

CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN MASSACHUSETTS

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The CAYL Institute - 2023 Workgroups



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Voices from the field offer these ideas:

In 2023 the CAYL Institute organized four workgroups[1] to identify challenges and solutions for early childhood education rooted in the experiences of practitioners. These workgroups occurred in the immediate aftermath of the COVID pandemic, an era that highlighted the programmatic, financial, and administrative fragility that already existed in early childhood education (ECE).[2]

The workgroups served as a practitioner platform to uplift local voices; expand and deepen understanding of ECE program needs; and propose systemic policy solutions. Workgroups were open to anyone wishing to actively engage in a diverse online community; offer a listening ear within a peer group; and identify group priorities.

These conversations were facilitated using a methodology called Articulate, Solve, and Prioritize:

1 - Articulate

Participants begin by defining issues and challenges facing them in their daily practice.

2 - Solve

Participants then begin to imagine how to connect the challenges to proposed solutions.

3 - Prioritize

As a last step, participants collectively prioritize proposed solutions to create timely, relevant, and immediately actionable change.

Together, 150 participants collaborated in approximately fifteen workgroup conversations which painted a portrait of early childhood education communities that were stressed, yet resilient. Simultaneously they were actively seeking solutions to benefit their professional communities while also offering more support for families.

This document is CAYL's synthesis of the workgroups' four articulated challenges and organizes their solutions into a framework called The Good Jobs Challenge. This document is also a companion to the 2023 CAYL Catalyst webinar series entitled "Moonshots for Early Childhood Education" - with episodes focused on children, teachers, and families.[3] Workgroup participants were thought leaders for the series of no-fee, live, online webinars that attracted over 1,200 registrants.



The COVID-19 pandemic brought early childhood education into the spotlight as the public acknowledged:



How essential child care and ECE are to working parents.



The lifelong positive impacts of early childhood education on children.[4]



The large financial return on investment[5] that child care provides to society at large.

Public visibility about early childhood education also spotlighted the broken ECE business model[6] that simultaneously depresses program quality and drives the price of enrollment too high for families, while the pay remains so low that recruiting or retaining educators is a real struggle.[7]

Despite these challenges, early childhood educators were called upon to be first responders in the COVID epidemic. As schools and other institutions shut down, child care was classified as an essential service – the workforce for the workforce – needed to sustain economic activity. Early childhood educators were key connectors with families, providing them with information and support during uncertain and fearful times. Although these educators are among the lowest-paid professions in our nation, these educators acted courageously to provide tools and resources to engage and serve families more effectively.

Fortunately, emergency initiatives deployed by federal and state governments offered significant relief during COVID. However, much of that federal financial relief ended in the fall of 2023.[8]

THREE MAJOR CHALLENGES

Nevertheless, the preexisting systemic gaps in the field remain to be reckoned with by families, practitioners, and governments. Workgroup conversations prioritized three broad challenges for this reckoning:

CHALLENGE #1:

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS ARE A PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITY FACING ENORMOUS WORKFORCE PRESSURES



Chief among the persistent complex challenges are issues of both workforce shortages and educator stress. This situation worsened during the COVID era as the field lost 21% of its workers. In Massachusetts alone, approximately 13% of programs were closed.[9]

The consensus is clear: the hiring and retention of staff has reached a critical level. Workgroup participants frequently and with frustration expressed anxiety that there are fewer trained educators available to hire. Early educators widely acknowledged that many programs found it necessary to hire staff with fewer credentials or less experience than they might have hired in the past to keep programs open. Administrators have exhausted themselves by constantly recruiting and training people completely new to the field.

Workgroup participants particularly emphasized the often overlooked yet vital role that early childhood program administrators play in addressing workforce challenges. Their essential roles to sustain both program quality and administration overstretched their time, abilities, and capacities, requiring them to perform unsustainable numbers of work hours and multiple overlapping responsibilities.

“One thing New Horizon Academy recognized, and it's been exacerbated in the pandemic, is that we have had to hire people who do not have as much experience or education as they did just a few years ago.”

-Chad Dunkley, CEO of New Horizon Academy

Moonshot: Every ECE Job is a GOOD Job

CHALLENGE #2:

IN THE ABSENCE OF SYSTEMS, EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS EXPERIENCED STRESS AND LACKED WELLNESS SUPPORT



Throughout the height of the COVID response, teachers and program directors turned to each other to find support and solutions. Early childhood educators created impromptu learning communities, often via social media platforms, which offered solidarity, a sense of community, practical problem-solving, and creativity. For those who persisted, a resilient mindset was essential to meet the need for support and solutions. In Massachusetts, the “9:30 call” by Strategies for Children became a lifeline for information and support.[10]

Despite an atmosphere that strongly articulated early childhood services as essential during the pandemic, workgroup participants often felt confusion about practical support; health and safety issues; and rapidly shifting public program policies. Nevertheless, the exceptional care of early childhood educators created conditions of safety: exposure to child care had no relationship with the risk of contracting COVID-19. People who were exposed to child care under those conditions were as likely to get COVID-19 as people who stayed at home with no child care. [11]

As educators valiantly supported others, their own well-being was strained, and few external systems met their needs. Workgroup participants emphasized the urgency of attention to educator wellness.[12]

CHALLENGE #3:

COMPENSATION MATTERS! A GREAT PROFESSION DESERVES RESPECT, IMPROVED WORKING CONDITIONS, AND EFFECTIVE CAREER LADDERS



Workgroup participants agreed that it would be difficult to overestimate or overstate how much funding matters to the field of early childhood education. Efforts to solve the underfunded and fractured funding model are essential in redressing both low pay for educators and the cost of high program quality. For example, In 2021 the average early childhood educator earned \$29,349 in Massachusetts[13], a state that prides itself on being an innovative leader in the field. In 2021, Massachusetts only met 3/5 of the number of quality markers for high-quality programs.[14]

Despite widespread acknowledgment that compensation is extraordinarily low and that advocacy efforts have been ongoing for decades,[15] the stubborn reality remains: the ECE profession is fragmented, all ECE jobs are not good jobs, and change has been so incremental as to frustrate the truest of all believers in this cause.[16]

A major roadblock to ECE professionalism is the field's low compensation. Roadblocks can also include suboptimal working conditions, weak career ladders, low occupational status, and professional disrespect.

Notwithstanding the foundational challenge of compensation, a profession with the documented social impact that ECE enjoys deserves to witness a faster pace of fundamental change in:

- Attitudes that attribute low professional status and respect to the field (we are not babysitters!).
- Basic professional working conditions and benefits (there is hardly any planning time, a working condition enjoyed by other educators).
- Clear, practical pathways for achieving and recognizing professional growth.

THE MOONSHOT: A GOOD JOBS CHALLENGE FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS

A wide array of initiatives has been undertaken over several decades to address the staffing crisis, wellness concerns, and persistently low compensation. Individual initiatives that address these challenges, while important, are inadequate to the task of remediating the big-picture challenges of the profession. Workgroup participants recognized that a more comprehensive, integrated systems approach – a paradigm shift - is required to produce change.

Being an early childhood educator is a job beloved by many who find considerable professional purpose and personal passion in belonging to a field with a high impact on human development. Still, many cannot afford, and will not choose to sustain, employment in the field in an economy characterized by widespread labor shortages that could be filled by the women who have historically comprised the majority of the ECE workforce. (see Text Box 1).

TEXT BOX 1

WHAT IS A GOOD ECE JOB? WHOLISTIC, WELLNESS CONSIDERATIONS [17]

 **PURPOSE:** A good job makes a difference to our society, offers personal meaning and purpose knowing that our work serves large social goals

 **GROWTH AND RECOGNITION:** A good job meets the standard of offering personal and professional growth so that staff continues to learn

 **FINANCIAL EQUITY:** A good job offers a fair, living wage with benefits and compensation appropriate to one's level of skills and experience.

 **RESPECT:** A good job offers respect including the appropriate working conditions, tools, and resources that encourage and enable the staff to do their best work and have a sustainable work-life balance

Potential solutions to the dilemmas facing the early childhood education field are grounded in CAYL's five core principles (see Text Box 2). These principles guide our work to achieve the vision of a nation where the right to high-quality early childhood education is embedded in public policy, professional practice, and family engagement.



Representative Leadership
Involving people in decisions that affect them.

Commitment to Diversity
Ensuring all voices are heard and bridging multiple perspectives.

Building and Sharing Knowledge
Creating and disseminating strategic information to be understood and used by everyone.

Impact and Innovation
Taking action that is timely, relevant and immediately actionable.

Focused on Solutions
Embracing responsibility to create sustainable change.

TEXT BOX 2

Achieving this vision may seem like an inconceivable moonshot – a far-off, lofty goal that will require monumental efforts. However, accelerating progress toward this moonshot matters because:

- There is incontrovertible evidence of both the immediate and long-term impact of early childhood experiences on children's success and well-being.
- At their core, these outcomes depend on a coherent profession offering good jobs in a skilled industry.[18]

Aspirations toward a moonshot require a changing paradigm. Workgroup participants concluded: shift the workforce narrative from staffing shortages to a focus on ensuring that ECE jobs are good jobs embedded in a coherent system supporting a respected profession.

THE PROPOSED PARADIGM SHIFT: CREATE A COMPREHENSIVE, COLLABORATIVE CHILD CARE WORKFORCE SOURCING, DEVELOPMENT, AND EMPLOYMENT SYSTEM

What emerged from workgroup conversations is a dynamic moonshot that envisions a comprehensive and effective workforce system.

In the past decade, there has been an emphasis on professionalizing the field of early childhood education primarily by focusing on upskilling staff knowledge, credentials, and degrees. The proposed paradigm shift recognizes that achieving the moonshot requires strategies that not only focus on the workforce, but also consider and integrate the roles of workforce systems, employers, and public/private funding.

With so many new staff entering this complex profession, the need to coordinate professional development resources with a coherent workforce system has become more apparent than ever. Meeting the challenges facing the ECE workforce will require significant and unprecedented levels of collaboration, coordination, and partnership among state agencies, higher education, and employers who must all co-invest for impact.

A comprehensive workforce system would be designed to:



Unify and connect practitioner voices with employer needs and the state's priorities.



Reimagine existing state infrastructures.



Create additional supports, so that Massachusetts will be both ready to and capable of supporting, employing, and increasing compensation for the workforce.

This paradigm shift is currently being piloted by The CAYL Institute^[19] in an effort called “The Good Jobs Challenge” with support from an \$8 million grant from the US Department of Commerce - Economic Development Administration, in partnership with the City of Boston^[20]. The new paradigm consists of a framework that integrates, supports, and leverages four strategies that would align funders, employers, the workforce, and system infrastructure as they enhance the profession individually and collectively.



FIRST GOOD JOBS CHALLENGE: INTEGRATE WORKFORCE SERVICES

Massachusetts already has a MassHire State Workforce Board, partially funded by the US Department of Labor (USDOL) Employment and Training Administration, that serves as an existing employee sourcing system. However, these entities have not typically worked systemically with early childhood job seekers. The proposed workforce system development strategy connects that system with initiatives from the Department of Early Education and Care (EEC), higher education/training organizations, childcare employers, and local municipalities to:

- Develop a reliable, meaningful, and sustainable on-ramp platform for employment.
- Recruit, develop, train, and employ educators, thereby easing their access to services.
- Lift the administrative burden of sourcing, initial training, and validating qualifications from individual program administrators.



This integrated workforce sourcing, development, and employment system would serve as a platform that:

- Connects the services of the Massachusetts Department of Labor to EEC's efforts
- Helps candidates access free or subsidized courses while working with higher education and training institutions
- Creates supported cohorts of educators who in turn will be offered guaranteed employment with cooperating employers at the assistant teacher, teacher, and lead teacher levels.

Workgroup participants shared that, to be most effective, integrating workforce services will require Massachusetts agencies to simultaneously address two big gaps:

1 COLLECT, ANALYZE, AND USE MORE INFORMATION ABOUT CHILD CARE

There is limited information about the true demand for ECE services across the state. Though the City of Boston launched an annual Childcare Survey in 2019 to assess the need for care across the city[21], there is no statewide equivalent. While the Department of Early Education and Care (EEC) has implemented a regular survey for all licensed ECE providers through the Commonwealth Cares for Children (C3) grant administration process, this provides only limited information about families already involved with licensed child care, and no information about families and children outside of the system. This gap is wider for those who live in metropolitan areas outside of Boston or rural areas of the Commonwealth.

Sixty-seven percent of MA children under six have all custodial parents in the labor force.[22] Families are more than stakeholders in the workforce system. They are partners who could be better served if agencies:

2 MEET THE NEEDS OF ALL FAMILIES

- a) Expand child care surveys and market research efforts to include unlicensed and license-exempt child care choices.
- b) Examine equity in access to special education and other services.
- c) Enact policy changes to support “nontraditional hours” care – care disproportionately required by Black and Hispanics families.
- d) Continue prioritizing children’s social, emotional, and mental health needs.[23]
- e) Ensure that teachers receive additional training and resources to support bilingual children. Require the Sheltered English Immersion Endorsement or an equivalent in ECE teacher qualification standards – a requirement currently mandatory for academic teachers licensed by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

SECOND GOOD JOBS CHALLENGE: APPROACH TALENT DEVELOPMENT HOLISTICALLY

Workgroup participants clearly stated that, to be most effective, a comprehensive holistic talent development system must strengthen professional development opportunities, realize compensation increases, and support workforce diversity. Six areas of focus for holistic talent development are:

1

SUPPORT ENTRY

A workforce system will enable novice staff to engage in a needs assessment including both dispositions and skill sets. Novices would be connected to appropriate (subsidized or free) educational opportunities with wraparound services that eradicate barriers to training or employment: To wit: One CAYL partner described how an unaffordable \$100 traffic ticket in another state prevented completion of a candidates’ licensing process.



Updating the state professional qualifications (PQ) registry with an intuitive interface could be used as a corollary to the system validating K-12 teacher licensure & training.[24]

2

UPDATE EXISTING SYSTEMS

3

WELLNESS

Acknowledging that educator stress is a serious concern, a workforce system could provide menus of choices for individual and program wellness.

Reimagining and differentiating staffing roles, while creating systems of teaching support, is a major step that will professionalize a field now characterized by only minor variations in compensation or recognition for seasoned and new staff:

4

STRONGER ROLE DIFFERENTIATION

- a) Even where the state recognizes distinctions – such as assistant or lead teacher – there is no standardized salary scale tied to a career ladder.
- b) There is a gap between the job roles defined by the state and the diversity of job roles and responsibilities that exist within community programs. Individuals find it difficult to identify which certification or degree might best boost their careers.
- c) Supports desired include mentorships, coaching, and apprenticeship models tied to an articulated career ladder.
- d) Substitute teacher pools are greatly needed.



5

SPOTLIGHT FRONT-LINE MANAGERS, ADMINISTRATORS, AND FAMILY CHILD CARE PROVIDERS

- a) Develop, alongside practitioners, a definition of high quality for ECE leaders like those established by the educator credentialing pathway for teachers.
- b) Identify support personnel staffing gaps that program leaders have been 'de facto' filling that the system might address.
- c) Increase opportunities to upskill and acquire business acumen.[25]

6

RAISE MINIMUM ENTRY REQUIREMENTS FOR THE FIELD TO ALIGN STATE REQUIREMENTS WITH PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS; SHIFT PROGRAMS TOWARD EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICES; AND ADVANCE RESPECT FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHING

This idea may seem counterintuitive in a profession that currently has low entry requirements, limited workforce supply, and misalignment between professional standards and state policies. Perhaps it is time to re-think the assumption that the requirements themselves are barriers to entry and instead address how professionals entering the field are compensated, supported, educated, differentiated, and advanced. If these career ladder and compensation challenges are better defined, the long-term benefit may be that ECE becomes a more attractive career for both entry and retention.

THIRD GOOD JOBS CHALLENGE: ENGAGE EMPLOYERS



Employers are the third partner in the “Good Jobs Challenge” workforce system, system development, and strategy.[26]

To date, the CAYL Good Jobs Challenge has successfully engaged 100 employers as partners. Partnerships entail an agreement to hire candidates who receive appropriate training, to provide onsite training, to engage in job quality initiatives, and to address compensation issues.

The Good Jobs Challenge recognizes that simply connecting candidates and employers is unlikely to result in a paradigm shift for early childhood education in Massachusetts. Historic high turnover rates of staff is one indicator of this concern.[27]

The paradigm shift envisioned by the Good Jobs Challenge workforce system acknowledges key elements of change: Professionals will thrive in well-compensated good jobs at an organization where they are valued. Investing in frontline staff improves recruitment and retention and creates competitive advantages. The Good Jobs Challenge will impel employers to make jobs better, not simply more plentiful.

In the system development of the Good Jobs Challenge, employers’ efforts will redefine and activate their collective role in the support, growth, and professionalism of the field with a focus on both working conditions and systems change.

1

WORKING CONDITIONS

- a) Improve compensation (salaries, benefits, and working conditions).
- b) Upskill existing teaching staff.
- c) Enhance supervisor effectiveness.
- d) Participate in Communities of Practice to review workforce data; solve challenges of onboarding and sustaining employee entry and growth; understand job quality and skill set issues in the industry; and hear priorities from the workforce they are competing for.

2

- a) Collaborate with other system partners to expand the pipeline of novice and experienced educators available for hire.
- b) Raise the floor of working conditions to achieve equity with that of the other educators of minor children. This will address concerns among Workgroup participants that their colleagues often lack working conditions comparable to other teachers such as access to overtime pay, paid time for curriculum planning, the ability to attend professional conferences, and the ability to use paid time off benefits.[28]
- c) Create operations policy tools that can serve as support or guidance regarding Human Resources or other business development needs to inform both employers and employees. [20]

SYSTEMS CHANGE

FOURTH GOOD JOBS CHALLENGE: ALIGN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE INVESTMENTS



The Good Jobs Challenge for systems development acknowledges that a collaboration of investors around a shared strategic vision for workforce development is more likely to lead to long-term sustainability. Consequently, the strategy is inclusive of funders of many types: philanthropic, corporate, public, and others.

Co-investment enables educators, employers, and communities to advance a skilled workforce, promote good jobs, and achieve equitable outcomes. By using a co-investment model that leverages both private and public funding, the community has more resources required to do the work. It is also important to identify additional funding streams to build the system, provide data, and plan for sustainability.

1

PUBLIC AND PRIVATE FINANCIAL COLLABORATION

Public and private financial collaboration is not new to Massachusetts. The state has an abundance of nonprofit entities that could support the Good Jobs Challenge as sourcing partners, education partners, technical assistance support, and strategic leadership.

Moreover, the state budget includes initiatives vital to the success of the Good Jobs Challenge including the Commonwealth Cares for Children (C3) grant program, the Commonwealth Preschool Partnership Initiative (CPPI), career pathways funding, and early childhood mental health consultation services line item. There have been successful efforts to invest in business skill building for FCC practitioners and legislative efforts to increase family access to early childhood education services.

2

STATE BUDGET INITIATIVES

These types of efforts show that Massachusetts has the political will and creativity to shift the paradigm of workforce challenges and create systems of fundamental change.

LET'S MAKE IT HAPPEN, MASSACHUSETTS!

When we synthesize the challenges and solutions suggested by the 150 workgroup participants, their vision of a **respected, well-compensated, and supported field** may seem like an inconceivable moonshot – a far-off, lofty goal that will require monumental efforts. However, we believe that the Good Jobs Challenge Framework offers a paradigm shift to achieve this moonshot. We summarize the moonshot as follows:

By 2026 there will be a Childcare Workforce Employment System connecting organizations that include the Massachusetts Department of Labor, the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care, higher education/training organizations, childcare employers, and local municipalities. This system will effectively recruit, develop, train, employ, and better compensate educators. The integration of these various entities into one system will achieve efficiency, ease practitioner access to services, and result in greater impact for all parties through collaboration, coordination, partnerships, and mutual support.

TOGETHER WE WILL RAISE THE FLOOR FOR THE MASSACHUSETTS EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION WORKFORCE.

ENDNOTES

Suggested Citation:

Washington, V., & Spisich, E. (2023, December). *Challenges and Solutions for Early Childhood Education in Massachusetts*. The CAYL Institute. cayl.org

[1] Workgroup meetings, facilitated by Amanda Storth, occurred over zoom and in conference calls between May and October 2023. This work was funded, in part, by the Eastern Bank Foundation.

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