



Early Childhood Education Workforce Coalition (ECEWC)

A practitioner & provider driven conversation about the ECE workforce

Background

As many Coloradans returned to work, or to more normalized communities following the COVID interruption of many of our core systems, the spotlight has once again highlighted the challenges of early childhood education (ECE) across Colorado.

While the State continues to take bold action to expand access to ECE, and a number of initiatives attempt to address families' financial ability to access the programs or the physical facilities necessary, and even as a number of innovative programs are being launched or growing, the backbone of ECE – the workforce – faces critical challenges that leave the state at risk of not meeting the needs of all families, nor fulfilling the vision of state leaders who have propelled a bold expansion of the state's ECE system as a key priority.

Despite being identified as a critical lever to helping parents return to full-time work, and to children developing key social emotional and academic skills that will position them for success, the state and its communities have not yet developed a comprehensive strategy to recruit and retain a high quality workforce in early childhood education.

Recognizing this, as students were returning to the classroom in the fall of 2021, PEBC leaders worked with their partners at the Keystone Policy Center to form the Early Childhood Workforce Coalition (ECEWC). This coalition builds upon the partnership of PEBC and Keystone, which has previously convened 80+ leaders in K-12 education together to learn from their experiences during COVID, resulting in a set of recommendations that generated a groundswell of bipartisan support for several pieces of legislation to respond to the needs of the education workforce in 2021. In 2022, PEBC and Keystone knew the need was to shift attention to ECE.

Students' futures depend on ECE, and the state's economic recovery will be hastened or hindered by whether there is broad access to ECE with highly skilled professionals educating our youngest students.



Methodology

Knowing the complexities of the ECE space, and in recognition of state efforts to better support this sector (most notably via the creation of a cabinet-level Department of Early Education), PEBC and Keystone worked with a Steering Committee of some of Colorado's leading thinkers, providers and advocates in early childhood in order to better understand which aspects of the workforce are currently being addressed at the state level and with partner organizations, and what if any areas in particular could use additional capacity to address.

Following these conversations and under the guidance of the Steering Committee, PEBC and Keystone formally launched the ECEWC with a tightened focus on identifying strategies to train, recruit, develop and retain a highly skilled and diverse workforce for ECE that reflects the communities across the state and the high value the people and leaders of Colorado place on early childhood education.

Informed by the decades of experience of the Steering Committee, dozens of one-on-one interviews and the experience of PEBC and Keystone advancing bold, research informed and field-driven changes, the ECEWC held regular meetings and panel discussions to empower coalition members to learn, explore and discuss an array of topics within the focus on Colorado's ECE workforce.

These discussions included an exploration, learning and identification of levers of change across:

- **Recruiting & Retaining ECE Educators:** Promising practices to inform scaling of successful models
- **Equity & Diversity:** Barriers and strategies to overcome in ensuring a diverse workforce at all levels
- **Career Pathways:** Strategies for a robust pipeline and role of career pathways in retention
- **Compensation Strategies:** Being transparent about the compensation challenge, its implications on the system and key considerations and opportunities to address ECE workforce compensation



Interim Findings and Recommendations

During the series of ECEWC meetings, panels and discussions, members identified the need for changes at nearly every level- from the program or provider level practices to the supports, oversight and resources provided by state agencies and ultimately to the legislative, regulatory and funding mechanisms or structures. The members and panelists found broad consensus that the most effective changes will be administered and implemented at the local level but most will require state support, transformational change at the system level and the formation of critical public-private partnerships as well as state-local partnerships.

The ECEWC continued its work into the fall of 2022 to further refine some of the recommendations and to shift from a phase of finalizing state system change recommendations to best practices and technical supports for implementation at the local level. Among the ideas discussed, the following concepts resonated most strongly with ECEWC members as specific and actionable at the state level:

- 1. Structuring/creating a meaningful, ladder-type system of career progression for the ECE workforce,** based on abilities and responsibilities, and inclusive of all levels of the profession from entry level to lead teacher and director-level positions
- 2. Creating a task force to design and pilot a system of professional development for ECE educators that supports skills growth;** is accessible to the workforce across settings and geographies; and includes additional work-based opportunities for the workforce to grow their skillset
- 3. Structuring/creating an incentive system to support ECE teachers to move through the newly created ladder system for career progression;** there are models for incentives in the K-12 space that the state has put into place that could be considered as models or examples to be built upon for the ECE sector (for example, the Educator Recruitment & Retention stipend program, designed by the last PEBC and Keystone convening, which provides stipends to K-12 educators pursuing an alternative license in K-12 shortage areas).

Interim Findings and Recommendations

Additionally, ECEWC members coalesced around the following ideas for system level changes, new systems, or levers of change that would be best served by action at the state levels:

Compensation Structures & Streams

There is no avoiding the simple fact that ECE compensation is among the lowest of any skilled profession. Various sources peg the average compensation between \$15-\$17/hour or \$25-\$37k/year, which is well below that of K-12 educators and on the low-end of many non-skilled jobs with far fewer stressors. In addition to the above career ladders, tied to incentives and compensation, members agreed that:

1. Any funding solution needs to address the variation in cost of living in different communities; a reliance on local funding sources will necessarily result in a disparity in compensation and therewith, in outcomes for kids based on their zip code;
2. There is a critical role the state should play both in providing a sustainable stream of funding to support the ECE workforce and in establishing guidelines and supports for local compensation systems;
3. Structures should be explored that incentivize local communities to identify public and private sources of funds while not setting up systems that exacerbate gaps based on community wealth;
4. While all communities need a substantial base level infusion of state funds to increase ECE compensation, the state could also explore some form of "pay for success" incentive model that connects additional funds to outcomes, workforce quality and the alignment of the workforce with the local community. For example, funding for training future ECE educators is tied to an agreed-upon metric such as # of years of retention as an ECE educator in the community where they enter the workforce;
5. Continue to learn from practitioners and pilots, such as through CDEC's upcoming compensation task force and pilots currently in the field

Career Pathways Into & Within Profession

Considering that the current landscape of pathways into the ECE workforce is widely viewed as overly complex and unintentionally creates barriers to entry, members discussed the need to make the ECE workforce structure one that encouraged educators to view it as a viable career with pathways and opportunities within it rather than something to be used solely as a stepping stone to K-12 or to other better paying careers working with children.

While these will always be the path of some, members believe there is much more that can be done to elevate the profession and opportunities within it including:

1. A state led effort to design career ladders and positions that provide mobility within the profession;
2. Technical support from state officials or grants from the state to work with technical assistance partners in developing locally informed career pathways and ladders;
3. Leveraging other models and lessons, particularly from CDE, Teach.org and others to assess workforce conditions, needs and opportunities.

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Interim Findings and Recommendations

Pathway Access & Workforce Recruitment

Every member expressed varying degrees of challenges or frustration with workforce recruitment. While compensation remains a high priority, members also shared that access to pathways, career opportunity awareness and perception of the career all created additional barriers to recruitment and in particular to recruiting a more diverse workforce.

Recommendations for further exploration from the group include:

1. A coordinated marketing campaign to raise awareness and elevate the prestige of ECE careers; leverage positive messaging/language (eg "highly skilled professionals") when referring to the ECE workforce
2. One-time incentives in the forms of sign-on bonuses, training reimbursement or loan forgiveness;
3. Developing multiple pathways into the profession modeled after Colorado's robust alternative licensure, residency and grow-your-own K-12 educator programs;
4. Inclusion of ECE in all state career navigation and counseling programs starting in high-school and continuing through adult education and job reskilling programs.

The above are only a subset of ideas generated by the ECEWC coalition and members. Each of these and others will be further refined and updated throughout the coalition's continued work into spring of 2023. PEBC and Keystone felt the issues raised, and opportunity to begin addressing them immediately and through the 2023 legislative session, are significant enough to warrant sharing this preliminary set of recommendations.

Members and participants in ECEWC

The Buell Foundation, Early Milestones, Executives Partnering to Invest in Children (EPIC), Council for a Strong America, Early Connections Learning Centers, Early Learning Ventures, Colorado ECEA, ECCLA, Early Childhood Partnership of Adams County (ECPAC), TeachPlus, TEACH Colorado, Scholars Unlimited, Clayton Early Learning, Denver Preschool Program, The Efshar Project, Colorado Department of Education, Colorado Department of Higher Education, Colorado Children's Campaign, Colorado Department of Human Services, Colorado Mountain College, Strong Start Strong Community, Empowering Communities Globally: For the Care of Children (ECG), Joint Initiatives for Youth and Families, Impact Charitable, Lutheran Family Services Rocky Mountains, Early Childhood Service Corps, Early Childhood Options, Denver Early Childhood Council, Council for a Strong America, University of Colorado - Denver, Rose Community Foundation, The Women's Foundation of Colorado, Colorado Association for the Education of Young Children (COAEYC), Early Childhood Council of La Plata County, Save the Children & The Village Institute

For questions or to learn more about the ECEWC, please contact Evan Kennedy, PEBC's Senior Director of Strategic Initiatives and Public Policy, at ekennedy@pebc.org.



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