

National Association of State Boards of Education

➔ Investing in Early Childhood Workforce Recovery

By Winona Hao

The pandemic hit the already vulnerable early childhood education (ECE) workforce especially hard, causing almost 40 percent of child care providers to shut their doors and many teachers to lose their jobs.¹ In 2021, enrollment in state-funded preschool also dropped for the first time in 20 years—a nearly 20 percent decline that erased a decade of growth.² Because of the workforce’s critical role in supporting children, families, businesses, and the economy, when the ECE system struggles, communities feel the effects.

The ECE industry is recovering slowly. As of May 2022, 12 percent—or about 117,400—of positions remain unfilled or have been eliminated.³ Such job loss significantly hurts the entire economy, as 16 percent of the U.S. workforce relies on child care to return to work.⁴

With substantial federal COVID relief funding, state boards of education have new opportunities to advocate for investment in efforts to address ECE teacher shortages and retention in particular. Many state policymakers have done so, using the funding to support compensation and benefits, mental health and well-being, and professional development for educators across the birth to grade 3 education sector.

COMPENSATION AND BENEFITS

At a median \$13.22 per hour, pay for U.S. child care educators remains low. Without adequate wages, many ECE educators quit teaching jobs for higher paid professions, which stifles the growth of the industry.⁵ The U.S. Department of Education allows

states and districts to use Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) and Governor’s Emergency Education Relief (GEER) funds to address compensation issues, particularly for teachers, principals, and other school personnel.⁶

Many states, including Georgia, Illinois, Michigan, New Jersey, and New Mexico, are using their relief funds to provide one-time bonuses of \$750 to \$1,500 to educators.⁷ While this one-off strategy is a good starting point, states should consider developing long-term strategies for systemic changes. Permanent increases in compensation, health benefits, and retirement contributions are strong investments in retaining a high-quality workforce.

Kentucky received \$763 million from the American Rescue Plan (ARP) Act, including \$470 million for sustainability payments to child care providers to increase hourly pay. Now child care providers can receive financial incentives from the state to increase minimum hourly pay based on where they fit in the All-STARS state quality-rating system so long as they meet the Kentucky Labor Cabinet’s minimum requirements and child care regulatory requirements.⁸ The funding allows Kentucky to implement this strategy through September 2023.⁹

In **North Carolina**, child care providers can apply for child care stabilization grants funded through ARP. Providers can use the grants on bonuses or to implement a salary scale based on education and experience. They can also be used for health, dental, and vision insurance; scholarships; paid sick or family leave; or retirement contributions.

In **Washington State**, providers receive child care stabilization grant funds based on their estimated number of staff. Funds

must be used for increasing wages or other recruitment and retention activities, including sign-on bonuses, retention incentives, and marketing for open positions.

MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

Functioning as essential workers during school closures, ECE educators continue to face heightened pandemic-related stressors, such as high risk of COVID exposure, long working hours in a typically chaotic environment, and limited organizational support. Many states have developed plans to address the mental health and well-being of teachers and school staff and prepare them to better assist students and families affected by COVID.

To increase educator capacity to build a strong school culture, the **District of Columbia** developed a multitiered system of support to organize interventions for educators and students into three tiers based on the intensity of need. Through an interactive, on-demand platform, the state education agency offers trainings, resources, and technical assistance in several areas: trauma, restorative justice, positive behavioral interventions and supports, social-emotional learning, and equity. The trainings are available for classroom teachers, student support teams, coaches, and administrators.

In May 2021, the **Louisiana** Department of Education invested \$1 million in GEER funding in a three-year initiative to provide all public school and child care educators with access to free virtual teletherapy sessions conducted by qualified mental health practitioners. The department was responding to a survey showing that nearly 40 percent of early childhood educators in Louisiana were exhibiting clinically relevant signs of depression.¹⁰

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

New Jersey allotted state ESSER funds to support a wide range of professional development for school staff on understanding and addressing student needs through

learning acceleration and other interventions. New Jersey also uses these funds for developing a positive school climate, supporting culturally responsive teaching practices, increasing digital and data literacy, and implementing social and emotional supports and other services.

The **Utah State Board of Education** approved \$12 million in ESSER II state reserve funds to establish the K-3 Early Professional Literacy Project. This effort provides training for Utah's K-3 teachers, administrators, literacy coaches, and school psychologists in the science of literacy. The state is targeting this funding toward high-need districts based on statewide reading assessment outcomes from 2020 and 2021.¹¹

STATE BOARD OPPORTUNITIES

The following are steps that state boards of education can take to increase understanding and guide actions relative to the ECE workforce.

Ask for an implementation

report. It has been 17 months since ARP was signed into law. State boards can ask their state education agencies for briefings on how state plans have been implemented. State boards can use their convening and questioning authority to examine whether the plans are on track and whether they need to be modified. Practitioners should be central to these conversations to ensure their needs are met.

Ask for ECE workforce data.

Various state and national organizations publish data on the ECE workforce that would be helpful for state boards weighing decisions on recruitment and retention strategies. For example, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics provides national information on the ECE workforce. State boards can also request data from their state education agency to determine whether financial incentives and other strategies are bringing back more ECE jobs or increasing the capacity to serve more children.

Establish an aligned ECE vision

for the state. At least a dozen states have incorporated ECE into their education strategic plans, and many more list ECE as a top priority.¹² State boards can review

whether local investments and implementations align to their state's ECE goals and strategies, and they can help guide investments toward long-term success, including by supporting the ECE workforce.¹³ Spurred by their own Top 10 Strategic Education Plan, the **Michigan State Board of Education** recently restructured the state's licensure bands, adding a birth through kindergarten teaching certificate to ensure that early childhood educators are better prepared to meet the needs of children.¹⁴

Federal relief funds provide an important opportunity to invest in and transform the ECE workforce. Many states developed plans to address the challenges that the workforce faces. However, without sustainable, long-term strategies for increasing compensation, they risk exhausting funding on short-term investments while maintaining a long-term funding gap for educators.

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NOTES

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