

Strengthening the Early Learning Workforce

A prerequisite for expanding access to high-quality early childhood care and education



Policy Brief

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Early childhood educators have a greater impact on classroom quality than any other variable—and the benefits of high-quality early childhood programming are particularly powerful for the most vulnerable children in Illinois.

Why a Well-Qualified Workforce Matters in Early Education

Between birth and age three, a child’s brain develops at an astonishing rate, making about a million neural connections *per second*—far more than at any other stage of life. These connections are profoundly influenced by the quality of a child’s interactions with the adults who care for them. These adults include the members of our early childhood workforce, who serve the 558,000 Illinois children under the age of six who spend time in child care so that their parents can work.

During these early years, **children learn how to learn**—and they learn best when they have secure, positive relationships with adults who can support their learning and development.

According to the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, “Young children naturally reach out for interaction through babbling, facial expressions and gestures, and adults respond with the same kind of vocalizing and gesturing back at them. This back-and-forth process is fundamental to the wiring of the

brain, especially in the earliest years.”

Wiring a brain—and laying the foundation for lifelong learning—is complex and nuanced work. Adults with a solid understanding of early childhood development are more likely to provide the stimulating, developmentally appropriate learning opportunities that early learners need to achieve their full potential. Conversely, adults who lack this knowledge could undermine their early learning and development.

In other words, adults working in early childhood contexts are not “just babysitting.” Their work is intellectually, physically and emotionally demanding. Because young children don’t have the self-awareness and verbal skills to identify and express their needs, early childhood professionals must observe the children in their programs closely to discern and address these needs in the right way at the right time—all while ensuring the optimal development of the group as a whole.

71%

Percentage of **Illinois children under the age of six who spend time in child care** so that their parents can work¹

¹Kids Count Data Center

A Workforce in Need of Investment

Increased public investment—as well as state policies that appropriately prepare, support and compensate the Illinois early childhood education workforce—will reduce pay inequities and help ensure that early learners in every Illinois community get the quality care, education and enrichment that they need and deserve.

Educators and caregivers who are knowledgeable, skilled and consistent—and reflect the diversity of the children they serve—are the most important predictors of high-quality early learning environments that lay the foundation for success in school and beyond. The strengths of our current Illinois early childhood workforce are the great diversity of its members, their years of experience, and their commitment to the field and the children and families in their programs.

Yet we simply don't have enough individuals willing and able to perform this critically important, highly skilled work. This shortage of qualified early childhood professionals is especially acute for children under the age of three.

The challenges faced by the early childhood education workforce are systemic, varied and complex—from the lack of clear pathways and resources to advance toward more career opportunities to the low wages that workforce members earn even after they have acquired additional degrees. Early childhood educators in Illinois earn 30% less on average than public elementary school teachers in grades K-8, despite having the same degrees and licenses.² The poverty rate for early

educators in Illinois is 17.8%, much higher than for Illinois workers in general (8.3%) and 8.5 times as high as for K-8 teachers (2.1%).³

\$13.85

Average **hourly wage** of early childhood educators in Illinois

These issues—combined with challenging job conditions in a field that is undervalued by many—have contributed to an unprecedented early childhood workforce crisis. In the aftermath of the pandemic, more than 80% of early childhood professionals responding to a survey conducted by the National Association for the Education of Young Children reported staffing shortages. In Illinois, there are centers with closed classrooms because directors cannot find qualified personnel to staff them.

Low wages and stressful working conditions are the primary drivers of this shortage. According to the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, nearly 20% of early childhood educators in Illinois live in poverty, and many Illinois early childhood professionals leave the field to seek better working conditions and a living wage. This is a revenue issue. We simply do not invest enough to cover the true cost of quality early childhood care and education.

Early Education Pays Off

The potential benefits of early childhood education are significant, but they can only be realized if children attend high-quality programs staffed by a skilled and supported workforce.

Benefits of High-Quality Early Childhood Programs

- Increased kindergarten readiness
- Fewer placements in special education
- Increased high school graduation rates
- Lower rates of criminal behavior in adolescence and adulthood
- Increased productivity and earning potential
- Improved health outcomes

² Smylie, S. (2022, November 22). Changes to Illinois' early childhood education funding needed to fix pay disparities, advocates say. Chalkbeat Chicago

³ McLean, C., Austin, L.J.E., Whitebook, M., & Olson, K.L. (2021). Early Childhood Workforce Index – 2020. Berkeley, CA: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley

Policy Solution: Continuous and Sustainable Investment in a Skilled Workforce

Fortunately, we know how to address our state's early childhood workforce crisis with programs and strategies that are informed by research and tested in the real world. We must increase compensation and improve working conditions to attract and retain high-caliber early childhood professionals and fund programs and pathways to support current and prospective workforce members as they pursue degree, licensure and credentialing programs.

To achieve these goals, Illinois must sustain and expand its investment in the following workforce development initiatives:

1 Innovative approaches to improving quality and compensation through the Smart Start initiative:

Smart Start Workforce Grants are designed to support staff recruitment and retention by funding enhanced compensation and benefits.

The **Smart Start Quality Support Program** helps participating centers cover staffing costs associated with higher-quality programming and supports staff in their quality-improvement work.

The **Smart Start Illinois Early Childhood Apprenticeship Pilot** (IECAP) connects scholarship programs leading to early childhood credentials and degrees with on-the-job training and mentorship opportunities. Participating programs implement a wage scale tied to degrees and credentials. This apprenticeship model will be explained in greater detail in a subsequent policy brief.

2 Investments in scholarships and innovative pathways to help early childhood workforce members attain the critical and complex knowledge, skills and abilities these professionals need:

The **Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity**: This groundbreaking initiative helps workforce members pursue education pathways that previously seemed out of reach with full-cost-of-attendance scholarships, mentors who support students as they pursue degrees at two- and four-year institutions of higher education, and

community-based navigators who help workforce members connect with and enroll in degree and credential programs to advance their careers in early childhood education.

The **Chicago Early Learning Workforce Scholarship** (CELWS) program for individuals who want to commit to working in a Chicago Early Learning program and the **Gateways to Opportunity Scholarship Program** (GSP) for those interested in pursuing early childhood degrees, credentials and licensure throughout the state. Outcomes from these scholarship programs will be presented in a subsequent policy brief.

3 A unified early childhood infrastructure with a new state agency

In October 2023, Governor J.B. Pritzker unveiled a plan to create a new state agency to house all early childhood programs and funding. This exciting initiative will provide a more equitable, integrated and holistic system of services for young children and families in Illinois. This is a substantial undertaking and an important step with the potential to unify the workforce qualifications and systems for attaining these qualifications, as well as systems for ongoing professional development for the field. Ultimately, this initiative will make it easier for program providers and individual practitioners to access information about available career pathways and successfully pursue these pathways. Workforce recommendations for this agency will be presented in a subsequent policy brief.

Conclusion

In recent years, Illinois has made substantial investments in its early childhood workforce—investments that have **set the stage for transformative change**. But, with so much at stake, we must do more.

Families, the economy and society benefit when children have access to high-quality care and early learning opportunities while their caregivers are at work. By investing in workforce development, we can ensure that families have adequate options for early care and education—and that hundreds of thousands of children under the age of six in Illinois don't miss out on the many benefits that can be realized through high-quality early childhood care and education each year.

The problems driving the Illinois early childhood workforce crisis are complex—and will require innovative and systemic solutions. Building a workforce that meets the needs of all Illinois families will demand multifaceted, multiyear strategies.

However, we cannot innovate our way out of a funding problem. Without immediate investment to address the most pressing issues in the state's early childhood sector—including equitable compensation for workforce members—a deepening of the early childhood workforce crisis is all but inevitable. Without

a pay increase, according to the Chicago Early Childhood Workforce Partnership Employer Council, 25% of Chicago's early childhood educators and 30% of administrators and home-based providers are projected to leave the workforce in the next five years.

We cannot expand the state's early care and education capacity without substantially increasing compensation for early care and education professionals. Throughout the state, early childhood classrooms are empty because program directors cannot recruit enough early childhood professionals willing to work for poverty-level wages. The investment needed to expand capacity must be calculated based on living wages for all early care and education professionals.

25%

Percentage of **early childhood educators projected to leave the Chicago workforce** in the next 5 years⁴

⁴ Policy Equity Group LLC. (2022). Supporting the Recruitment and Retention of Head Start Staff: A Wage and Benefits Comparability Study for Chicago Head Start Grantees. Commissioned by the Chicagoland Workforce Funder's Alliance.

If our state's youngest learners are to reap the many benefits of high-quality early childhood education and achieve their full potential, **Illinois must prioritize investment in a diverse, well-qualified and equitably compensated workforce.**



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