Results from the 2025 Evaluation of the Arkansas Step Up to WAGE$® Salary Supplement

Employer Perceptions

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Executive Summary

This report presents the findings from the first comprehensive evaluation of the Arkansas Step Up to WAGE$® salary supplement program (AR WAGE$), focusing on the perspectives of the employers of its recipients. The study reveals that AR WAGE$ is a highly effective intervention for stabilizing the state's early childhood care and education (ECCE) workforce. The program demonstrates measurable success in reducing staff turnover.

The Challenge in Early Childhood Education

The ECCE sector faces a critical challenge characterized by high staff turnover. Turnover rates in the field nationally range 26%–47%, primarily driven by low compensation (Bassok et al., 2021; Caven et al., 2021; Doromal et al., 2025; Thorpe et al., 2020; Vicente & Guerrero, 2024). ECCE educators earn wages that are significantly lower than those of other education professionals, often failing to meet the "living wage" standard. This financial strain leads to a shrinking workforce, which compromises the quality and consistency of care during the most critical period of children's brain development. High turnover not only weakens developmental outcomes for children but also costs ECCE providers, families, and the state economy. Parents depend on child care to be productive members of the workforce. Currently, insufficient availability of affordable, quality ECCE is estimated to cost Arkansas $78 million in lost earnings, workplace productivity, and state revenue (Bishop, 2023).

A Solution: The Arkansas Step Up to WAGE$® Program

To help solve this problem, Arkansas piloted the Step Up to WAGE$® program (AR WAGE$) using funds from the American Rescue Plan Act. The Arkansas Early Childhood Association administered the program over three years (2022-2025), paying early childhood professionals a wage supplement once every six months, which was based on their level of education and continuous employment in the same program. The goal was to reward teachers for their knowledge and give them a reason to stay in their important jobs. This study asked employers of participating early childhood professionals about the program's impact.

Methods

This study used a one-group posttest design and collected data using a convergent-mixed-methods methodology. A one-group design means the evaluation focused on the experiences of employers with staff who received WAGE$ stipends, without collecting information from a comparison group of employers who did not. Therefore, the research design does not allow us to demonstrate causation. Convergent mixed-methods studies collect and analyze quantitative and qualitative data simultaneously.

Administrators in programs who employed AR WAGE$ recipients were invited to participate in a survey and in a series of focus groups to collect feedback about their experiences. The final sample included 259 administrators who responded to the survey (a 51% response rate). The resulting sample was representative of the full sample. Fifteen administrators participated in focus groups.

Evaluation Results

The findings presented in this report reflect the first data gathered from administrators of programs that employed AR WAGE$ participants. The feedback from employers was overwhelmingly positive. The study shows that AR WAGE$ is a highly successful and valued program.

AR WAGE$ Helps Retain Teachers

Employers reported that 80% of staff members who received AR WAGE$ supplements stayed at their jobs. Nearly 9 out of 10 programs kept more than half of their staff who participated in the program. By reducing turnover, the program helped create a more stable learning environment for children. Participation also led some programs to increase wages: 25% increased salaries for staff, with increases primarily concentrated in preschool classrooms.

Employers Strongly Support AR WAGE$

Child care employers are very happy with AR WAGE$. In fact, 97% said they would recommend the program to other centers, and 98% said they would continue to support their staff's participation. They found the administering organization, the Arkansas Early Childhood Association, was easy to work with and praised the customer service they received.

The Extra Pay Makes a Big Difference in Teachers' Lives

The wage supplements provided much-needed financial help that had a profound impact on participants' lives. Administrators shared stories of employees who were able to pay their power bills, afford rent for a new apartment, or get through tough financial times because of the salary stipends from AR WAGE$.

AR WAGE$ Boosts Morale and Professionalism

Employers noted that the program made their staff feel valued and respected for their hard work and education. It boosted confidence and made them feel proud of their profession.

Conclusions

Financing in the ECCE sector is challenging. Programs operate with funding based on what families can afford, rather than the actual cost of care (Dade & MacLean, 2023). As a result, programs are often unable to provide livable wages for their educators, which leads to high staff turnover (Caven et al., 2021). Arkansas piloted the Step Up to WAGE$® model to address the compensation gap and reduce turnover.

WAGE$ employers say the program reduced turnover, led to increased compensation in some cases, and provided meaningful financial relief, which lead to exceptionally high program satisfaction. These findings provide encouraging evidence that AR WAGE$ may play an important role in stabilizing the ECCE workforce through improved compensation.

Introduction

This study presents the findings of the first evaluation of the Arkansas Step Up to WAGE$® wage supplement program for early childhood professionals (AR WAGE$). Here we report and analyze perspectives offered by the employers of individuals who qualified for and received WAGE$ supplements. Based on our findings, the AR WAGE$ program represents a significant benefit to the early childhood and education workforce and, by extension, the young children of Arkansas.

Background

The first five years of life are a critical window of brain development, when stable relationships with adults are essential for building a foundation in language, cognitive, and social skills (National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2000; Phillips et al., 2017). In Arkansas, these foundational relationships increasingly involve early childhood educators. Sixty-two percent of children under age 5 live in households where all parents are in the workforce (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). The quality and stability of the care received in non-parental care are critical for building children's skills. Investing in the qualifications and stability of the ECCE workforce is, therefore, a favorable strategy for supporting child development and ensuring the long-term prosperity of Arkansas's communities.

Estimates of annual turnover in ECCE within the past decade range 26%–47% (Bassok et al., 2021; Caven et al., 2021; Doromal et al., 2025; Thorpe et al., 2020; Vicente & Guerrero, 2024).[1] Before COVID, the ECCE workforce was already unstable and shrinking (Hur et al., 2022; McKelvey et al., 2022; McLean et al., 2020), but the pandemic accelerated this trend (ChildCare Aware, 2022; Hall et al., 2024; Salzwedel et al., 2020). Rural child care programs were significantly impacted (Salzwedel et al., 2020), creating greater strain in areas where working parents already struggled to find affordable child care, which has been defined as costing no more than 7% of a family's income (ChildCare Aware, 2022).

[1] The range represents differences in the specific kind of turnover being measured (e.g. facility-level turnover v. exiting the ECCE field), the population being studied (e.g., geographic location, funding streams, or age of children being served), and the timing of the measurement relative to COVID.

The situation in Arkansas is no different. Three-quarters (77%) of participants in a 2018 directors' workforce study reported at least one instructional vacancy in their program within the last six months (McKelvey et al., 2018). Our 2022 workforce study found that 48% of teachers surveyed were planning to leave the field within 2 years or were not sure how much longer they planned to remain in early childhood (McKelvey et al., 2022).

Impact of Turnover

The children of Arkansas pay the greatest cost of turnover. Researchers have repeatedly demonstrated links between teacher turnover and negative outcomes for children (Braun et al., 2020; Madigan & Kim, 2021; Oh & Wolf, 2023; Shen et al., 2015; Tikkanen, 2021). Because the time that children spend in ECCE programs is also the period of greatest brain development, turnover in ECCE settings, even at lower rates, is associated with weakened development in language and social skills in children (Cassidy et al., 2011; Hale-Jinks et al., 2006; Hatfield et al., 2016; Whitebook et al., 1990).

For programs, turnover increases expenses related to recruiting, interviewing, and training qualified candidates. Because continuity of care is a requirement for performance in programs like Early Head Start and Head Start (EHS/HS), turnover directly reduces care quality in addition to diminishing desirable child development outcomes (McCormick et al., 2022).

There is also an enormous cost for families, businesses, and the state. Parents depend on child care to be productive members of the workforce. Currently, insufficient availability of affordable, quality ECCE is estimated to cost Arkansas $78 million in lost earnings, workplace productivity, and state revenue (Bishop, 2023).

Economic Security and Professional Capacity

Previous studies have shown that the Arkansas ECCE workforce faces severe economic instability (McKelvey et al., 2017; McKelvey et al., 2018; McKelvey et al., 2022). Much of this instability stems from low pay for ECCE educators. Median industry wages are lower than those for education professionals at all other ages. In most states, the ECCE median wage is less than two-thirds of the median wage *for all occupations*. This means that median child care wages do not meet the standard for a "living wage" for a single adult with one child in any state. Only in 10 states do they meet standards for a single adult (McLean et al., 2020). Arkansas workforce studies have shown that

early childhood educators consistently face economic insecurity, including food insecurity, which impacts their ability and willingness to remain in the profession (McKelvey et al., 2017; McKelvey et al., 2022).

This is not simply an issue of programs that could increase compensation and benefits simply neglecting to do so. Financing in the ECCE sector is challenging, in that funding is often based on what families can afford, rather than the actual cost of care (Dade & MacLean, 2023). A recent analysis suggests that 25% of Arkansas families can afford infant care at current costs (Economic Policy Institute, 2025). Programs cannot raise tuition without jeopardizing their enrollment, and by extension, the continued operation of their business.

In short, programs are unable to provide sufficient compensation for ECCE educators. Poor compensation is consistently predictive of staff turnover across all types of ECCE centers, without regard to location, with the highest turnover observed in private-pay centers serving children from birth to 5 years old (Caven et al., 2021).

However, there are positive correlations between increases in compensation, increases in teacher professional well-being, and decreases in ECCE staff turnover (Grant et al., 2019; Totenhagen et al., 2016; Buettner et al., 2016). Other states implementing wage-incentive programs report consistent improvements in staff professional well-being and decreases in turnover (Bassok, Doromal, et al., 2021; Bassok, Markowitz, et al., 2021; Child Care Services Association, n.d.).

In addition to its economic benefits, greater professional attainment is an important palliative and protective factor against turnover. Many ECCE educators begin their careers with little to no experience in the field (Whitebook et al., 2009; Whitebook & Ryan, 2011), and their knowledge of pedagogical techniques may be limited only to what they may have experienced. This can place significant limitations on these individuals with regard to their perceptions of self-efficacy and professional well-being, making long-term retention in the ECCE workforce difficult, especially where these issues are further complicated by economic insecurity.

Education protects ECCE teachers against higher levels of stress, as teachers understand themselves to be better prepared to meet the needs of the children in their care. This sense of professional well-being and self-efficacy, in turn, promotes better child-teacher interaction (Sandilos et al., 2018; Fukkink & Lont, 2007). Greater levels of professional attainment also positively correlate with improved language development (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 1999) and broadly improved outcomes for children (Dreer, 2023). With this in mind, we

can see that improvements in compensation for ECCE teachers are important protective and promotive factors for positive outcomes among children, staff, and programs.

AR WAGE$

Attempting to address these vital needs, Arkansas intervened with two evidence-based programs to improve ECCE quality by reducing staff turnover. The first program was the TEACH Early Childhood® scholarship. In addition to paying tuition for early childhood educators to take college courses, the scholarship reimburses ECCE programs for paid release time that staff use to attend classes. AR WAGE$, the second program the state implemented, issued wage supports directly to early childhood educators. Amounts were based on the educator's level of education and were contingent on the educator's continued employment within the same program.

The WAGE$® model was established as a county-based pilot program in North Carolina in 1994 and continues to serve communities in North Carolina today. In 2021, Child Care Services, the administering organization behind WAGE$®, developed Step Up To WAGE$® for states to test the efficacy of wage supplements using funds from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). Arkansas was one of 10 states to participate. The program was funded from August 1, 2022, through July 31, 2025, and managed by the Arkansas Early Childhood Association (AECA).

To qualify for AR WAGE$, individuals had to:

- Be a teacher, assistant teacher, aide, floater, or center director in a licensed child care center or family child care home (FCCH); or be a home visitor or home visiting coordinator.
- Work directly with children ages birth to 5 years, at least 10 hours per week.
- Make $20 per hour or less.
- Have an education level appearing on the AR WAGE$ Supplement Scale (Table 1).

Table 1. AR WAGE$ Supplement Amounts by Education		
WAGE$ Level	**Required education/credentials**	**Annual supplements effective 7/1/24**
8	Bachelor's degree with at least 18 credit hours in ECCE/CD	$3600
7	Bachelor's degree with at least 12 credit hours in ECCE/CD 90 credit hours towards a Bachelor's degree with at least 18 in ECCE/CD	$3000
6	Associate's degree with at least 24 credit hours in ECCE/CD	$2400
5	Bachelor's degree Associate's degree with at least 18 credit hours in ECCE/CD 57 Gen Ed credit hours with at least 24 in ECCE/CD	$1800
4	Associate's degree with at least 12 credit hours in ECCE/CD 45 Gen Ed credit hours with at least 18 in ECCE/CD	$1200
3	Associate's degree 36 Gen Ed credit hours with at least 12 in ECCE/CD 21 ECCE/CD credits	$900
2	12 ECCE/CD credits	$450
1	National CDA (valid and not expired)	$300

Awards varied based on education and eligible hours (Table 2) and were issued in two 6-month installments, each after the participant completed an assigned 6-month commitment period in the same program. ECCE programs employing recipients agreed to provide employment status and wage verification at necessary intervals. Employers also agreed not to use participation in AR WAGE$ to offset or replace normal wage increases.

Table 2. WAGE$ Payment Percentage Based on Hours Worked	
Hours per Week	**Award Payment**
30+	Full
21-29	75%
10-20	50%

Though there are few studies of wage incentive programs, recent evidence suggests that these programs support workforce retention:

- In a randomized controlled trial of a wage incentive program in Virginia, recipients were 11% more likely to still be teaching at their sites by the end of an eight-month study period (Bassok, Doromal, et al., 2021).
- The WAGE$® program in North Carolina documented a 14% turnover among participants in fiscal year 2023 compared to a statewide turnover rate of 31% (Child Care Services Association, 2023).
- A study of Minnesota's R.E.E.T.A.I.N. surveyed wage supplement applicants from 2013–2018 and found that 55% of recipients reported that the bonus increased their likelihood of remaining in the field. Over the five-year study period, 96% of applicants remained in the field (Hilty et al., 2019; Shaw et al., 2019).

This study presents the results of the first comprehensive analysis of the AR WAGE$ program. It is focused specifically on the perspectives of the recipients' employers.[2] Because each state has unique characteristics and challenges within its early childhood education landscape, we have tailored this evaluation to the Arkansas context. Doing so ensures that insights into how programs like AR WAGE$ operate within Arkansas's specific socio-economic, demographic, and policy environments are actionable and appropriate. By leveraging these evidence-based conclusions, Arkansas can continue to support the professional growth, retention, and success of its early

[2] The evaluation is part of a larger project, which includes a separate report on the perspectives of AR WAGE$ recipients (McKelvey et al., 2025).

childhood workforce, benefiting the entire early childhood education system and the future well-being of all our young learners and our state.

Research Questions

The research questions for the current study focus on understanding the effectiveness of the AR WAGE$ program for supporting ECCE professionals' wages and workforce retention. Specifically, we aim to answer the following questions specific to employers of individuals who received an AR WAGE$ supplement:

1. **Do providers see reduced turnover related to this support?**
2. **Have providers changed their compensation because of participation?**
3. **What are administrators' perceptions of the program, what barriers exist, and what recommendations do they have for improvement?**

It is important to note that, unlike workforce retention, changes in administrative practices related to compensation are not explicit goals of the AR WAGE$ program nor directly tied to the existing literature. As a result, one should consider these outcomes exploratory.

Methods

This study uses a one-group posttest design and collected data using a convergent-mixed-methods methodology. In this context, a one-group design means the evaluation focuses on the experiences of employers with staff who received WAGE$ stipends, without collecting information from a comparison group of employers who did not. Therefore, the research design does not allow us to demonstrate causation (McNeil, 1990; Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzel, 2018).

Convergent mixed-methods studies use data from both quantitative (i.e., survey) and qualitative (i.e., interviews) sources that are collected simultaneously (Creswell et al., 2009; Creswell & Tashakkori, 2007; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Survey data provides structured, quantifiable information about outcomes and perceptions across respondents. Focus groups provide depth and

context for participants' experience in the program. Using this design enhances the validity of results by corroborating findings across both data sources.

Quantitative Methods

Sampling

Survey participants were employers of AR WAGE$ stipend recipients. AECA provided rosters of administrative contacts for program participants. Where multiple participants reported to one individual, we issued one survey request per program administrative contact, who was asked to report at the aggregate level for all AR WAGE$ participants. This resulted in an invitation for 522 AR WAGE$ administrative contacts.

The research team designed the survey using REDCap, a secure web application for building and managing online surveys (Harris et al., 2009, 2019). Invitations were emailed to employers of WAGE$ participants. The employer survey was open from May 15, 2025, through May 31, 2025. After removing 14 invalid email addresses, the final invitation sample was 508 administrative contacts.

At the close of the survey, the final employer respondent count was 259, a 51% participation rate. Thirty-one administrators completed partial surveys, and those data are included in reporting when items were completed. Each employer respondent received $25 for their time to complete the survey.

Sample Representativeness

To estimate the representativeness of the programs that responded to our survey, we compared the characteristics of the programs invited to participate who did respond to the survey ("response") and those who did not ("non-response").

To conduct this analysis, we merged the program data from AECA with publicly available data about programs from the Arkansas public child care search.[3] Using these data, we compared the response

[3] https://ardhslicensing.my.site.com/elicensing/s/search-provider/find-providers?language=en_US&tab=CC

and the non-response programs on their geographic location, School Readiness Assistance and Arkansas Better Chance (ABC) participation, and Better Beginnings Level 4 or higher.[4] The resulting sample of AR WAGE$ employers is representative of those invited to participate in the survey.

The analysis suggests that programs with a state voucher agreement were more likely to reply to the invitation to participate in our survey. There were no differences in responsiveness based on all other program characteristics:

Geographic Location. Half of the invited programs were in urban settings (50%). There were no differences between those who were invited to take the survey and did not respond and those who responded based on urban/rural geography (chi-square = 0.50, $p > .05$).

School Readiness Assistance Participation. Approximately 65% of programs participated in the Arkansas School Readiness Assistance voucher program (SRA; 65%). There were differences between those who were invited to take the survey and did not respond and those who responded based on whether the program accepts child care subsidies (chi-square = 6.86, $p < .01$). The direction of the difference was seen in an overrepresentation of voucher participants as respondents (71%) compared to non-respondents (60%).

ABC Participation. Approximately 40% of the programs were funded by ABC (43%). There were no differences between those who were invited to take the survey and did not respond and those who responded based on whether the program provides the ABC program (chi-square = 2.65, $p > .05$).

Better Beginnings Rating. Approximately 40% of the programs invited to participate in the AR WAGE$ employer survey had Better Beginnings Level 4 ratings or higher (38%). There were no differences between those who were invited to take the survey and did not respond and those who responded based on whether the program participates in Better Beginnings at Level 4 or higher (chi-square = 0.25, $p > .05$).

[4] School Readiness Assistance is the state of Arkansas's child care subsidy program funded through the Child Care and Development Block Grant. Arkansas Better Chance is state-funded pre-kindergarten programming. Better Beginnings is the state of Arkansas's Quality Rating and Improvement system.

Measures

This study used a variety of measures adapted from the following sources:

- Child Care Services Association evaluation of the North Carolina TEACH® program (Child Care Services Association, n.d.)
- Previous Arkansas workforce studies (McKelvey et al., 2018; McKelvey et al., 2022)
- Relevant academic literature (Whitebook & Sakai, 2003)

Administrator and Program Characteristics

The survey asked participants for the following information:

- Demographic information (including race, education, and experience in early childhood education)
- Positions (e.g., administrative staff in center-based programs, FCCH, and/or home visiting supervisors).
- Weekly hours worked and additional employment (if any)
- Program accreditation and sources of funding
- Program enrollment
- Roles, experience level, and number of staff participating in AR WAGE$.

Higher-quality programs were defined as those that reported national accreditations (the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), the National Association for Family Child Care (NAFCC), or the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF) or funding through HS/EHS or ABC.

Compensation, Benefits, and Changes to Administrative Practices

The survey asked administrators about their average hourly pay for staff and the benefits offered to their employees (e.g., paid vacation, paid sick/personal days, or health insurance).

We asked administrators whether they had made compensation changes to support individuals working in their programs as a result of AR WAGE$ participation, including changes in staff pay,

bonuses, benefits, paid release time for education or professional development, or stipends for books or materials used for college coursework.

Program Satisfaction

The survey asked various questions to determine administrator satisfaction with the AR WAGE$ program, such as whether they would recommend AR WAGE$ to another program, reasons they would or would not support staff applying for AR WAGE$ if the program were re-implemented in the future, and whether they received good customer service from the AR WAGE$ administrative staff at AECA.

Workforce Retention

The survey included questions about how long the administrator's program had employed AR WAGE$ participants, how many participants were employed by their program, their positions, and the number of WAGE$ recipients who are still employed in the program.

Qualitative Methods

Sampling

A random sample of 35% (*n* = 171) of the AR WAGE$ administrators identified for inclusion in the quantitative study were sent an email invitation to sign up for a focus group through the survey platform REDCap (Harris et al., 2009, 2019). Focus groups were conducted during the summer (Round 1) and again in the fall (Round 2) and were offered multiple days a week and at varied times to increase the likelihood of participation.

After registration, administrators were sent an automated confirmation email with a Zoom meeting link, along with email and text reminders, the day before and the day of their group. Those who missed their original focus group were sent an invitation to register for another.

Attendance was similar during both rounds of data collection. (Table 3)

Table 3. Focus Group Recruitment Summary				
Round	**Groups Offered**	**Groups Canceled***	**Completed Groups**	**Participants**
Round 1 (June 17 – July 11)	4	0	4	7
Round 2 (Sept 3 – Sept 17)	3	1	2	8
Overall (June 17 – Sept 17)	7	1	6	15
Note: Groups were only canceled due to no registration or no-shows.				

Measures and Procedures

Data Collection

The research team developed an interview guide with seven questions for AR WAGE$ employer focus groups, which was also used as a starter template for coding. All questions were developed independently and were not part of or based on an existing measure.[5]

Seventy-five minutes were reserved for each interview, but actual time varied depending on attendance, participants' enthusiasm, and the level of detail provided. Actual time spent in focus groups ranged 20–75 minutes. Interviews were conducted, recorded, and transcribed using Zoom. Each participant received $50 for their time.

One of two facilitators, neither involved in AR WAGE$ implementation, conducted the focus groups. Each facilitator was given the flexibility to ask the questions from the guide in a slightly different way depending on their personal facilitation style, the participants' level of understanding, and the flow of conversation, but they were to maintain the "spirit of the question" in any adaptations. Some questions were skipped if the groups ran too long.

[5] A copy of the interview guide can be found in a separate technical appendix and is available on request.

Analysis

Our approach to qualitative analysis differed between the two focus group rounds. In the first round, we used a form of rapid qualitative analysis (Ryan & Goulding, 2023; Vindrola-Padros, n.d.; Vindrola-Padros & Johnson, 2020) in which each participant's responses were summarized by focus group question using a single-coding methodology. In this approach, the theme that was most prominent in the statement, or that made it unique from other statements, determined what code it was organized by and counted under. Summary statements were then merged across groups and organized by similarity to identify common themes. A single, experienced qualitative researcher coded all groups in the first round.

In the second round, we used narrative summaries of each group's results guided by themes identified with the first round of coding. Summaries were created by one of two facilitators based on who conducted the group. Themes remained consistent across both rounds of data collection.

Results

Quantitative Results

Administrator Characteristics

The following section summarizes the demographics of administrators, their education and experience, as well as characteristics of the programs for which they work. Full results can be found in the Appendix.

Administrator Roles and Employment

The vast majority (*n* = 232, 90%) of administrators who have supervised AR WAGE$ participants reported being in administrative roles in center-based facilities. A small proportion of programs reported being FCCHs (*n* = 12, 5%) and home visiting programs (*n* = 18, 7%).[6] (Appendix Table 1).

Race and Ethnicity of Administrators

[6] Numbers do not add to the total number because participants were able to select multiple roles. Where people reported multiple roles, items were combined for reporting. This sample also includes two teachers (1%).

The administrators in the sample reported a racial/ethnic breakdown of 70% White/Caucasian, 21% Black/African American, 1% Hispanic/Latino(a), 7% multiracial, and 1% other. (Appendix Table 2).

Education and Experience of Administrators

Three out of 4 administrators (76%) in the sample reported having a bachelor's degree or higher. Administrators also reported having a master's degree (*n* = 84, 37%), followed by a bachelor's degree (*n* = 77, 34%), an associate's degree (*n* = 30, 13%), a doctorate (*n* = 6, 3%), or an education specialist degree (*n* = 5, 2%). Eleven percent of respondents reported less than a college degree (some college, but no degree, *n* = 18, 8%; high school diploma or GED, *n* = 7, 3%). (Appendix Table 3A).

Child Development Associates (CDA) credentials were held by 25% of the sample. (Appendix Table 3B).

The vast majority of administrators reported 11 or more years of experience (*n* = 188, 83%). The remaining administrators reported 1–2 years (*n* = 5, 2%), 3–5 years (*n* = 13, 6%), and 6–10 years (*n* = 22, 10%) of experience. (Appendix Table 3C)

Similarly, a large proportion of administrators reported being in a leadership position in their current program for 11 or more years (*n* = 89, 39%). The remaining administrators reported less than 1 year (*n* = 7, 3%), 1–2 years (*n* = 20, 9%), 3–5 years (*n* = 58, 25%), and 6–10 years (*n* = 54, 24%). (Appendix Table 3D)

Finally, we asked administrators if they had a second paying job and to specify the seasons of additional employment. Most (*n* = 183, 80%) reported that they did not, but 45 (20%) reported having second jobs for the full year (15%), during the school year (4%), or during the summer (1%). (Appendix Table 3E)

Program Characteristics

When asked about program accreditations, the majority (*n* = 178, 78%) reported participating in Better Beginnings. Some programs also reported national accreditations from NAEYC (*n* = 17, 8%), NAFCC (*n* = 7, 3.%), and CARF (*n* = 6, 3%). (Appendix Table 4A)

Home visiting program administrators reported providing Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY; *n* = 11, 61%), Healthy Families America (HFA; *n* = 3, 17%), Parents as Teachers (PAT; *n* = 2, 11%), and SafeCare (*n* = 1, 6%). (Appendix Table 4B)

When asked about program funding, the largest proportion of administrators reported private tuition (60%) and child care vouchers (52%) as sources of program revenue. Nearly half (43%) of programs reported Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) funding. ABC funding was reported by 42% of programs. Less frequently, programs reported funding from private donations/grants (17%), Medicaid (15%), in-kind (10%), HS/EHS (9%), or funding for home visiting (ABC=6%; Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV)=3%). (Appendix Table 4C)

We computed an indicator of program quality based on reported program accreditations and funding streams in which higher-quality programs were defined as having reported NAEYC, NAFCC, or CARF accreditations and/or funding from HS/EHS and ABC. Using that definition, half of the programs were of higher quality (*n* = 129, 55%). (Appendix Table 4D)

Center-Based Child Enrollment

When asked about program enrollment, 159 center-based programs reported infant/toddler enrollment (*M* = 53.6, *SD* = 88.9, range = 1–999), 224 programs reported preschool enrollment (*M* = 96.3, *SD* = 120.9, range 4–750), and 66 programs reported school-age enrollment (*M* = 31.1, *SD* = 48.6, range = 1–300).

SRA voucher enrollment was reported by 109 programs (32%, *SD* = 26.8%, range 1%–94%). CACFP enrollment was reported by 123 programs, 81% of total program enrollment (*SD* = 27.8%, range 4%–100%). (Appendix Table 5)

Family Child Care Home (FCCH) Child Enrollment

When asked about program enrollment, 11 FCCH programs reported infant/toddler enrollment (*M* = 2.9, *SD* = 1.9, range 1–8), 11 programs reported pre-kindergarten enrollment (*M* = 6.7, *SD* = 5.7, range 1–16), and 6 programs reported school-age enrollment (*M* = 3.5, *SD* = 3.5, range 1–10).

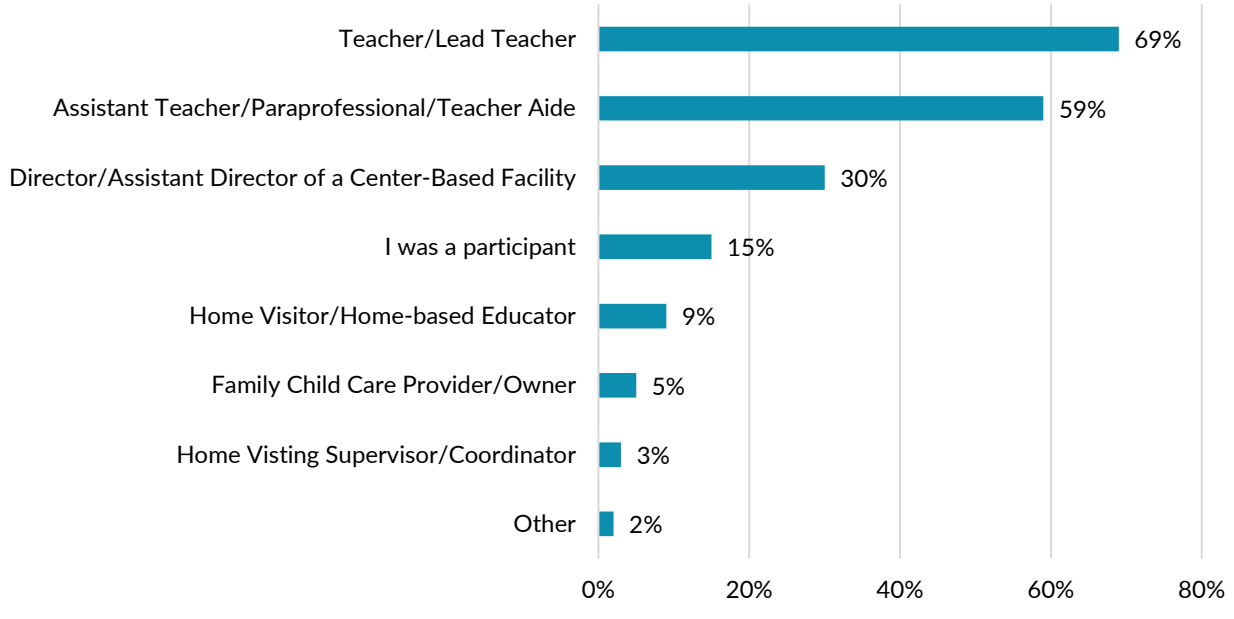
SRA voucher enrollment was reported by 9 programs, 91% of total program enrollment (*SD* = 28.6%, range 14%–100%). CACFP enrollment was reported by 9 programs, 59% of total program enrollment (*SD* = 36%, range 13%–100%). (Appendix Table 6)

AR WAGE$ Program Enrollment

Administrators who reported that they employed at least one AR WAGE$ recipient were also asked to report on the roles and numbers of those individuals. Administrators reported that their programs employed a range of 1–50 AR WAGE$ recipients. The average number of recipients per program was 4.7 (*SD* = 5.4). (Appendix Table 7A)

The majority of programs (69%) reported lead teacher participation, followed by assistant teachers (59%). Nearly one-third (30%) of programs also reported that the director or assistant director participated. A small minority of programs reported recipients who were home visitors (9%), FCCH owner/providers (5%), home visiting coordinators/supervisors (3%), or other (2%). Some examples of roles classified under "other" included floaters and curriculum coordinators.
(Figure 1 and Appendix Table 7A)

Figure 1. AR WAGE$ Staff Positions



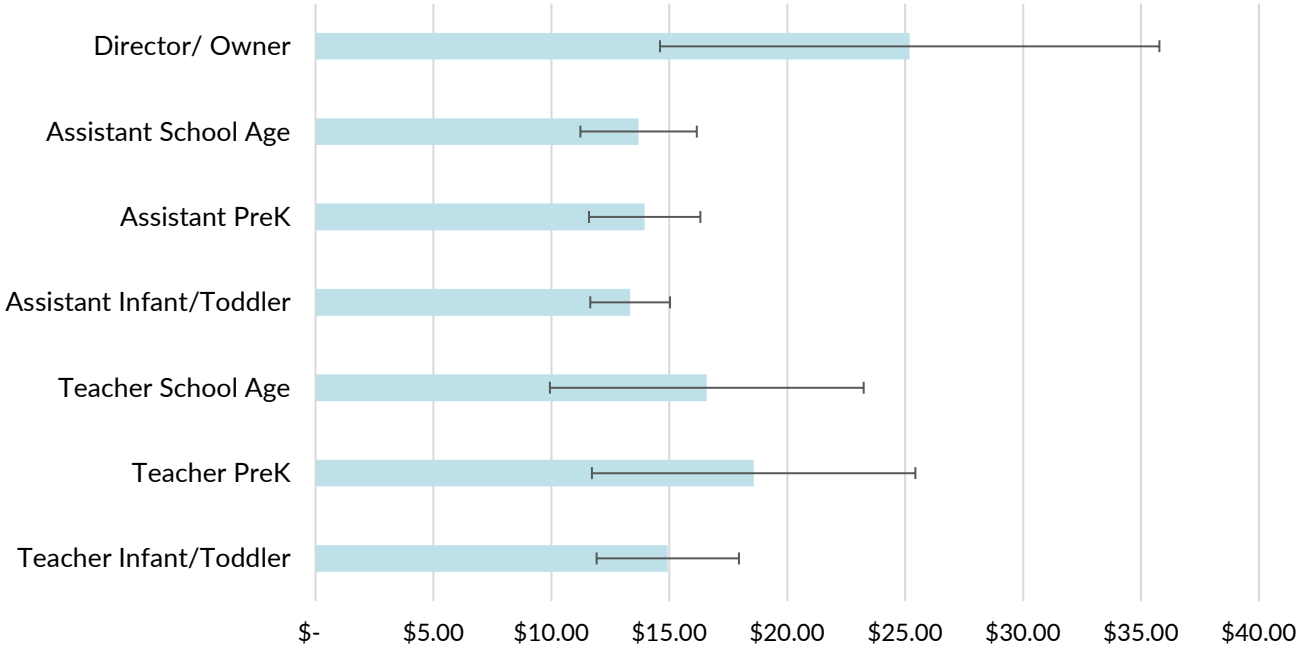
Note: Positions are not exclusive

When asked how long their program has supervised AR WAGE$ recipients, the largest portion of the sample reported less than 2 years (*n* = 127, 53%), followed by 3–4 years (*n* = 99, 42%), and "unsure" responses (*n* = 12, 5%). (Appendix Table 7B)

Compensation

Respondents reported the average per-hour pay for each position in their program, which was multiplied by 2,080 (40 hours a week x 52 weeks a year) for the estimated annual salary. The average annual pay of administrators was $52,395. The highest salary for lead teachers was for those working in preschool ($38,646), followed by those in school-age ($34,507) and infant/toddler ($31,075) classrooms. Salaries for assistant teachers were more similar regardless of program but still followed a similar pattern with those in preschool classrooms ($29,037), earning slightly more than those in school-age ($28,496) and infant/toddler ($27,747) classrooms. Average hourly wages for center-based programs are provided in Figure 2; data in Appendix Table 8.

Figure 2. Center-Based Programs' Average Hourly Salary



	Teacher Infant/Toddler	Teacher PreK	Teacher School Age	Assistant Infant/Toddler	Assistant PreK	Assistant School Age	Director/ Owner
Mean	$14.94	$18.58	$16.59	$13.34	$13.96	$13.70	$25.19

FCCH programs with an assistant (*n* = 6) reported an average hourly pay of $14.08 per hour (range $11.00-$18.00). This would result in an average annual salary of $29,286.40, slightly higher than reported for assistants in center-based settings. (Appendix Table 8)

For home visitors (*n* = 10), the average hourly pay was $16.65 per hour (range $11.00–$23.00). This would result in an average annual salary of $34,632, comparable to salaries reported for lead staff in school-age rooms for center-based programs. (Appendix Table 8)

Discretionary Benefits

We asked administrators about staff access to discretionary benefits provided by their program. For each benefit, administrators answered whether a benefit was available to none or some (0) or all (1) staff. Access to a benefit was considered provided if it was for all staff across a range of indicators.

The most reported benefit offered by programs was to pay staff for the time they spend in required professional development (PD) activities (86%). Other PD benefits were less common. A little more than a third (37%) of administrators reported that staff were paid for PD beyond the requirements of licensing or the program. Somewhat fewer programs reported supporting staff with additional educational supports; 33% reported supporting staff with books and materials needed for self-paid education; and 25% reported supporting staff with paid release time for PD/education.

A little more than half (56%) of programs reported offering retirement benefits to all staff.

Most programs reported access to some form of paid leave for holidays (57%), vacation (53%), or illness (70%) for all staff. Paid maternity leave was offered the least often (16%). However, a large proportion of administrators reported that all staff were offered unpaid maternity leave (71%).

Just over half of programs reported providing health insurance (55%), dental insurance (57%), and disability and/or life insurance (56%).

Administrators reported other benefits that financially help families, such as free on-site meals (40%) and free or reduced tuition for their own children, not including accepting vouchers for children of staff (49%). (Appendix Table 9)

Changes to Administrative Practices

Changes in administrative practices were not explicit goals of the AR WAGE$ program, nor were they directly tied to the existing empirical literature. However, as compensation is associated with turnover, we analyzed this as an exploratory outcome.

We were interested in understanding whether programs changed their compensation for staff as a result of having participants in AR WAGE$. Therefore, the survey asked administrators about changes to staff salaries. The majority (75%) reported not making changes to staff salaries or bonuses. One-quarter (25%) of administrators reported changing salaries or providing bonuses as a result of having staff participate in AR WAGE$. (Appendix Table 10A)

Where administrators did report changing staff salaries or providing bonuses (n = 47), we asked which of the staff positions had salary changes. The most common roles where salaries were changed were lead teachers in preschool rooms (82%), followed by lead teachers in infant/toddler rooms (59%), and assistant teachers in preschool rooms (56%). Increases in directors'/assistant directors' wages were reported by almost half (45%) of respondents. Increases were less common for assistant teachers in infant/toddler classrooms (38%) and lead (32%) and assistant teachers (24%) in school-age rooms. (Appendix Table 10B)

Program Satisfaction

We also surveyed administrators for their satisfaction with the AR WAGE$ program administration and service, as well as their satisfaction with the program overall. Administrators who interacted with AECA agreed or strongly agreed that they were provided with good customer service (96%). (Appendix Table 11A)

Nearly all respondents (97%) reported that they would recommend AR WAGE$ to other early childhood programs, 4 (2%) programs were not sure, and only 2 (1%) reported that they would not recommend AR WAGE$. (Appendix Table 11B)

We provided administrators with an opportunity to share the reasons for their responses. We created codes using a bottom-up, open-coding methodology, which resulted in the following themes: *general praise*, *reduces turnover/helps recruitment*, *knowledge/experience boost*, *easy to participate as an employer*, *morale boost*, *miscellaneous and suggestions for improvement*, and *administrative burden*.

These codes were applied in two rounds. In the first round, individual statements were matched with any code that applied, and in the second round, all the statements within a particular code were scrutinized to make sure they fit within that code and not another. Merging of codes took place before the second round.

There were 134 statements that received 150 total codes (note that a single statement could be coded under multiple themes), with the most popular theme being *general praise*, with 71% of total codes, followed by *reduces turnover/helps recruitment* with 12% of codes. See Table 3 for full results and example statements that fell under each code.

Table 3. Open-Ended Responses for Why Administrators Would or Would Not Recommend AR WAGE$ To Other Programs

Theme	Number of statements	Percent of total codes	Examples
General praise	107	71%	As a public school, our pay is set by the district salary schedules. WAGE$ allows for our staff members to receive an incentive for working in Early Childhood. It helped me supplement pay for my staff with a degree. Being a private pay facility, it is very hard to compete when trying to get good teachers. This is a great supplement for my staff who deserve way more pay than I can pay them. This program kept me from having to close my doors.
Reduces turnover/helps recruitment (implicit or explicit)	18	12%	This program helped retain good staff and was a big incentive regarding onboarding new staff Being able to offer WAGE$ to my employees has significantly impacted retention rates at our organization. I would definitely recommend to other programs.

Table 3. Open-Ended Responses for Why Administrators Would or Would Not Recommend AR WAGE$ To Other Programs			
Theme	**Number of statements**	**Percent of total codes**	**Examples**
Knowledge/ experience boost (implicit or explicit)	12	8%	WAGE$ is a wonderful program that incentivizes professional growth which in turn leads to a higher quality program where teachers and students thrive. WAGE$ encourages employees to stay loyal to their program decreasing the employee turnover rate in early childhood programs. Why would you not participate?
Easy to participate as employer	4	3%	They are easy to work with and the program helps me with wage increases They were helpful with all the questions that we had.
Morale boost	3	2%	I would recommend it because it supports staff financially. It builds morale and is a great supplement for staff. Our staff were so excited to participate in this program.
Miscellaneous and Suggestions for improvement	5	3%	Both employees who received step up to wages did not receive money back on their taxes this year. Additionally, both employees ended up owing money on their taxes this year. Helps some. But those who are low income have to do different tax forms because of the w1099. It is an amazing incentive for those who qualify. I do feel like there needs to be cost of living adjustments based on what part of the state you live in. It was a wonderful opportunity for my staff who qualified! My only complaint is that teachers who have been in the field for decades, who are amazing and dedicated to the profession, could not participate.

Table 3. Open-Ended Responses for Why Administrators Would or Would Not Recommend AR WAGE$ To Other Programs			
Theme	**Number of statements**	**Percent of total codes**	**Examples**
Administrative burden	1	1%	The request for verification of employment for every employee comes twice a year. This is too much. Once a year should be adequate. It could certainly be streamlined. Perhaps a spreadsheet sent out to verify employment mid-year instead of the need to fill out the entire form.

We also asked administrators if they would support their staff participating in AR WAGE$ in the future. Nearly all (98%) reported they would, 1 program reported they would not (1%), and 3 were unsure (1%) (Appendix Table 11C).

As before, we allowed respondents to provide more information about why they would or would not support future staff participation, and we coded their responses into the same thematic categories as above.[7]

There were 112 statements that received 115 total codes, and a single statement could be coded under multiple themes. The most popular theme was *general praise*, with 77% of total codes, followed by *reduces turnover/helps recruitmen*t with 13% of codes. See Table 4 for full results and example statements that fell under each code.

[7] The codes developed in the first question were used to code this data as well, after spot checking for consistent fit, and were modified as needed.

Table 4. Open-Ended Responses for Why Programs Would or Would Not Support Their Staff Participating in AR WAGE$ in the Future

Theme	Number of statements	Percent of total codes	Examples
General praise	88	77%	Anything to help my staff financially is a benefit. Anytime a staff member could receive incentives for their work with early-childhood-aged students, they deserve it! It is a good program and much deserved, especially in facilities where pay is set at the district level. Because I witnessed how beneficial this program was to my center. I want staff to understand I believe in and support early childhood education and the importance of their job. WAGE$ provides incentives to staff that they may not otherwise receive. The stability is so important for our children, parents, and staff.
Reduces turnover/ helps recruitment (implicit or explicit)	15	13%	It is beneficial in helping retain staff as they could go to other jobs and earn more money. Retaining staff with higher education is this field can be challenging when they could make more per hour in other fields. This is a valuable incentive... Early education teachers as a whole are in a lower paying industry compared to primary educators, yet the first 5-years are the most influential in a child's future success. The program has been helpful in staff retention as well as provided well deserved compensation for early childhood workers.
Knowledge/ experience	6	5%	...We are growing brains in early childhood. And we are struggling to find dedicated staff that have the knowledge and skills to support these critical years of development.

Table 4. Open-Ended Responses for Why Programs Would or Would Not Support Their Staff Participating in AR WAGE$ in the Future			
Theme	**Number of statements**	**Percent of total codes**	**Examples**
boost (implicit or explicit)			WAGE$ supports these goals by providing monetary incentives to employees for dedication and professional growth...this is how we solve the problem and equip our early childhood educators for the important work they do every day.
Easy to participate as a sponsor	2	2%	...This is a valuable incentive. The paperwork is minimum on my end as the staff gather the needed documents...
Morale boost	1	1%	It builds staff confidence and self-esteem. It makes them feel proud to be a part of something that has their best interest at heart. As a small business I support that, whereas I don't always have the resources to do it myself.
Misc. negatives/ suggestions for improvement	2	2%	Most of the staff do not understand tax information or money management. Receiving extra money sounds great, but they do not know how to allocate it for tax purposes. It would be more beneficial to provide staff with money management or life skills classes.
Administrative burden	1	1%	The request for verification of employment for every employee comes twice a year. This is too much. Once a year should be adequate. It could certainly be streamlined. Perhaps a spreadsheet sent out to verify employment mid-year instead of the need to fill out the entire form.

AR WAGE$ Participation and Retention of Participants

Administrators were asked how many AR WAGE$ participants they have employed, the job roles of those participants, and the number of participants still employed in their program. We computed a staff retention percentage by dividing those retained in the program by those employed.

As mentioned earlier, administrators reported having a range of 1–50 staff members participating in AR WAGE$ (*M* = 4.7, *SD* = 5.4). They also reported on staff still employed by the program, which ranged 0–45 (*M* = 3.7, *SD* = 4.5). The calculated proportion of staff retained by programs was 80% (*SD* = 30%). (Table 12A)

We also examined the distribution of programs by staff retention. More than half of the programs (58%) retained all their participating staff, and another 30% retained 50%–95% of their AR WAGE$ staff members. Taken together, this means that the majority of programs (88%) retained more than half of participating staff. (Table 12B)

The minority of programs retained some, but less than half of staff (5%), and 14 (7%) programs reported not retaining any participating staff. An examination of programs that reported losing all staff revealed that the programs also reported having few (range 1–3) participating staff in total.

Qualitative Results

The following section summarizes the demographics of the AR WAGE$ administrators in our focus groups, including their race/ethnicity and education, followed by a summary of thematic results.

Administrator Characteristics

Race and Ethnicity of Administrators

The administrators in the sample reported a racial/ethnic breakdown of 73% White/Caucasian (*n* = 11) and 27% Black/African American (*n* = 4).

Education of Administrators

The largest groups of administrators in the sample reported having either a bachelor's degree (*n* = 5, 33.3%) or a master's degree (*n* = 5, 33.3%). The remainder reported having an associate's degree

(*n* = 3, 20%), some college (*n* = 1, 6.7%), or a doctoral degree (*n* = 1, 6.7%). Four administrators (26.7%) reported having a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential.

Thematic Results

Recipient Stories

We asked administrators to provide a short summary of one employee's AR WAGE$ story.

Administrators reported that staff used AR WAGE$ to address basic needs, such as housing costs and medical care, or they used the money to help pursue college courses.

Turnover Impact

We asked administrators to detail any changes in turnover rates they thought were attributable to participation in AR WAGE$.

Most believed it helped with retention, with a few saying there was a noticeable increase in turnover since the program ended. The rest stated it made no difference or that it was hard to know. Two of those who said "no difference" mentioned a long history of low turnover at their program. Another said they work for a school system, where it is easy to rehire when positions go vacant.

We asked administrators their opinion on what, other than pay increases, helps retain early childhood educators. Most mentioned offering benefits like tuition reimbursement, insurance benefits, retirement match, and generous paid time off. Others mentioned focusing on purpose and meaning found in the work, schedule flexibility, and good leadership. Another said that directors who get out of their offices and actively support teachers help teachers feel more supported and reduce turnover.

Changes to Administrative Practices

We asked administrators to detail any changes they made in their administrative practices, such as adjusting pay or benefits or offering support with college tuition, after having staff participate in the AR WAGE$ program.

One administrator shared that they went to their Board of Directors to get a salary increase for staff. Another reported starting to reimburse staff for 50% of tuition if they enroll children at other centers.

Other administrators mentioned not having financial control over those types of decisions or not being able to change compensation because their grants are flat-funded. Similarly, others mentioned changes that predated their involvement in AR WAGE$ or things that they wanted to change but had not yet been able to.

Barriers and Suggested Changes

We asked administrators if there were any barriers in the administrative process or suggested changes to the program. Most mentioned no barriers and thought the process was easy.

However, one participant mentioned that it took time to get clarification on exactly who qualified for the stipend and who did not. Another administrator mentioned that it was challenging for her program because staff stipends were unequal depending on the individual's position. For example, staff in roles who worked less time directly with children were not eligible for the same stipends, despite equal levels of education.

Multiple administrators said they would like to fill out all the recertifications on a single form, rather than having to fill out a separate form for every staff member. Finally, one said that they had difficulty getting AECA to recognize their credits from an out-of-state college that was not on their preapproved list of universities.

Miscellaneous

When asked for any final thoughts, two administrators mentioned thinking there should be better education around tax requirements for the stipend. One suggested an adjustment to the stipend based on geography, noting that some regions of the state have a higher cost of living than other regions. Others mentioned gratitude for the AR WAGE$ program, with one saying her teachers could get paid more without having to burden families with increased tuition.

When asked about how they learned about AR WAGE$, most mentioned seeing it in an email or learning about it in the Office of Early Childhood monthly provider calls.

Discussion

The findings presented in this report reflect the first data gathered from administrators of programs that employed AR WAGE$ recipients. The study demonstrates positive impacts of AR WAGE$ on program outcomes, with high levels of reported satisfaction. Data were gathered to answer the following three research questions:

1. **Do providers see reduced turnover related to this support?**
2. **Have providers changed their compensation because of participation?**
3. **What are administrators' perceptions of the program, what barriers exist, and what recommendations do they have for improvement?**

Unlike improvements in workforce retention, changes to programmatic compensation practices are not explicit goals, nor are they directly tied to the existing literature examining the outcomes of other wage supplement programs. Therefore, it is important to note that those outcomes we report are exploratory.

Research Question 1: Do providers see reduced turnover related to AR WAGE$?

Administrators broadly reported that there were noticeable positive changes in staff retention as a result of participation in AR WAGE$.

Survey results indicated that with an overall average of 4.7 AR WAGE$ recipients per program (*SD* = 5.4), an average of 3.7 recipients remained employed with their program at the time of the survey (*SD* = 4.5). This means that, on average, 80% of all AR WAGE$ recipients were retained by their employer (*SD* = 30%).

Surveys showed high retention across most programs, with 88% of programs retaining more than half of their participating staff. Almost 6 out of 10 (58%) retained all AR WAGE$ recipients, and 30% retained more than half of the recipients.

There was lower retention in a minority of programs, with 5% of programs retaining some, but fewer than half of recipients, and 7% (14 programs) reporting retaining none of their recipients. However, the programs in this latter category reported having few recipients overall.

Findings from the focus groups suggested similar themes. A few directors reported that AR WAGE$ helped with retention. One stated that turnover noticeably increased after the program ended. The remainder reported that it made no difference or that it was hard to know the impact of AR WAGE$ on retention for their specific program. For example, some administrators said AR WAGE$ did not impact retention in their programs, citing a long history of low turnover at their programs or working for a school system where it is easy to rehire when positions were vacant.

These findings suggest that participation in AR WAGE$ is associated with staff retention in most early childhood programs — an essential factor in maintaining program quality, continuity of care, and workforce stability.

Research Question 2: Have providers changed staff compensation because of participation in AR WAGE$?

Compensation figures reveal two key patterns that have long been demonstrated in the ECCE field (McKelvey et al., 2022):

> **Preschool Roles Pay More**: Staff working in preschool classrooms consistently earn more than their counterparts in infant/toddler and school-age classrooms. This may reflect differences in required teaching credentials or differences in funding streams, such as greater public investments in preschool.
>
> **Overall Low Wages**: Despite their critical role in child development, early childhood educators — particularly assistant teachers in centers and FCCHs — often earn insufficient wages to support a family, contributing to workforce instability and high turnover. While their sample was small in this study, home visitor salaries were also below those of similar professional roles, especially considering that most require a bachelor's degree to qualify for employment.

Although the average annual salary for administrators in center-based settings was reported to be $52,395, which is higher than for teaching positions, early childhood administrators are paid far less than the $89,180, the average salary for an Arkansas K–12 administrator (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024). Fifteen percent of survey respondents received AR WAGE$ supplements themselves, and 30% reported employing a director or assistant director who was a recipient. Further, 20% of administrators maintain additional employment, highlighting systemic issues of wage inadequacy at all ECCE career levels.

Changes in Compensation

To assess the broader influence of the AR WAGE$ program, administrators were asked whether employing participants led to changes in staff compensation. The findings reveal modest but meaningful shifts in wage policies.

Limited Salary Adjustments:

75% of administrators reported no changes to staff salaries or bonuses.

25% made adjustments because of staff participation in AR WAGE$, indicating targeted but limited impact.

Positions Most Affected by Salary Changes (among programs reporting salary increases):

Lead teachers in preschool rooms: 82% of those making changes (21% of all programs)

Lead teachers in infant/toddler rooms: 59% (15% of all programs)

Assistant teachers in preschool rooms: 56% (14% of all programs)

Directors and assistant directors: 45% (11% of all programs)

Administrator focus groups included similar themes. One administrator stated that their program started reimbursing staff for 50% of tuition for enrollment of teachers' children at other centers. However, some directors mentioned not having financial control over those types of decisions or not being able to because their grants are flat-funded. When there were administrative changes, they were specific to individual positions or individuals rather than program-wide changes.

These exploratory outcomes reveal that salary increases were not widespread and were primarily concentrated in preschool roles, with fewer adjustments for infant/toddler and school-age staff. Leadership roles saw moderate increases, but overall, compensation changes were limited.

Research Question 3: What are administrators' perceptions of the program, what barriers exist, and what recommendations do they have for improvement?

Customer Service and Willingness to Recommend

Administrator feedback in surveys and focus groups reflects highly positive experiences with the AR WAGE$ and its administering organization, AECA. The overwhelming majority of administrators

who supervised AR WAGE$ recipients perceived the program as a well-administered, effective measure for strengthening the ECCE workforce.

Customer Service: Among administrators who interacted with AECA, 96% agreed or strongly agreed that they received high-quality customer service.

Program Recommendation: Nearly all respondents (97%) said they would recommend AR WAGE$ to other early childhood programs.

Future Participation: Nearly all administrators (98%) reported they would support staff participation in AR WAGE$ in the future.

Open-ended responses for why administrators would recommend AR WAGE$ to other early childhood programs included *general praise* (71% of codes), followed by *reduces turnover/helps recruitment* (12% of codes). Themes from administrators who participated in focus groups were also highly positive.

These findings highlight AR WAGE$ as a highly valued and trusted mechanism for advancing the early childhood workforce.

Barriers to Participation

While the majority of respondents did not cite confusion with eligibility requirements, one provider suggested that this information could be provided in a clearer or more intuitive format. One administrator also suggested that employment re-certifications could happen with less frequency (e.g., every year instead of every six months). Multiple administrators reported that the process was somewhat cumbersome, wishing they could have filled out all the recertifications in a single form, rather than having to do a separate form for every staff member.

One administrator shared that in programs with a mix of child-facing and adult-facing positions (teachers versus family service workers or home visitors), the stipends caused some friction among staff, who had equal levels of education but received different stipends because of the percentage of time spent directly working with children.

Recommendations for Improvement

The most common improvement respondents recommended in surveys and focus groups was to guide the impact participation had on personal tax filing. While AECA provided information about

Internal Revenue Code requirements for reporting payments to recipients (AECA, 2024), administrators shared that many early childhood educators were challenged by the stipend's impact on personal tax filings.

Fewer than 3% of administrators identified potential areas of improvement in program equity. Cost of living differences between different areas of the state were cited by one as a potential area for improvement, noting that the cost of living is significantly higher in some areas of the state. One respondent noted that while the AR WAGE$ program was a wonderful opportunity for educators who qualified, other skilled educators with decades of experience were not eligible.

Strengths and Limitations

This is the first study of the AR WAGE$ program, which sought to understand the experiences of employers with staff who received WAGE$ stipends. As with any study, there are both strengths and limitations to consider when interpreting the results.

The study employed a mixed-methods design, which integrates both quantitative and qualitative approaches to data collection (Creswell et al., 2009; Creswell & Tashakkori, 2007; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The use of this design is a key strength as it allows for a comprehensive understanding of provider experiences and outcomes, allowing for enhanced validity of findings as they are corroborated across different data sources.

An additional strength of the study lies in sampling. The study invited all employers of AR WAGE$ recipients to participate in the survey data collection. While the sample of employers who responded to the survey was roughly half of those invited, there were no statistical differences between those who did and did not respond were only found for programs accepting vouchers (SRA). This suggests the sample was moderately representative of the full invited sample.

When interpretating the findings presented, particularly those related to administrators' reports of staff compensation, it is important to note that the funding of programs in the survey had wide variability. Providers in school and ABC settings benefit from additional in-kind programmatic funding and school-district pay scales, which can positively impact staff compensation. However, it is also important to note that the presence of programs with this funding may also skew data related to the ability of administrators to change staff compensation.

Participation in focus groups was lower than anticipated. The evaluation team collected data during two periods, the summer and early in the school year, to attract as many administrators as possible. While the sample was smaller than planned, the second round of focus groups produced little new information, and the themes observed within the second round were not distinct from those of the first. This consistency in themes is a sign that the sample was sufficient to capture the range of perspectives relevant to our research questions. Similarly, previous research suggests that over 80% of unique insights surface within the first two or three focus groups (Guest et al., 2006, 2017, 2020; Namey et al., 2016). Therefore, we are confident the data represents the broad experience of employers of AR WAGE$ recipients.

As with all research that involves asking direct questions, respondents' answers could be influenced by what feels socially acceptable. However, few results reported here involve sensitive topics where respondents might feel pressure to respond differently, so the risk should be like other studies that use self-report outcomes. Moreover, in the absence of in-depth, annually updated administrative data for every early childhood professional in the state (employer, title, pay, education, etc. for every year employed in early education), self-report remains an important data collection tool.

There are potential limitations to using a one-group, descriptive and retrospective design. Because this study depends on post-test or retrospectively reported experiences, it is possible that respondents will not remember certain details about the past perfectly. However, retrospective studies allow people to use the same frame of reference (their current understanding of their change over time) to rate differences, rather than two frames of reference from two separate points in time, thereby avoiding potential *underestimation* of change due to response-shift bias (Chang & Todd, 2018; Dube et. al., 2004; Howard, 1980; Pratt et. al., 2000).

Finally, one-group designs are inherently unable to prove cause and effect. They can describe changes that participants report, and variation among different groups of participants, but they cannot prove causation (i.e., that changes happened because of the program, and not for other reasons). In many cases, conducting studies that can definitively prove causation, such as a randomized controlled trial, is impractical.

As such, research commonly relies on the best alternative methods available within these constraints. The results of the current study will be used to shape a future quasi-experimental study comparing those who participated in the program to a matched group of individuals who did not.

High-quality quasi-experimental comparison studies can provide credible estimates of a program's impact.

Conclusions

Financing in the ECCE sector is challenging. Programs operate with funding based on what families can afford, rather than the actual cost of care (Dade & MacLean, 2023). As a result, programs are often unable to provide livable wages for their educators, which leads to high staff turnover (Caven et al., 2021).

Arkansas piloted the Step Up to WAGE$® model to address the compensation gap and reduce turnover.

Exploratory Outcomes

Wage Growth

Although the AR WAGE$ program does not offer direct funding to ECCE programs and was not specifically designed to facilitate program-level changes in staff compensation, the program resulted in modest salary increases, as reported by one in four program administrators, particularly for lead teachers in preschool and infant/toddler classrooms.

Main Outcomes

Turnover Reduction

AR WAGE$ was also associated with staff retention. Administrators reported an 80% average retention rate. Further, almost 9 out of 10 (88%) programs retained more than half of their participants, with almost 6 out of 10 (58%) retaining all participating staff.

Program Satisfaction

Administrators overwhelmingly endorsed AR WAGE$, with nearly all stating that they would support staff participation in the future. In focus groups, administrators shared stories of individuals who participated in AR WAGE$ and the difference that it made in their lives.

Administrators shared stories of employees being able to move out of debt and into greater financial security.

Final Conclusion of Year 1 Study

These findings provide encouraging evidence that AR WAGE$ may play an important role in stabilizing the ECCE workforce through improved compensation.

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Appendix: WAGE$ Employer Survey Results

Administrator Characteristics

Table 1. Administrator Roles and Employment

Positions: Type and Number

Position	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Center Administrator	232	90.3	90.3
Family Child Care Home	12	4.7	4.7
Home Visiting Coordinator	18	7.0	7.0
Number of Positions Held			
1	250	97.3	97.3
2	7	2.7	2.7

Table 2. WAGE$ Administrator Race and Ethnicity

Race

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid	Black	44	17.0	20.5
	White	151	58.3	70.2
	Hispanic	3	1.2	1.4
	Other	2	.8	.9
	Multi-Racial	15	5.8	7.0
	Total	215	83.0	100.0
Missing	Unknown	44	17.0	
Total		259	100.0	

Table 3A. WAGE$ Administrator Education

Respondents' Highest Level of Education

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid	High school diploma or GED	7	2.7	3.1
	Some college courses, but not a degree	18	6.9	7.9
	Associates degree	30	11.6	13.2
	Bachelor's degree	77	29.7	33.9
	Master's degree	84	32.4	37.0
	Doctoral degree	6	2.3	2.6
	Education Specialist	5	1.9	2.2
	Total	227	87.6	100.0
Missing	Unreported	32	12.4	
Total		259	100.0	

Table 3B. WAGE$ Administrator Respondents' Education: CDA

Do you have a Child Development Associate (CDA) certificate?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid	No	170	65.6	74.6
	Yes	58	22.4	25.4
	Total	228	88.0	100.0
Missing	Unreported	31	12.0	
Total		259	100.0	

Table 3C. WAGE$ Administrator Time in Field

How long have you worked in the early childhood field?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid	1-2 years	5	1.7	2.2
	3-5 years	13	4.5	5.7
	6-10 years	22	7.7	9.6
	11 years or more	188	65.5	82.5
	Total	228	79.4	100.0
Missing	Unreported	31	12.0	
Total		259	100.0	

Table 3D. WAGE$ Administrator Time with Employer

How long have you been in leadership with your current employer/program?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid	Less than one year	7	2.4	3.1
	1-2 years	20	7.0	8.8
	3-5 years	58	20.2	25.4
	6-10 years	54	18.8	23.7
	11 years or more	89	31.0	39.0
	Total	228	79.4	100.0
Missing	Unreported	31	12.0	
Total		259	100.0	

Table 3E. WAGE$ Administrator Secondary Employment

In addition to your primary job in an early childhood field, do you have another paid job?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid	Yes, during the summer only	2	.7	.9
	Yes, during the school year only	8	2.8	3.5
	Yes, during the school year and summer	35	12.2	15.4
	No	183	63.8	80.3
	Total	228	79.4	100.0
Missing	Unreported	31	12.0	
Total		259	100.0	

Program Characteristics

Table 4A. Program Accreditations

Does your program have any of the following accreditations? (Check all that apply)

	Frequency	Percent
National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)	17	7.2
National Association of Family Child Care (NAFCC)	7	3.0
Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF)	6	2.6
Better Beginnings	205	87.2
Other*	3	1.3

Note: Results include participants who endorsed at least one answer option (*n* = 235). *Includes School Accreditations: Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI); Arkansas Nonpublic School Accrediting Association (ANSAA); Montessori.

Table 4B. Home Visiting Programs

What is your home visiting model?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid	Parents as Teachers	2	.8	11.1
	HIPPY	11	4.2	61.1
	Healthy Families America	3	1.2	16.7
	SafeCare	1	.4	5.6
	Other*	1	.4	5.6
	Total	18	6.9	100.0
Missing	Unreported	241	93.1	
Total		259	100.0	

*Model was not specified in text.

Table 4C. Program Funding Sources

The sources from which your program received funding in the last 12 months. (Check all that apply)

	Frequency	Percent
Parent fees/Private Tuition	154	59.5
Head Start/Early Head Start funds (including EHS-Child Care Partnerships	24	9.3
ABC funds for Pre-K	108	41.7
Child Care Vouchers (Child Care Development Fund, CCDF)	135	52.1
Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP)/free-reduced lunch	111	42.9
Private donations, grants (e.g., foundations, United Way), or fundraising	44	17.0
Corporate/employer subsidies	4	1.5
Match/In-Kind Donation	26	10.0
Medicaid	38	14.7
ABC funds for home visiting	15	5.8
Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV)	7	2.7

Note: Results include participants who endorsed at least one answer option (*n* = 259).

Table 4D. Program Accreditations/Quality

Program Quality by Accreditations/Funding

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid	No National Accreditations or Quality Funding	106	45.1	45.1
	NAEYC, NAFCC, CARF, HS/EHS, or ABC	129	54.9	54.9
	Total	235	100.0	100.0

Note: Results include participants who endorsed at least one answer option (*n* = 235).

Center-Based Child Enrollment

Table 5. Program Enrollment and Funding Proportion: Center-Based Programs

Center-Based Program Enrollment and Funding Proportion

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Dev.
Infants/Toddlers	159	1	999	53.6	88.9
Preschool	224	4	750	96.3	120.9
School Age	66	1	300	31.1	48.6
All Ages	227	8	1728	141.6	174.4
Percentage with SRA Voucher	109	1%	94%	32.6%	26.8%
Percentage with CACFP	123	4%	100%	80.7%	27.8%

Family Child Care (FCCH) Home Enrollment

Table 6. Program Enrollment and Funding Proportion: Family Child Care Homes

Family Child Care Home Program Enrollment and Funding Proportion

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Dev.
Infants/Toddlers	11	1	8	2.9	1.9
Preschool	11	1	16	6.7	5.7
School Age	6	1	10	3.5	3.5
All Ages	12	3	21	10.6	6.0
Percentage with SRA Voucher	9	14%	100%	90.5%	28.6%
Percentage with CACFP	9	13%	100%	58.7%	36.4%

WAGE$ Program Enrollment

Table 7A. WAGE$ Program Enrollment

Item	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev.
How many WAGE$ participants has your program employed?	209	1	50	4.7	5.4
What kinds of positions have you supported in WAGE$ (Check all that apply)?					
Teacher/Lead Teacher	238	0	1	.69	.46
Assistant Teacher/ Paraprofessional/Teacher Aide	238	0	1	.59	.49
Director/Assistant Director of a Center-Based Facility	238	0	1	.30	.46
Family Child Care Provider/Owner	238	0	1	.05	.21
Home Visitor/Home-based Educator	238	0	1	.09	.29
Home Visiting Supervisor/Coordinator	238	0	1	.03	.16
I was a participant	238	0	1	.15	.36
Other*	238	0	1	.02	.14

Note: *Other included floaters, curriculum coordinators

Table 7B. WAGE$ Program Enrollment

How long has your program employed WAGE$ participants?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid	Last year was the first year	16	6.2	6.7
	1-2 years	111	42.9	46.6
	3-4 years	99	38.2	41.6
	Not sure	12	4.6	5.0
	Total	238	91.9	100.0
Missing	Unreported	21	8.1	
Total		259	100.0	

Compensation

Table 8. Salaries by Position

Hourly Salary in Programs by Position

Position	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev.
Center-Based Positions					
Lead Teacher: Infants and Toddlers	116	11.00	28.64	14.94	3.02
Lead Teacher: PreK	145	11.00	50.00	18.58	6.86
Lead Teacher: School Age	53	11.00	50.00	16.59	6.65
Assistant Teacher: Infants and Toddlers	102	11.00	19.70	13.34	1.69
Assistant Teacher: PreK	136	11.00	25.18	13.96	2.36
Assistant Teacher: School Age	43	11.00	25.00	13.70	2.47
Director/Owner	118	11.00	68.00	25.19	10.59
Other Positions					
Assistant Teacher/Aide (FCCH)	6	11.00	18.00	14.08	3.20
Home Visitors	10	11.00	23.00	16.65	3.72

Benefits

Table 9. Benefits Offered to All Staff

Does your program offer any of the following benefits to staff? (Check all that apply)

	Frequency	Percent
Insurance (Offered at Least One)	143	61.6
Health insurance	128	55.2
Dental insurance	131	56.5
Disability and/or life insurance	129	55.8
Paid Leave (Offered at Least One)	192	82.8
Sick Leave/PTO used for Sick	162	69.8
Vacation/PTO used for Vacation	123	53.2
Holidays	155	57.4
Maternal Leave (Offered at Least One)	167	77.3
Paid Maternity Leave	36	16.4
Unpaid Maternity Leave	145	71.4
Educational Supports (Offered at Least One)	200	87.0
Required Trainings	198	86.1
Training Beyond Required	77	36.5
Stipends for Books/Materials for Self-Paid Education	63	33.3
Paid Release Time to Attend PD/College Courses	48	25.3

Cost reductions (offered at least one)	150	66.7
Free meals for staff	92	40.4
Free/reduced child care fees (not including vouchers)	111	48.9
Other		
Periodic increases in wages: cost of living or performance/education	157	71.0
Retirement or pension plan	126	54.8

Note: Results include participants who endorsed at least one answer option (*n* = 232).

Changes to Administrative Practices

Table 10A. Changes to Administrative Practices

Have you permanently changed staff pay/provided bonuses as a result of participating in WAGE$?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid	0 No	141	53.0	75.0
	1 Yes	47	17.7	25.0
	Total	188	70.7	100.0
Missing	Total	78	29.3	
Total		266	100.0	

Table 10B. Positions with Compensation Changes

Which positions have you changed wages/compensation (Check all that apply)?

Position	N	Yes (%)
Center-Based Positions		
Lead Teacher: Infants and Toddlers	34	59%
Lead Teacher: PreK	34	82%
Lead Teacher: School Age	34	32%
Assistant Teacher: Infants and Toddlers	34	38%
Assistant Teacher: PreK	34	56%
Assistant Teacher: School Age	34	24%
Director/Owner	42	45%
Other Positions		
Assistant Teacher/Aide (FCCH)	8	88%
Home Visitors	4	75%

Program Satisfaction

Table 11A. Satisfaction with Service

Did you receive good customer service from the WAGES staff?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	8	3.1	4.3
	Agree	62	23.9	33.5
	Strongly Agree	115	44.4	62.2
	Total	185	71.4	100.0
Missing	N/A (Did Not Contact WAGE$ staff)	36	13.9	
	Unreported	38	14.7	
	Total	74	28.6	
Total		259	100.0	

Table 11B. Recommendation of WAGE$

Would you recommend WAGE$ to other early childhood programs?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid	No	2	.8	.9
	Yes	215	83.0	97.3
	Not sure	4	1.5	1.8
	Total	221	85.3	100.0
Missing	Unreported	38	14.7	
Total		259	100.0	

Table 11C. Participation in WAGE$ in the Future

Would you support staff in your program participating in WAGE$ in the future?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid	No	1	.4	.5
	Yes	217	83.8	98.2
	Not sure	3	1.2	1.4
	Total	221	85.3	100.0
Missing	Unreported	38	14.7	
Total		259	100.0	

Participation and Retention of Participants

Table 12A. Staff Retention

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev.
How many WAGE$ participants has your program employed?	209	1	50	4.72	5.41
How many WAGE$ participants that you employed are still employed by your program?	216	0	45	3.69	4.51
Proportion of Staff Retained by the Program	208	00%	100%	80%	30%

Table 12B. Staff Retention: Proportions

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	All Staff Retained	121	46.7	58.2	58.2
	50%-99% of Staff Retained	62	23.9	29.8	88.0
	1-49% of Staff Retained	11	4.2	5.3	93.3
	No Staff Retained	14	5.4	6.7	100.0
	Total	208	80.3	100.0	
Missing	Unreported	51	19.7		
Total		259	100.0		

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The information, content, and conclusions expressed in this material are those of the authors.

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