

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

A joint report of The Institute for College Access & Success and  
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## Executive Summary

### 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.<sup>i</sup> President Biden’s *Build Back Better Framework* proposed free, universal, and higher quality preschool education to all three- and four-year-olds.<sup>ii</sup> 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.<sup>iii</sup> Increased credential requirements carry the risk of locking out promising and highly qualified educators of color.<sup>iv</sup> Therefore, it is important that racial and economic equity is centered in credentialing<sup>v</sup> as much as possible.

Local, state, and federal policymakers must work to remove the systemic postsecondary education, workforce, and economic barriers that low-income early childhood educators and early childhood educators of color encounter when credential requirements in the profession change. 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.<sup>vi</sup> Changing credential requirements can further exacerbate the child care crisis, which could in turn prevent parenting adults from fully participating in every profession.<sup>vii</sup> 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 (CA) and Washington, D.C. (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.<sup>viii</sup> 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.

## Characteristics of the Early Childhood Educator Workforce

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 and relevant credentials, as well as postsecondary degrees.
- Early educators are paid low wages and many live in low-income households.
- White early 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.

## Case Studies:

### The Evolving ECE Workforce in California and Washington, D.C.

We explored ECE credential requirements in CA and D.C. for two key reasons: 1) both recently changed these requirements and 2) both are in the process of implementing the new changes. In both CA and D.C., we interviewed diverse focus groups of early childhood educators, child care operators, worker advocates (exclusive to D.C.), and policy leaders.

### Three key takeaways emerged from the focus group discussions:

- 1 Educators of color need specific supports to access, fund, and earn newly required credentials. 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.

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.

## 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.

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

## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> Lovejoy, A., (2023, February). *Governors demonstrate bipartisan support for child care and early education*. Center for American Progress. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/governors-demonstrate-bipartisan-support-for-child-care-and-early-education/>

<sup>ii</sup> The White House. "The Build Back Better Framework: President Biden's Plan to Rebuild The Middle Class." <https://www.whitehouse.gov/build-back-better/>

<sup>iii</sup> McLean, Caitlin, et al. "Early childhood workforce index 2020." Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, February 2021. Available at <https://escholarship.org/content/qt5k46c178/qt5k46c178.pdf>

<sup>iv</sup> National Association for the Education of Young Children. (2019). *Increasing Qualifications, Centering Equity Experiences and Advice from Early Childhood Educators of Color*. Washington, D.C. [https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/user-74/increasing\\_qualifications\\_centering\\_equity.pdf](https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/user-74/increasing_qualifications_centering_equity.pdf)

<sup>v</sup> Teken, E., Jones J., & Kagan S. L. (2022, January). *Addressing the Impact of COVID-19 on the Early Care and Education Sector*. National Academies Press. <https://nap.nationalacademies.org/read/26463/chapter/1>.

<sup>vi</sup> Coffey, M., & Khattar, R. (2022, September). *The Child Care Sector Will Continue To Struggle Hiring Staff Unless It Creates Good Jobs*. Center for American Progress.

<https://www.americanprogress.org/article/the-child-care-sector-will-continue-to-struggle-hiring-staff-unless-it-creates-good-jobs/>

<sup>vii</sup> Coffey, M. (2022, July). *Still underpaid and unequal: Early childhood educators face low pay and a worsening wage gap*. Center for American Progress. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/still-underpaid-and-unequal/>

<sup>viii</sup> Libassi, C.J., (2019, May). *The Neglected College Race Gap: Racial Disparities Among College Completers*. Center for American Progress. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/neglected-college-race-gap-racial-disparities-among-college-completers/>; The Chronicle of Higher Education & Guild Education. (2021). *Meeting the Needs of Working Adult Learners*. White Paper. Washington, D.C.:

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