000 people earned associate's degrees in ECE from community colleges in California.[53]

- California Community Colleges (CCCs): The per unit cost at CCCs for California residents was $46 in 2023 – totaling over $1,100 for 24 units (or credits) of coursework. Nearly half of students in the state's community colleges have fees waived entirely by the California College Promise Grant (formerly known as the Board of Governors fee waiver).[54] CCCs also offer many early care and education courses online.[55]
- California State University (CSU): In 2023, 24 credits cost $6,814 at California State University, Los Angeles (one of the more affordable CA public four-year state colleges).[56]
- California Private College/University: In the 2023-2024 school year, 12-18 units were estimated to be $33,320 a semester ($2,244 per unit for both undergraduate and graduate students) at the University of Southern California (one of CA's largest private four-year institutions).[57]
- Notably, CCC students were very unlikely to borrow federal loans, whereas approximately 30 percent of students attending a CSU and 32 percent of those at a University of California (UC) institution had student debt.[58]
- Borrowing rates are even higher among students at for-profit colleges in California, with 55 percent of students at for-profit institutions borrowing money to attend.[59] Additionally, borrowers who attended CSUs and UCs were more likely to have made progress toward repaying their loans within the first three years than those who attended for-profit institutions.[60]

Challenges of Raising Credential Requirements in California

- Of the 40,000 early childhood educators who hold bachelor's degrees and are already teaching, only 43 percent of these educators are estimated to have a Child Development Permit[vi] at the teacher level or higher and have six or more years of teaching experience in ECE settings.[61]
- The shift toward universal ECE and the new credentialing requirements may make it difficult for California to prevent shortages in the ECE workforce.[62] New requirements may unintentionally exclude experienced professionals, notably educators of color, from advancement opportunities and could potentially obstruct the planned expansion of ECE.[63]
- While tuition is relatively low at California community colleges, most college costs extend beyond tuition (e.g., housing, transportation, food, child care, and textbooks). Even with financial aid, these additional costs can be prohibitive for some students to complete their education, especially student parents.[64]
- While the availability of online courses can help early childhood educators keep transportation costs down and provide flexibility to students juggling work and family responsibilities, it is possible that internet access and updated computers and software may be unaffordable to some students and prevent them from taking advantage of online courses.[65]
- Lead TK teachers earn at least twice the salary of the early childhood educators with a bachelor's degree working in other ECE settings and have more robust benefits (e.g., retirement plans, paid leave, and health insurance) than their peers in California center- and home-based settings.[66]
- Even experienced members of the incumbent ECE workforce may be required to enroll in a teacher preparation program to become eligible for a teaching credential.

[vi] Child Development Permit at the teacher level here refers to educators who are center-based teachers or home-based family childcare (FCC) program teachers.

Case Study: Washington, D.C.

Overview of Changes to Credentialing Requirements in Washington, D.C.

In December 2016, the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) adopted increased educational requirements for the early childhood workforce, which went into effect between 2022 and 2023. OSSE later revised the requirements in 2023 to include additional pathways for meeting the new criteria. Effective December 2023, OSSE requires ECE teachers and expanded home caregivers (a home-based ECE role)[67] to have an associate's degree in ECE or a closely related subject, an associate's degree (or higher) with at least 12 credit hours in ECE, or to have completed 60 credit hours in any subject with at least 12 credit hours in ECE. Early educators who do not meet these requirements may also be employed in these roles if they hold a CDA credential and are enrolled in a program to earn an associate's degree within four years of their hiring.[68] Assistant teachers and associate home caregivers can meet the requirement by having a CDA credential, an associate's degree in any subject area, 60 completed credit units in any subject, or a state-awarded certificate from another state determined by OSSE to be comparable to a CDA. Individuals with a high school diploma or equivalent may also be employed in these roles, as long as they are enrolled in a program to complete a CDA within two years.[69] Home caregivers are required to have a CDA or a state-awarded certificate comparable to a CDA.[70] Child development centers that employ teachers or assistant teachers enrolled in a program to meet the new education requirements can apply for a general waiver on behalf of their employee.[71]

In recognition of the value of experience, as well as barriers that may have prevented some experienced early childhood educators from accessing postsecondary credentials, OSSE offers a "continuous service waiver" option for directors, expanded home caregivers, and teachers with 10 or more years of experience for those who held these roles prior to 2023. This continuous service waiver allows eligible early childhood educators to continue working in their roles with a continuous service certification that can follow them across changes in employment (rather than relying on their employers to apply for a waiver on their behalf).[72]

In February 2022, legislation passed by the D.C. Council authorized OSSE to launch the Early Childhood Educator Pay Equity Fund (Pay Equity Fund) to supplement the wages and increase the pay of ECE teachers and caregivers.[73] In order to receive funding from the Pay Equity Fund, child development facilities must be licensed by OSSE and pay eligible early childhood educators salaries that meet or exceed OSSE-established minimum salaries.[74] The minimum salaries are intended to advance pay parity between early childhood educators in licensed child development facilities and D.C. public school teachers with comparable degrees.

Minimum salaries set by OSSE also provide a financial incentive for early childhood educators to meet the new credential requirements. In 2022, the average annual salary in D.C. was $45,759 for a center-based teacher, home caregiver, or expanded home caregiver; it was $41,536 for an assistant teacher or associate home caregiver. Under the 2024 minimum salary requirements, an assistant teacher with a CDA would earn at least $51,006, compared to $43,865 for an assistant teacher with less than a CDA. A teacher with an associate's degree would earn $63,838 compared to $54,262 for a teacher with only a CDA. The minimum salaries create a pathway for early educators who earn additional credentials to earn increased compensation and create incentives to work towards higher credentials that allow them to advance professionally.[75] (*See Appendix J: Comparison of D.C. Teacher Salaries in 2022 and Minimum Salaries Required in Fiscal Year 2024 for Programs Receiving Pay Equity Funds.*)

As of October 2023, D.C. had over 3,900 early care educators in its ECE workforce.[76] Teachers make up 46 percent of the workforce, while assistant teachers make up 39 percent, and home caregivers approximately 1 percent.[77] As of 2018, Black and Latinx educators made up three-quarters of the ECE workforce in the Washington region[vii] and tended to be lower paid than their white colleagues.[78] Women made up 94 percent of the ECE workforce.[79]

Infrastructure in Place to Support Increased Credentialing Requirements in Washington, D.C.

- OSSE provides a list of colleges that offer associate's degree programs with on-campus, online, and hybrid options.[80]
- At the University of the District of Columbia (UDC), an associate's degree in early childhood education requires 62 credits earned over five semesters, with tuition and fees for D.C. residents totaling $8,974.[81]
- For educators who already have an associates' degree and only need 12 semester credit hours in ECE, the D.C. resident cost of tuition for 24 credit hours over two semesters at UDC was $3,668 in 2023 ($1,834 per 12 credit hours).[82]
- Several options are available for ECE educators to obtain a CDA, including the OSSE-funded CDA Training and Preparation Program (free in-person and/or hybrid training for ECE professionals seeking an initial or renewed CDA, offered through two community-based grantees), Quorum eLearning (membership-based online platform in English and Spanish that allows educators an alternative to obtaining the 120 training hours for the CDA), and First Step CDA credential program (for high school students interested in concurrently completing their CDA), as well as other options offered by charter schools, child care providers and higher education institutions with a variety of funding sources.[83] OSSE provides no-cost membership to Quorum to ECE educators in D.C.
- OSSE also offers several resources to help pay for a CDA in partnership with the Southeast Childrens Fund and the CentroNía Institute: scholarships to pay for application fees, as well as grants for CDA training and preparation programs offered in person in English, Spanish, and Amharic (or online in English and Spanish).[84]
- OSSE provides various scholarship opportunities for D.C. residents pursuing an associate's degree, including D.C. Futures, D.C. Leading Educators toward Advanced Degrees (D.C. LEAD) Grants, and D.C. Tuition Assistance Grants (DCTAG).[85]
- In 2024, the D.C. Council established a special fund, the Higher Education Incentive Program (HEIP Fund), which will be administered by the University of the District of Columbia Community College (UDC-CC). This is an effort to increase the number of ECE teachers in D.C. by providing scholarships.[86]
- UDC-CC also offers a Spanish-English bilingual associate's degree program.[87]
- D.C.'s Pay Equity Fund established a required salary scale based on role, credentials, and work experience which will help ensure equity in ECE as educators work to achieve new credential requirements in D.C.[88]

[vii] The Washington Region includes Alexandria County, the City of Alexandria, and Fairfax County in Virginia; Prince George's County and Montgomery County in Maryland; and the District of Columbia.

Challenges of Raising Credential Requirements in Washington, D.C.

- As of October 2023, 39 percent of teachers and 37 percent of assistant teachers met or exceeded the new minimum education requirements for their current roles.[89]
- For early childhood educators who do not yet meet the new credential requirements, the biggest challenge to obtaining the CDA credential will likely be the time commitment. For example, obtaining a CDA through Quorum requires evidence of 120 education hours. In addition to education hours, challenges could include the costs of tests and portfolios and barriers in language access.

Case Study: Findings

The themes elevated from the focus groups are a combination of findings from the California and D.C. participants.

Focus Group Theme 1:
Credential Requirement Policies Should Provide Inclusive Supports That Break Down Barriers to Success

Participants indicated that early childhood educators of color disproportionately encounter barriers to access, fund, and earn required ECE credentials. Participants recommended several options to help educators overcome these barriers, including the creation of competency-based alternatives into the profession, financial aid, flexible and inclusive academic structures, and paid student teaching options.

In California, one respondent championed childhood development coursework as a more appropriate competency-based pathway to qualify for Transitional Kindergarten (TK) roles, and questioned the need take general education courses to become a TK teacher. As of April 1, 2024, ECE educators have the option to pursue an alternate credential—the PK-3 Specialist Instruction Credential.

> "The ECE unit – those 24 units – is the basic foundation for TK, which I don't understand why if I was new trying to get into the field why I need a Multiple-Subject Credential because that doesn't apply to TK, and people get this misunderstanding all the time that TK and Kindergarten is like every other grade level. It is not, and it should not be, and I think the state is coming into that now and realizing that it should be treated differently, so the requirement should be different... The new requirements, I mean, the requirement for them to have the multi-subject credential, I think it's unnecessary. The child development courses? Yes." - **ECE Educator (CA)**

In D.C., participants underscored the value of the Child Development Associate (CDA) competency-based credential as an entry point to foundational knowledge about the ECE profession. They also shared diverse perspectives on the extent to which barriers to attaining a CDA have been addressed. Specifically, they recommended alternative pathways for experienced educators without traditional credentials and proposed allowing early childhood educators without a credential the flexibility to teach while pursuing the credential, which is something the December 2023 licensing regulations address.[90]

> "I want to underscore that over half of our early childhood educators can meet the credential requirements by obtaining a child development associate. This is a competency-based credential that was created specifically for the early childhood workforce that's really focused on ensuring that adults have the base level understanding of child development and of effective toolkit of techniques and strategies for working with young children to be effective and confident and successful in the classroom or the home with our early learners." - **Policy Leader (D.C.)**
>
> "I do think it would be helpful if there were some alternate avenues for some teachers, and that's not to say that it's a waiver out of education entirely, but that I think if there are teachers who are in process in some way or similarly to how like there's a CDA as an alternate route, even a CDA though it can take time. I do think it does feel like a very binary, you either have it or you don't, and you're either allowed in the classroom or you're not." - **ECE Operator (D.C.)**
>
> "I think some people decided several years ago, I'm hearing this from other directors and centers, that they have staff who were like, "I'm going to go for the AA," or "I'm going to go for the bachelor's, because that's what's going to stand me in the best set in the future." And so they did that in lieu of doing a CDA, but now they aren't finished. And so they don't have the CDA that qualifies them for the classroom, but they also aren't finished with the degree. And I think that's probably a question mark for a lot of people is, what's going to happen with them? And I think that would be a real shame if those people get pushed out of the field because that's... Yeah, it's kind of getting pushed out of the field on a technicality as opposed to a desire to leave the field." - **ECE Operator (D.C.)**

As highlighted earlier in this section, effective December 2023, OSSE required at least an associate's degree for lead teachers and expanded home caregivers. Early childhood educators cannot qualify for lead teacher or expanded home caregiver roles with a competency-based credential alone. One D.C. participant championed advanced competency-based pathways to qualify for lead teacher and expanded home caregiver positions.

> "We really, really value the CDA as a competency-based credential. We would love for there to be a similar competency-based credential that we could use with [lead] teachers and expanded home[care] providers. However, that competency-based credential does not currently exist. And so we are using the associate's degree for that purpose... If there was something competency based that was a step beyond [the entry level CDA credential], that also included some of the more general knowledge and leadership skills that we would want to see in people in lead teaching and expanded home caregiver roles, we would be very interested in pathways for that." - **Policy Leader (D.C.)**

California participants noted the effects of long-standing barriers and called for specific supports for women and other educators of color, with a dedicated focus on race and representation with ECE programs.

> "The whole thing about the educational requirements in public schools has always been hard, especially for teachers of color because we don't get in. We don't graduate from college at the same rate, and then we don't qualify...The CSET [California Subject Examinations for Teachers] that we have to take now, the Multiple Subject Credential test,[viii] has eighth grade algebra on it. If you wanted to teach TK [transitional kindergarten], you don't really need that. So I hope that's part of the requirements that they're going to change. But still, we don't have enough support for teachers of color to be able to get through the process and get out the other end." - **ECE Operator (CA)**

D.C. respondents noted the importance of accessibility for people with language barriers. One highlighted the usefulness of CDA material to non-native English speakers and immigrants.

> "Amharic-language CDA coursework and exams is not something that is needed necessarily nationally, but the Council for Professional Recognition allowed us to fund the translation of the exam [for the large Amharic-speaking community in D.C.]. So it did not have to be one-on-one for people in cohorts that were taught in Amharic, but in group settings, which alleviates a lot of barriers just in terms of the process and the time that it takes to get through." - **Policy Leader (D.C.)**

While reflecting upon successful strategies for earning required credentials, California and D.C. participants championed flexible class times, online courses, academic advising, and mentoring support.

> "And I'm really grateful that [my organization has given us] the opportunity to really take it over the weekend instead of after work, because we have a long day already. So that would just make it very difficult for me. But I am taking my classes on Saturdays, which is wonderful, but once I'm done with this cohort part, my worry really would be like, is it going to continue? Will there be a next cohort, or do I need to get into in-person at a college, which I'll have to figure out because if it's during the weekdays, it won't be possible for myself even though I want to keep moving forward. So that's where I'm at this time." - **ECE Educator (CA)**
>
> "I'm in their classroom, but I'm also live-streaming, so that people can do either one. And I think that really helps, especially people that can't jump out of their house and run [to] the college because there's a class on." - **ECE Operator (CA)**
>
> "It is important to ensure that the programs are accompanied by the kind of academic advising that our early educators need to be successful. I have worked in a number of states in this area and have dealt with examples of people who, for example, took 17 years to complete an associate's degree program because requirements changed. They were given inaccurate guidance. They took tons of courses that didn't count towards the credential that they needed or that didn't stack up in any logical sequence to a credential. That is a serious problem in our higher education system for non-traditional learners, for individuals who are first generation college goers. But it's when we can address through the supports we provide specifically for

[viii] As mentioned above, prior to the PK-3 Credential, TK candidates were required to have Multiple Subject Credential, but this is no longer required. While the PK-3 Credential creates a new, more aligned pathway for ECE educators, the MSC pathway will remain an option for ECE educators.

> our early educators to help them look at what coursework they may already have, figure out the most expeditious pathway to obtain the credential they need." - **Policy Leader (D.C.)**
>
> "We have also implemented mentorship programs. We've made sure that there are resources available, especially for people who are not necessarily comfortable going back to school. And I think that that has been a big deal for the workforce too, once they understand what's available to them and the people who are there to support them, and everyone wants them to be successful in the programs that they're in." - **Policy Leader (D.C.)**

Furthermore, California participants advocated for additional financial aid (e.g., need-based grants) and child care support to help early childhood educators meet credentialing requirements. Research has highlighted that financial aid is vital for persistence and attainment, especially for students from low-income backgrounds.[91] Access to on-campus child care also supports the matriculation and completion of student parents.[92]

> "I think one of the main services would be around financial aid. And making sure there's flexibility for their financial aid. A lot of our ECE providers are older, and so, do we have services that they need? Child care services on campuses for them to have child care provided for them while they seek the credential? Or do we have financial incentives for them? I think it takes a lot to become a teacher and to seek a credential. So making sure that it's going to be worth it for them to begin with is also a thing that we really need to consider." - **Policy Leader (CA)**
>
> "Expanding some of our current grant programs in the state that target teachers or people who want to be teachers...I think we really need urgency around clarifying those pathways." - **Policy Leader (CA)**

Paid student teaching positions emerged as a promising practice in California that would help educators overcome barriers to earning credentials. According to a California participant, paid student teaching made early childhood education an attractive opportunity. California is considering proposals to support paid student teaching as a strategy to eliminate the teacher shortage in the state.[93]

> "I was in a program that paid me for my student teaching. I got paid 20 grand each semester, so it was a no-brainer to go to school and do that. But not everybody's in that case, and I think somewhere down the road you need to start paying student teachers. If you pay people to do student teaching... I think it would increase people wanting to be a student teacher because now it makes it worth it because you could embed your classes around that and you're more willing to do it." - **ECE Educator (CA)**
>
> "If they had more... programs where you could get credentials where you got paid for it like I did, it'd be a no-brainer, and I think it would open it up to everybody. I think everybody would be willing to do it. But it's sad that money plays a factor into it because in two years they're getting a credential. Who knows how much that is [worth] and some people can't... It's hard to do both at once. Some people can do it and excel. Other people, they can't. They're like, Well, I can't work and go to school and raise a kid. So I think if we made it more accessible to everybody, I think that would be a start in the right direction..." - **ECE Educator (CA)**

Focus Group Theme 2:
ECE Proficiency Should Consider Counting Prior Work Experience Towards New Requirements

The binary nature of credential attainment does not acknowledge partial progress toward a degree, making it challenging for educators to meet all requirements. A flexible approach to ECE credential-primary pathways that values experience was a recurring theme among respondents.

> "I do agree the units and some of the stuff they do teach you definitely does help out. But then I'm also a big proponent, too, that sometimes people could be the most educated and have the most schooling, but they don't do as well sometimes as someone who has the experience and might not even have some of the schooling... I wish there was some middle ground." - **ECE Educator (CA)**
>
> "Yeah, I think that goes hand in hand. It's good to have that [credential], but the hands on is very good too, because you learn as you go, you learn what works and what don't work, and you grow as a teacher too when you go into classroom every day." - **ECE Educator (D.C.)**
>
> "There's a lot of emotional work that goes into teaching these students. A lot of work that a lot of us can't do. And I think that the system in a way dismisses a lot of the work, and years, and knowledge that a lot of our providers already have in the field. " - **Policy Leader (CA)**

While participants noted the importance of applying work experience towards new requirements, respondents noted that—although difficult to assess—the quality of the experience also matters.

> "Everybody who has a lot of experience isn't necessarily a good teacher. So we have to be careful... and time is not enough. But we also can't expect those people to take any kind of examination or test based on their experience, because the experience they have may not necessarily be the type of thing that could be adequately measured in a test." - **ECE Operator (CA)**
>
> "I think experience should count to a certain extent because there's years of work, years of learning on the job. But then, what is the quality of the work that person has been doing? So I can say, "Hey, I have been working in early ed for 20 years." But what kind of program was it for 20 years? What kind of quality? Is it NAEYC accredited? Is it Head Start?...But experience by itself should never be enough. You have to have some sort of education." - **Worker Advocate (D.C.)**

Unique to the D.C. focus groups, one participant acknowledged that while effective pedagogy from credentialing can be a benefit, early childhood educators without credentials also bring valuable experience to the ECE sector.

> "I do think that teachers need qualifications, and I think that the pedagogy that you get in a collegiate attainment and course is what is needed for high quality teaching. I do think, and talking to a lot of people, I mean, I think it's the exception not the rule, but I don't think that's the end all be all. There are some very amazing teachers that do not have the credentials. In my experience, they are or have been in some type of program, but not always bachelor level or master level. And I mean they can out-teach anybody I've ever seen." - **ECE Operator (D.C.)**

Focus Group Theme 3:
New Credentials Need to Lead to Better-Paying Jobs with Good Benefits in Order to Strengthen the Dignity of Work in the Profession

Participants argued that the value of ECE work should not be tied solely to credentialing, but to the critical role educators play in the educational landscape. Any new credential policies, they argued, should aim to increase salaries and benefits for educators, push back against legacies of racism and sexism in the field, and ultimately work toward strengthening the dignity of work in the profession.

Early childhood educators find themselves compelled to work multiple jobs to make ends meet, leading to a sense of being undervalued despite their qualifications.

> "If you want to do what you love and do it well, you're not going to make a living wage for the most part. That's the reality of it. I saw a post on [social media]...they were asking, "Hey, what do you guys do to make ends meet?" I was reading through it and it was just atrocious. They're working two and three jobs and then not having weekends, not having time to recuperate, going back into the classroom, loving these children with trauma, with all these things just to maybe make ends meet. So there's definitely the pay disparity, and to ask for additional education, you're then now asking people who are already probably living in the poverty range to try to find money to go back to school to do it. But if they do that, when are they going to work their second and third jobs to even stay housed? ...With the workforce shortage, where I work, we are down so many teachers and they want to work on retention. They can go to McDonald's and make $20 an hour, but they come to us with 24 units and I can't even give them $18. And that's not a year round program. Let me just throw that in there too. So they don't get paid in the summer. So you can't retain people. I'm like, "Good luck. Do they have any openings for me?." - **ECE Operator (CA)**

Despite their pivotal role in students' lives at the beginning of their educational journeys, California participants reported feeling devalued in the field.

> "So, my organization, our specific focus is really around low-income communities and communities of color. And there's a special focus for us around the Latino and Black communities in this space. I think one of the biggest discussions that has been floated, but not really highlighted, I think it all goes back to, "How we value..." Or, "Don't value the work of women of color in the space." - **Policy Leader (CA)**
>
> "Teaching is devalued and it was never talked to me as a kid, and you just always looked at your teachers, and even as a kid, I knew that they were underpaid. And so growing up, it was like, I always had that thought, like why would I want to be a teacher? And especially as a male, especially Latino male, I think it's undervalued, and I'm taught to maybe do more of a construction worker role or something with kind of more blue collar. That's what I was growing up [around], so I totally agree with what she's saying that it's undervalued, not talked about. So I didn't even know. I didn't even know I could be a preschool special ed teacher, so it was hard. And I navigated towards there when I was like 23, 24." - **ECE Educator (CA)**

One D.C. participant highlighted that resistance to credential requirements from some operators reflects opposition to pay parity for early childhood educators.

> "I think some of this resistance [around credential requirements] is coming from folks who do not want to pay teachers at a level where it is comparable to their counterparts in public schools and public charter schools. If you minimize a role, you don't have to compensate them at a higher level, right? So that's one of the shining reasons, in my opinion. Again, talking to a lot of different people, being in a lot of different meetings." - **Worker Advocate (D.C.)**

Another D.C. respondent expressed the need to consider new initiatives through an equity lens, especially considering the historical and present-day impact of racism and sexism on both early childhood educators and the communities they serve. Addressing systemic inequities through compensation can better retain and support women of color who have been (and still are) historically marginalized in the field, despite disproportionately making up the ECE workforce.

> "I view our compensation work as really core racial justice and social equity work and gender justice work too, because the reasons that our women early childhood educators are so underpaid are deeply, deeply grounded in racism and sexism. And if we are able to address those issues, we are directly tackling those outcomes. And so I do think it is important for us to think about as we increase compensation, how do we make sure that our folks who are in the early learning workforce historically are benefiting from that. And the support for credential attainment is an important part of that because we wouldn't want to have it be the case that, you see this in some other fields, as the compensation goes up, you recruit new people in and they push the folks who've historically been there out. Our goal is that that not be the case and that because we're providing supports and we're raising the bar for everybody, we retain the workforce that we have." - **Policy Leader (D.C.)**

D.C. participants championed the crucial role of D.C.'s Pay Equity Fund in supporting the ECE workforce by increasing compensation and wellbeing alongside rising credential requirements. The fund can cover essential expenses like furniture and rent. Respondents heralded the Pay Equity Fund as a supplemental revenue source for child care programs, bridging the gap between what parents can afford and necessary compensation for early childhood educators. They expressed the importance of awareness about the fund.

> "I think since the Pay Equity Fund rolled out, and the first phase was $10,000 for assistant teachers, $14,000 for lead teachers, that was given to the teachers directly from OSSE. And I already started hearing, "Wow, it was so helpful. I was able to buy furniture for my apartment," or "I was able to pay my rent on time," or "I was able to get a car. So my commute is easier right now. So, I think the quality of life of teachers is definitely a change for a lot of people. And like I said, if we are going to hire teachers with credentials and we want to, then we have to pay them. And when we pay them, we are able to attract more teachers." - **Worker Advocate (D.C.)**
>
> "It's a three-legged stool, right? It's a requirement. They have to be high standards because this is about children's learning and if we are going to give something to the early learning workforce, we need to have something we're getting in return for it. It's about support to earn credentials, which we do through our scholarships and our CDA programs. And it's about compensation, which we're doing through our Pay Equity Fund and our healthcare for child care program." - **Policy Leader (D.C.)**

California participants uplifted collective action and union representation as integral strategies for improving the dignity of their work. Unions, like Child Care Providers United (CCPU), and advocacy organizations (e.g., BlackECE) emerged as powerful allies in home-based providers' pursuit for better compensation, benefits (e.g., Medi-Cal), working conditions, and empowerment. The overarching sentiment among respondents was a call for increased societal recognition of the ECE profession, higher salaries, and retirement benefits. Participants argued that the value of their work should not be tied solely to credentialing but to the critical role they play in the educational landscape.

> "I also believe that unless the public gets involved, unless parents get involved, the state of California is not...as willing as they should be to look... behind the workforce, and to understand the role of it. And it is because of that we have a union." - **ECE Operator (CA)**
>
> "...the workers are doing great at mobilizing. They're doing great with what they can do and what they know how to do. They did several marches and mobilization in California this past year, and they're one of the biggest reasons why we got the win that we did in the last budget. And I just hope that we're able to create more opportunities for them to be their own advocates in spaces where it truly matters." - **Policy Leader (CA)**
>
> "If it wasn't for the union, I don't even think we'd be where we are right now. So we thankfully have a union. There are more talks now about what's the true cost of care, and that the workforce needs to be fairly compensated if they want quality. And you can't ask for quality without compensation. Those two things go together." - **ECE Operator (CA)**
>
> "The union, we have CCPU right now... for our family child care providers, we're marching for what? Now, that doesn't even include benefits. Some of the preschools have benefits, but we're fighting for what? Medi-Cal and retirement." - **ECE Operator (CA)**

Conclusion

As state policymakers across the country are considering increasing credential requirements for early childhood educators, we urge them to prioritize educators' success in meeting any new requirements. Otherwise, we risk locking out promising or highly qualified educators of color and increasing barriers that Black and Latina women already face in the ECE workforce.

Policy Implications

Policies that increase credential requirements for ECE jobs should protect educators and advance racial and economic equity in the profession. These policies must be adequately funded. Policymakers should engage early childhood educators in policy development and implementation.

To ensure that the ECE workforce and system remain strong, our research points to the importance of the following policy priorities for policymakers to consider:

- Build relationships and/or networks of incumbent workers and worker advocates.
- Reduce the costs associated with obtaining new credentials.
- Develop flexible and competency-based pathways, in collaboration with other entities.
- Provide adequate credit for work experience.
- Create debt-free pathways to college.
- Increase educator wages and prioritize pay equity.
- Improve data collection efforts.

When early childhood educators are given the support they need to succeed in the profession, our economy and society as a whole will benefit.

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