

# BUILD A MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLNESS SYSTEM TO HELP STABILIZE THE EARLY EDUCATION WORKFORCE

Employee turnover in early childhood education has been a perennial problem. COVID exacerbated this challenge and brought attention to the issue of educator mental health and wellness. Indeed, researchers point to issues of burnout, mental health, and lack of access to wellness systems as major contributing factors to current workforce shortages and destabilization.[1]

Decades of research have demonstrated that educators are overextended.[2] For example, the recently completed Cambridge Early Childhood Pulse Study reported that over 50% of Cambridge early childhood educators reported feeling stressed.[3] One in five educators reported feeling emotionally drained from their work several times a week.

The wellness of educators is critical to the cognitive development of children, as children learn most through high-quality interactions with responsive, caring adults. With this in mind, President Biden recently highlighted the need for increased mental health support for early childhood educators in his [Executive Order on Increasing Access to High-Quality Care and Supporting Caregivers](#). The Order recommends that access to mental health services for care workers, including early childhood educators, should be readily available in federally funded programs to decrease burnout and increase retention.[4]

**As Massachusetts continues its leadership role in the field of early childhood education, how could the Commonwealth meet the need for mental health and wellness access for early childhood educators?**

## The Challenge

There is a national consensus that early childhood educator mental health and wellness services are important and very much needed.

The RAND American Teacher Survey of K-12 teachers reported that there was a much higher percentage of teachers who had frequent job-related stress and depression symptoms than the regular adult population.[5]

Stephen Noonoo, in an article in EdSurge, noted that teachers are no longer receiving the praise that placed them at the same level as first responders at the beginning of the pandemic. **"The result is as disappointing as it is predictable: a mental health crisis that will take thousands—maybe tens of thousands—of teachers out of the classroom years before their time."**[6]

Lesaux, et al. [7] emphasize that teachers need to be able to model the self-regulation skills that children need to develop to be successful as learners.



## The Challenge (continued)

Yet despite this preponderance of evidence, Massachusetts' efforts to support the wellness and mental health of early childhood educators are quite limited. The primary focus in research is on the mental health of the children and families versus the educators, and there are not many resources designed specifically for early childhood educators. For example, although a Massachusetts helpline called the Massachusetts Behavioral Health Helpline was established in 2023, this helpline is for the public and has not been directly advertised to the early childhood community.[8] Funding from the Department of Education C3 grants explicitly permitted the use of these funds for mental health support when the grants were launched, but mental health support is no longer mentioned in the grant overview of permissible expenditures.[9]

## UNIQUE OPPORTUNITY FOR MASSACHUSETTS TO LEAD THE WAY

Given both the challenges of accessing current and relevant data, along with the complexities of infant and toddler care, we offer these three next steps:



**01 — The creation of a state-supported mental health and wellness system to specifically support the early childhood education workforce.**



**02 — A system that provides local programs with a menu of services from which they can choose to meet their specific needs.**



**03 — An EEC-led marketing and outreach campaign about the system that will facilitate awareness and access to EEC programs and staff.**

**These measures are important to stabilize the workforce, offer support to children, have high-quality programs, and improve continuity of care. Investing in the mental health and wellness of the workforce is a source of validation and recognition for the contributions early childhood educators make for the children and families of the Commonwealth.**



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# ENDNOTES

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