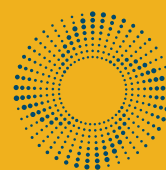




The Early Childhood Education Workforce in Alaska

CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES

**Executive
Summary**



Stellar
Group



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“I want to do work that connects me to a community that really does feel like I am doing something for somebody - making a difference in both individuals’ lives and the landscape of the community.”

– EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATOR



Executive Summary

The early childhood education sector is an integral part of a thriving economy with both states and local municipalities playing a role in supporting this sector.¹ Alaska, like many states across the nation, is facing a crisis of limited availability of quality early childhood education options. This long-standing crisis in Alaska continues growing amid early childhood education workforce declines, resulting in statewide economic stress. In response, on April 6, 2023, Governor Mike Dunleavy issued Administrative Order No. 346 establishing the Governor’s Task Force on Child Care (Task Force) within the Alaska Early Childhood Coordinating Council (AECCC). The purpose of the Task Force is “to develop a plan to improve availability and affordability of quality child care throughout Alaska,” while recognizing that a well-compensated early childhood education workforce is central to achieving goals of affordability, accessibility, and quality.² A substantial public investment along with change at multiple levels of the system is needed to stabilize the sector.

About This Report

In 2019, The Johns Hopkins School of Education Innovation in Development, Engagement and Learning Systems (IDEALS) Institute conducted a study on a Wage and Compensation Model for Alaska’s Early Care and Education in Alaska (JHU Study), finding that the early childhood education workforce in Alaska faces significant instability. The purpose of this report is to update the JHU Study and provide an up-to-date analysis of the current workforce, with a focus on workforce shortages and relevant recommendations. The report has the following sections:

- *An updated review of factors affecting the early childhood education workforce throughout the United States, including those related to the COVID-19 pandemic*
- *An analysis of the status of the early childhood education workforce in Alaska, including a scan of workforce shortages, turnover, and licensed capacity in Alaska with attention to regional trends*
- *An analysis of factors impacting the early childhood education workforce crisis in Alaska, highlighting low compensation, inadequate benefits, and poor working conditions*
- *A summary of current early childhood education workforce supports in Alaska, including progress made on recommendations from the JHU Study, including financial supports, wellness programs, educational opportunities, and professional development programs*
- *An exploration of workforce stabilization strategies adopted by other states and their relative successes, including a discussion of the feasibility of implementing such strategies in Alaska*
- *A set of recommendations drawn from this research to inform local and statewide workforce stabilization efforts*

The Nationwide Early Childhood Education Workforce Crisis

The availability and affordability of early childhood education is in crisis across the United States. Federal COVID-19 relief funds have provided temporary relief for early care and learning providers and the educators they employ; however, this funding is nearing its conclusion. As COVID-19 relief funding ends, early childhood education systems throughout the country are thinking creatively about how to dedicate sustainable funding to support the workforce long term with wages, benefits, and workplace supports to encourage retention.

While the COVID-19 pandemic disruptions made clear the essential role of early childhood education in supporting healthy families and state economic conditions, the factors affecting the crisis remain consistent. National research shows that a chronic undervaluation of the early childhood education workforce has resulted in and reinforced low wages, which are the strongest predictor of turnover. Low wages are often coupled with a lack of adequate benefits, with early childhood educators often lacking basic benefits such as health insurance, retirement, and paid leave. Challenging workplace conditions such as lack of adequate staffing, poor workplace culture, and lack of support for challenging child behaviors contribute to burnout. Many efforts seek to increase professionalization and raise the quality of care through increased education and professional development requirements, however without attention to wages and benefits, and equitable access to training and professional development, these efforts can increase exploitation of a low-wage workforce by requiring but not compensating them adequately for their higher education and standards.

Status of The Early Childhood Education Workforce in Alaska

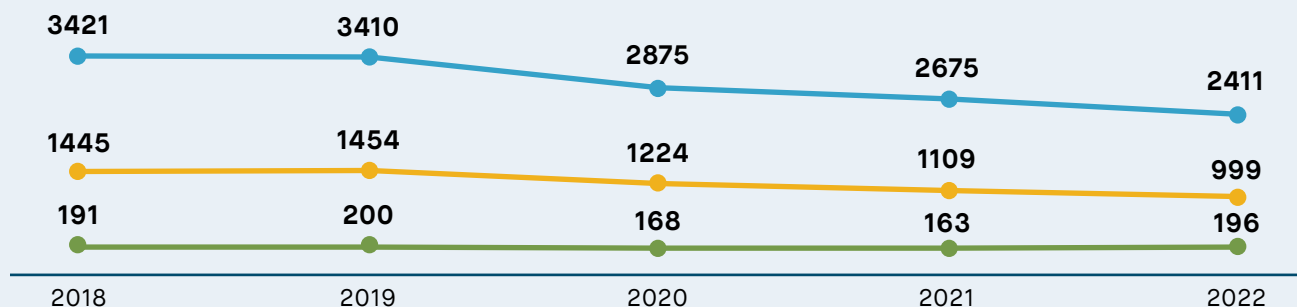
“ I want to do work that connects me to a community that really does feel like I am doing something for somebody - making a difference in both individuals' lives and the landscape of the community.”

– Early childhood educator

Alaska is facing a decline in early childhood education workforce numbers, including high levels of staff turnover. This decline in workforce numbers is accompanied by a decline in licensed early care and learning providers across the state, which has decreased 19% since 2019. However, the picture in Alaska does include a promising element: there exists a passionate and dedicated workforce in Alaska that, if supported and invested in, has the potential to flourish.

The number of both child care workers and preschool teachers has dropped by nearly one-third in recent years.

■ Childcare workers ■ Preschool teachers (except special education) ■ Early childhood education administrators



State of Alaska, Department of Labor and Workforce Development. 2023.

Factors Impacting the Early Childhood Education Workforce Crisis in Alaska

The decline of the early childhood education workforce in Alaska is affected by several factors – all of which are interconnected. The 2023 Alaska ECE Workforce Survey and interviews with early childhood educators show that the key factors influencing the crisis in Alaska are low wages, a lack of benefits, and challenging working conditions. One bright spot is in access to professional development, an area that has received considerable investment and focus over the past few years.

LOW WAGES

“ You can work at the post office and get higher pay there. You can work at the airport and get higher pay there. You can be an instructional aide in the school district in the upper grades and get \$5 more an hour than you would if you worked as the director at the daycare.”

– Early childhood educator

Findings revealed that low wages and limited opportunities for wage increases with further education and experience present a frustrating and untenable situation for early childhood educators. Wages do not increase significantly with years in the field and higher education does not guarantee higher wages.

Despite personal investments in their careers, their lack of ability to earn a living wage often leads early childhood educators to leave the field for higher pay. As one educator said, “[I] **absolutely loved my job. However, I literally couldn’t survive, and that’s why I had to leave.**”

LACK OF BENEFITS

“ I think the root of [burnout] is being paid poorly and not having any benefits like sick time or anything... If we had employees that we could keep, then people who were sick could take sick days, and we could just help each other out more... I know that’s why we can’t keep people.”

– Early childhood educator

While some sectors of the early childhood education workforce receive benefits, in most early childhood education workplaces, the lack of health insurance, paid time off, and retirement benefits remains an ongoing challenge to the stability of the workforce. Ninety-three percent of survey participants indicated that workplace benefits are at least moderately important to them regarding their employment decisions, however nearly one in five report no benefits of any kind. Those in licensed homes and group homes were the least likely to have access to any benefits, with only 5% reporting access to employer sponsored health care.

“ Having a job that doesn’t provide benefits, that has no health insurance, [that] has no retirement - when [I was] in my twenties [and] in my thirties, I was like, oh, whatever. But now in my forties, yes... this changes the picture.”

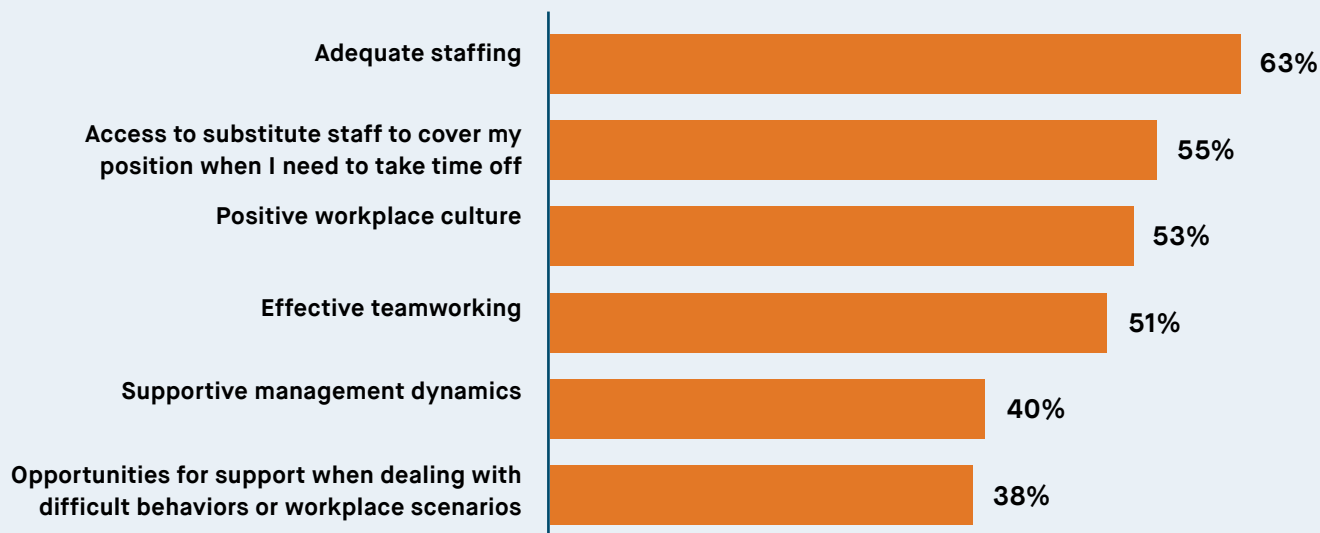
– Director of a licensed center

One area that has received investment in the past few years is professional development. The Child Care Program Office (CCPO), thread, local school districts, and other community agencies work together to provide professional development opportunities for early childhood educators, and there is high satisfaction, with 82% of early childhood educators reporting satisfaction with their access to professional development. However, access is not equal and early childhood educators in licensed homes and group homes were the least likely to report access to paid professional development or paid time off to participate in it.

CHALLENGING WORKPLACE CONDITIONS

Although 69% of early childhood educators said they were at least moderately satisfied with the current supports in place to help them navigate the challenges of their work, almost all (95%) indicated that improved workplace wellness supports would motivate them to remain in their current position, signifying the need to prioritize the wellbeing of the early education workforce through strategies that impact the day-to-day conditions educators experience. Seventy-nine percent of educators report an increase in challenging behaviors since the COVID-19 pandemic and 74% saying their jobs are more demanding.

Early childhood educators identified factors related to adequate staffing, positive interpersonal dynamics, and supportive teamworking as the most important wellness supports affecting their employment decisions.



2023 Alaska ECE Workforce Survey. N=510

Finally, a strong workforce requires attention to workplace conditions that influence early childhood educators' ability to participate in a coordinated, welcoming, and supportive environment (i.e., adequate staffing, mental health supports, etc.). Absence of adequate supports has led to high levels of burnout among early childhood educators in Alaska: 62% of survey respondents reported feeling emotionally drained from their work. As one said, ***"People are getting overworked. There's not enough time to take a break... I can't even use the bathroom. It's physically and mentally not healthy for me to be in this work environment."***

Current Efforts to Strengthen The Early Childhood Education Workforce in Alaska

Several agencies and organizations across the state are thinking creatively about how to support the workforce. The CCPO, Alaska Department of Education and Early Development (DEED), thread, and other agencies often partner to provide vital support, including professional development, scholarships, financial support, the Alaska System for Early Education and Development (SEED) Registry, and Learn & Grow and there has been some limited progress on the JHU Study recommendations.

INFRASTRUCTURE FOR QUALITY IMPROVEMENT AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Alaska has some important infrastructure in place to support the early childhood education workforce. thread houses both the Alaska SEED Registry and Learn & Grow, the State's Quality Recognition and Improvement System (QRIS). The SEED Registry enables early childhood education professionals to track their professional development and education in one place. This can be helpful for applying for jobs, meeting licensing requirements, and tracking yearly professional development requirements. Learn & Grow helps early care and learning providers strive for higher quality by setting tiered quality standards and offering support through financial incentives, administrative and classroom coaching, and education.

AVAILABLE SUPPORTS FOR WAGES

Alaska has one statewide wage bonus program and encourages transparent pay scales that reward education and tenure through Learn & Grow. While the bonus program has offered meaningful relief, funding for it is inconsistently available, and therefore early childhood educators cannot depend on it as part of their compensation. The City and Borough of Juneau has also designed its own local subsidized wage program.

AVAILABLE SUPPORTS FOR BENEFITS

There remains no progress on the JHU Study's recommendation to support early care and learning providers to develop, deliver, and document benefits packages for early childhood educators or to establish partnerships to provide universal health insurance options and retirement plans.

AVAILABLE SUPPORTS TO IMPROVE WORKPLACE CONDITIONS

The JHU Study recommended offering mental health and leadership support to improve the quality of the early childhood education workforce. Since then, workforce burnout has become a common topic in early childhood education professional development courses offered by thread – both how to avoid and manage burnout in oneself and, for administrators, how to cultivate workplace environments that help reduce burnout.

CURRENT WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES

In Alaska, recent attention has been given to expand the ways in which current and potential early childhood educators can build their credentials, education, and learning, with increasing attention to lowering barriers for rural and remote individuals through remote options, subsidizing learning, and alternative pathways that integrate classroom-based learning and experience, including apprenticeship programs. As many of these supports are in their infancy, there is limited data demonstrating their effectiveness. These efforts are also directly tied to improving the overall quality of early care and learning provided in the state.

Other States' Strategies to Strengthen The Early Childhood Education Workforce

Alaska's pressing issues of low wages, lack of benefits, and difficult workplace conditions for early childhood educators are challenges felt across the nation. At least 22 governors have recognized the foundational importance of a well-prepared early childhood workforce and spoke about the need for increased and new childcare investments in their 2023 state addresses.³ In discussions with other states and a review of recent reports on strategies to address the early childhood workforce crisis, the following themes emerged about how other states are approaching the crisis:

- *Improving wages and benefits for early childhood education employees is central to most state efforts with many different approaches being used*
- *No single early childhood education workforce strategy stands in isolation. Strategies recognize that compensation, licensing, quality, and workforce development are intertwined*

- ***Multi-faceted strategies require coordination across state programs and with key stakeholder groups. States with strong coordination and centralized authority are often able to be more efficient, leverage resources more easily, and move more quickly to act on priorities***
- ***Rethinking early childhood financing strategies is necessary. While many states leveraged COVID-19 relief funds to pilot and scale their initial approaches, states have now found it necessary to increase funding to sustain their efforts***

Specific examples of programs to increase wages, benefits, and workplace wellness, as well as broader workforce development efforts, including targeted supports for in-home providers, are described in the full report.

Recommendations

To build a strong and sustainable early childhood workforce, complementary efforts are needed across these priority areas: wages, benefits, workplace conditions, workforce development, small business supports, along with systemic infrastructure to back these efforts. While all recommendations have the potential to lead to productive and sustainable outcomes, some may require higher investment and in turn deliver a higher level of impact. Additionally, recommendations differ on the time required for implementation; some can be implemented immediately, while others require additional time for strategic planning, coordination, and implementation. These considerations are noted below.

The findings in this report echo findings in prior reports and many of the recommendations are aligned with those made in other recent reports and plans for Alaska’s early childhood education system: the JHU Study, First Children’s Finance’s report, and Early Childhood Alaska, the state’s current strategic plan for the early childhood system. Areas of alignment between recommendations in these reports and the current report’s recommendations are noted throughout the full report.

RECOMMENDATION 1: INCREASE WAGES

Wages emerged as the number one reason early childhood educators have left or are thinking about leaving the field. Recognizing the value of the service that early childhood educators provide, wages should be tied to the value of the sector and state-level economic indicators. Recommended strategies include:

- ***Continue Income Supports (Immediate)***
- ***Align the CCPO Early Childhood Educator Scholarship Program with Wage Scale and Income Supports (Immediate)***
- ***Develop and Fund Implementation of a Wage Scale (Mid-Range; High Investment, High Impact)***

RECOMMENDATION 2: INCREASE ACCESS TO BENEFITS

Health insurance, paid time off, and retirement emerged as the most important benefits for study participants’ employment decisions, and research revealed that other benefits, such as subsidized child care costs, are also well-received. In-home providers are particularly vulnerable to a lack of benefits. Recommended strategies include:

- ***Implement Categorical Eligibility for Child Care Providers (Immediate; High Investment, High Impact)***
- ***Grants for Providers to Increase Educator’s Benefits (Immediate; High Investment, High Reward)***
- ***Leverage Group Purchasing Power for Benefits (Mid-Range)***
- ***Support Development of Substitute Pools (Mid-Range; High Investment, High Impact)***
- ***Create Conditions for Collective Bargaining (Mid-Range; High Investment, High Impact)***

RECOMMENDATION 3: SUPPORT HEALTHY WORKPLACE CONDITIONS

Working conditions encompass the elements people need to succeed; feel supported, competent, and healthy; and contribute effectively to the organization. While improved wages and benefits are needed to address adequate staffing, other supports can affect working conditions, many of which are related to training opportunities, highlighting the intertwined nature of these needs. Recommended strategies include:

- *Increase Training on Equity and Inclusion (Immediate)*
- *Expand Access to Leadership Development Training (Immediate)*
- *Expand Access to Wellness Resources (Immediate)*
- *Expand Access to Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation and Coaching (Long-Term; High Investment, High Impact)*

RECOMMENDATION 4: STRENGTHEN CAREER PATHWAYS

Alaska has made many recent investments in workforce development pathways, including educational and professional development opportunities, that should be sustained; however, many of these opportunities are new and in development with uncertainty about key elements and effectiveness. There are opportunities for Alaska to be more intentional to ensure a strong foundation with diverse options equitably available in rural, remote, and urban areas. Alignment between Alaska's quality standards and the workforce pipeline is key and can be enhanced by continuing to encourage innovation and creativity that responds to unique challenges and opportunities in Alaska. Recommended strategies include:

- *Continue to Offer Free Professional Development (Immediate)*
- *Develop and Implement a Workforce Development Plan (Mid-Range; High Investment, High Impact)*

RECOMMENDATION 5: PROVIDE ADDITIONAL SUPPORT FOR IN-HOME PROVIDERS

In-home providers are a key part of the early childhood education system in Alaska, particularly in smaller communities that can not support a larger center. However, while in-home providers encounter many of the same challenges that center-based care providers face, they also face unique challenges as part of running their own business and having fewer or no staff members aside from themselves. Recommended strategies include:

- *Offer Start-Up Grants (Immediate; High Investment, High Impact)*
- *Develop a Staffed Child Care Network (Long-Term; High Investment, High Impact)*

RECOMMENDATION 6: IMPROVE SYSTEM COORDINATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY

The early care and learning system in Alaska has a strong set of engaged stakeholders who are critical to success. These include local, tribal, and state governments; the university system; nonprofits focused on early childhood; economic development agencies; employers; and the early care and learning providers themselves, along with the families they serve. Efforts such as the creation of Alaska's Strategic Direction are evidence that shared values and goals have emerged throughout the field. However, infrastructure to help the state move forward on those priorities more cohesively and efficiently is needed. Recommended strategies include:

- *Increase Communication and Outreach (Immediate)*
- *Finance Strategically (Long-Term; High Investment, High Impact)*
- *Improve Data Systems (Long-Term; High Investment, High Impact)*
- *Increase Alignment and Coordination (Long-Term; High Investment, High Impact)*

Data Sources

- 1 “Want to Grow the Economy? Fix the Child Care Crisis.” **Council for a Strong America**, 16 Jan. 2019, www.strongnation.org/articles/780-want-to-grow-the-economy-fix-the-child-care-crisis.
- 2 Dunleavy, Mike. “Administrative Order No. 346.” **Office of Governor Mike Dunleavy**, 6 Apr. 2023, gov.alaska.gov/admin-orders/administrative-order-no-346/.
- 3 Fillion, Jane. “Analysis: Majority of Governors Highlight Child Care as Key to Workforce Growth.” **First Five Years Fund**, 21 Feb. 2023, www.ffyf.org/2023stateofthestate/#:~:text=The%20First%20Five%20Years%20Fund,child%20care%20and%20early%20learning.



“I’ve always felt like I need to follow my heart and do what I love... It was a passion...”

– EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATOR



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