



Arkansas Workforce Study: Instructional Staff in Child Care & Early Childhood Education, 2017

Report Summary

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What's a workforce study & why did Arkansas need one?

Workforce studies provide an understanding of the people that make up a particular field—their wages and benefits, education levels, professional development needs, and common barriers and supports to their work. Having effective policy and workplace supports is critical in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) because research has shown the first five years of life are the most important for a child's developing brain.

How did the study work & how many people participated this year?

Researchers from the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences developed an online survey that was sent to thousands of ECCE educators (those working in licensed child care programs teaching and caring for children birth to Pre-K). Over 1,400 people replied with their input! Participants included 1,270 current (56% in higher- and 44% in lower-quality settings) and 151 former educators. The UAMS team also held focus groups in two cities to gain personal insights into the working lives of ECCE teachers and the difficulties they face from both inside and outside their programs.



Online Survey:

current ECCE teachers = 1,270

former ECCE teachers = 151



Focus Groups:

current ECCE teachers = 34

What did the study find?

The most important contribution of the workforce study was being able to put numbers to the reality that many professionals have known for years:

1. Due to a number of factors, many of those working in the early education sector do not have an educational background in an ECCE-related field. Instead, personal experience with children is often the only early childhood knowledge Arkansas's teachers have when hired.
2. Low wages and widespread lack of access to benefits make it hard to recruit and retain staff. Nearly 10% of the field is planning to leave within two years and nearly 25% within five years, primarily due to financial pressures.
3. Teachers say they often struggle to deliver high-quality instruction because of high child-teacher ratios, inadequate professional development opportunities, and limited access to special needs and childhood mental health specialists.

The following pages give the study's findings in greater detail and offer recommendations on how policymakers, philanthropists, and those leading the early education field can work toward positive changes.



Education

Unfortunately, the educational background of Arkansas’s early childhood teachers lags behind what is needed to create a quality early care system in our state: Only 61% of the field reported having an ECCE-related education (Bachelor’s degree or higher in related field OR any education level with CDA and/or Arkansas Birth-PreK credential). When looking only at related Bachelor’s degrees or higher, that number fell to 31%. Some teachers in our focus groups said this low barrier to entry allowed them to switch fields into early education with no prior coursework or experience, other than their personal experiences as mothers and family members. While some might see this as a positive way to boost flexible employment options in our state, the lack of professionalized training that many teachers report having ultimately lowers the quality of care that Arkansas children receive.

Wages

Our survey indicates that 85% of teachers work full-time (31+hours per week) and make \$19,365 - \$40,206 based on their level of education and years of experience. Those with an ECCE-related education were paid an average of \$6,718 more than their peers. There is also pay disparity based on the ages of children in the classroom—Infant/toddler teachers report lower wages than preschool teachers, and significantly less than kindergarten teachers. Even early educators with Master’s degrees make \$5,000 less on average than Arkansas’s kindergarten teachers (\$40,206 versus \$45,850). One focus group participant summed up the sector’s low wages powerfully when saying,

“I made more money flipping burgers at Sonic than I do working with human beings.”

Benefits

Unlike many other industries, the ECCE workforce has little access to common workplace benefits. Only half of teachers said they are offered health or dental insurance through their jobs and only 40% were offered retirement plans. Roughly 35% said their job did not offer paid holidays or sick/personal days, and only 8% had access to paid maternity leave. Unlike other sectors, cost-reduction benefits like free meals and free or reduced cost tuition for teachers’ children were relatively common at 48%.

Economic Insecurity

Nearly three in five (58%) early educators reported having trouble paying for their basic economic needs in the last year, which broke down into four categories: medical expenses (41%), important monthly bills like rent or car payments, utility bills (19%), and transportation (24%). Results showed that teachers who work primarily with infants or toddlers (0-35 months) are more at risk for economic insecurity than those working with other ages groups.



Food Insecurity

Four out of ten (40%) ECCE teachers in our survey reported being food insecure. Teachers were counted as food insecure if in the last year they, “ran out of food and didn’t have money to buy more” or “cut meal sizes or skipped meals altogether because there wasn’t enough money for food”. Those caring for infants and toddlers were significantly more at risk for food insecurity (50%) than those caring for children in other age groups.



Risk for Depression

One out of three (35%) ECCE teachers screened positive for depression risk based on a commonly used two-question depression screening tool. Unfortunately, the mental health needs of many ECCE teachers will likely go unmet, as only half of those in our survey reported having access to health insurance through their jobs.

Professional Development

Single topic, one-session trainings are the most common type of professional development teachers receive, with 61% saying they attended at least one training of this type in the last year. In-depth, multi-session trainings (52%) and professional conferences (34%) were also popular options. Research suggests trainings with a strong mentoring/coaching component are the most effective over time, but unfortunately, only 19% reported participating in this kind of training over the last year.

A desire for more coaching-based trainings was heavily discussed in our focus groups. Many strongly believed they were too often receiving the wrong kinds of training. One participant said, **“Stop bringing us to these huge trainings and lecturing us. Come to our classroom and show us what you’re trying to teach.”** Another agreed, **“We spent five hours learning what to do (in) an earthquake... I don’t need that. I need training on my kids”**. Adding to this, teachers said they were rarely paid for attending trainings outside of normal business hours and were not reimbursed for travel to the training site, which lead them to choose trainings based on convenience, not on content.

Focus group participants also talked at length about the lack of on-the-job training for new teachers that, combined with high child-teacher ratios, puts incredible pressure on new hires. One teacher’s story stood out in particular, **“When I went into my first job... we had 20 kids and 7 of those had behavior issues. That’s what makes people quit”**.

Predicting Future Turnover

Nearly 10% of teachers said they planned to leave the ECCE field entirely in the next two years, and nearly 25% within the next five years. Another 30% were unsure how much longer they would stay. When asked what factors were motivating their decision, 72% said one or more financial reasons was a key influence (wanting better pay, wanting better benefits, or no opportunity for career advancement).



EXIT



How can we move forward?

Our survey and focus group participants describe a workforce that is poorly compensated, often lacks basic professional benefits and quality professional development, and struggles to support children with challenging behaviors or developmental delays. We now also understand that many early educators in our state are at risk for depression, go to work hungry, and have difficulties meeting their own basic economic needs.

These factors not only add up to poor quality of life for our estimated 16,000 ECCE staff statewide, but very likely translates into lower quality care for Arkansas's children, and less optimal educational outcomes as they grow. To help make progress for a better future, we recommend state policymakers, education leaders, and philanthropists focus on four key areas:

1. Explore options for increasing teachers' pay & benefits.

States have implemented multiple techniques for increasing stability in the ECCE workforce, including supplementing salaries through stipends. For example, the WAGE\$[®] program provides education-based salary supplements to ECCE educators based on their education and years in the field. States have also implemented targeted tax credits for ECCE staff to incentivize education and retention. Both Louisiana and Nebraska have refundable tax incentives for ECCE staff and directors that are tied to the quality rating of the program in which they work, their education level, and years in the field.

While early educators in higher-quality settings tend to make more than others in the field, their annual pay is still far below that of kindergarten teachers. Some states have worked to prevent turnover in early education programs by introducing pay parity laws that equalize wages and benefits between the two groups. Pay parity could also flatten the vast differences in wages within the early education sector that are tied to the specific ways each program is funded (the mix of various public funding models and private tuition they use). In extreme cases, these program differences can translate to a nearly \$10,000 gap in pay based solely on where teachers work.

2. Support more mentoring & coaching-based training models, especially when behavioral challenges or special needs are involved.

Research suggests training for early educators is more effective when: 1) it happens over a series of sessions that build off of each other, rather than a single-session, "one-shot" model, 2) it includes a fixed curriculum that provides room to individualize examples, context, and delivery strategies, 3) participants have opportunities to apply what they are learning during and immediately after the training, 4) trainers are able to observe teachers trying out what they've learned and give feedback on their progress, and 5) participants have opportunities to reflect on what they have learned and to share their accomplishments and challenges with others.

3. Find ways to support & incentivize additional college-level education for current staff.

Knowing that cost of tuition is a great obstacle to teachers pursuing additional education, some states have developed tuition or wage subsidy programs for their early educators. For example, the Teacher Education and Compensation Helps (T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood[®]) program provides wage subsidies that link a teacher's education, compensation, and years of experience together, and awards pay raises as teachers complete additional blocks of college credit hours.

T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood also removes some of the typical barriers to college education by paying most of participating teachers' tuition, books, and travel expenses (including paid release time from work), and by providing scholarship counselors to help them navigate the process. Arkansas has traditionally supported scholarship opportunities for early educators to attain their CDA credential, but that funding was recently shifted into improving the state's ECCE quality rating and improvement system.

4. Explore additional options to support staff who are caring for infants and toddlers.

We've all heard the saying, "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure". Not only is this true for the lasting positive effects that quality early education can have on a child's life in general, but it's especially true for our youngest Arkansans. Our survey results showed ECCE teachers that care for infants and toddlers often faced the greatest challenges of those working in the sector. Therefore, we recommend that efforts to improve wages, education, and training opportunities for early educators pay special attention to the needs of infant/toddler teachers.

