

HANNA JUNUS, LINDA SMITH, AND ALEXANDRA DARO

Who Stays in the Early Childhood Programs? Stability Starts with the Workforce



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Executive Summary

The Challenge

The strength of the early childhood system depends on the strength of its workforce, but across the United States, the early childhood workforce faces persistent staff shortages, high turnover, and uneven training pathways. Child care programs struggle to recruit and retain qualified staff—creating instability for children, families and employers who rely on dependable care.

Despite the importance of the workforce, policymakers often lack comprehensive data on the composition and stability of early childhood. State workforce registries (state systems that track information about the early childhood workforce) provide one of the most comprehensive sources of information, including roles, educational attainment and participation over time.

This report analyzes state workforce registry data from eight states—Illinois, Maine, Montana, Nevada, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania and Tennessee—to better understand the structure of the early childhood workforce and workforce retention patterns. It focuses on individuals working in licensed programs in direct care roles, including directors, teachers, assistant teachers and home-based owners.



Key Findings

1. The workforce is shrinking and turning over quickly: Only 56 percent of the workforce active in 2023 remained active two years later, representing a loss of more than 70,000 direct care staff across the participating states.
2. Education level matters for retention: Educators holding an early childhood-specific degree or credential, like a Child Development Associate (CDA®), or associates degrees demonstrated higher workforce retention rates.
3. State workforce registries provide valuable insights but are underutilized: Strengthening data infrastructure will allow states to better monitor workforce trends, track retention, and evaluate investment impact.

Policy Implications

States seeking to strengthen the early childhood workforce should consider three key strategies:

1. Expand access to entry-level credentials, like the CDA®, to strengthen the workforce pipeline.
2. Strengthen state workforce registry systems to better track workforce supply, turnover, and credential attainment.
3. Target higher education investments toward program directors, technical assistant providers and leadership roles to improve instructional quality and workforce support.

The early childhood workforce is essential infrastructure for families, employers and state economies. Understanding who makes up this workforce—and how educators enter, remain in, or leave the field—is critical for building a stable and effective child care system. By examining state workforce registry data across multiple states, this report provides new insights that can help guide future investments in early childhood workforce development.



Introduction: Why Workforce Data Matters

The quality and stability of the early childhood workforce are central to the effectiveness of the child care system. Direct care personnel—directors, teachers, assistant directors, assistant teachers, and home-based owners—play a critical role not only in ensuring children’s safety while parents work, but also in supporting early learning and development during the most formative years of life. Research consistently shows that the skills, preparation and stability of early educators influence both classroom quality and children’s developmental outcomes.⁴

Yet the early childhood workforce faces longstanding structural challenges related to compensation, preparation, and retention. Child care workers remain among the lowest-paid workers in the U.S. economy, often earning significantly less than educators in Head Start, state Pre-K programs or the K–12 system while receiving fewer benefits. As a result, the field struggles to attract and retain individuals with higher levels of formal education and specialized training.

⁴ Pianta, R., Downer, J., & Hamre, B. (2016). Quality in early education classrooms: Definitions, gaps, and systems. *The future of children*, 119-137. OR Whitebook, M. (2003). *Early Education Quality: Higher Teacher Qualifications for Better Living Environments. A Review of the Literature*. OR Phillips, D., Austin, L. J., & Whitebook, M. (2016). *The early care and education workforce. The future of children*, 139-158.

Introduction: Why Workforce Data Matters

Economist Chris Herbst has documented a declining relative quality of the child care workforce.⁵ Over time, the workforce has become less educated and scores lower on measures of cognitive ability compared with earlier cohorts of early childhood workers, reflecting barriers to accessing appropriate education and training. At the same time, compensation in the sector remains low relative to other professions requiring similar levels of responsibility and skill. These conditions make it difficult for the field to compete for highly trained workers, contributing to persistent workforce instability.

A previous economic analysis of the child care sector, [Economics and Child Care: Where Are We and Where Do We Go?](#), from the Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska and Child Care Aware of America similarly emphasizes the importance of workforce stability for improving program quality.⁶ Participants in that analysis noted that low wages and limited benefits contribute to high levels of staff turnover across child care programs. Frequent turnover disrupts relationships between educators and children and undermines program quality. While many states have implemented Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) to measure aspects of program quality, these systems often do not measure teacher turnover, even though workforce stability may be one of the most important determinants of quality.

QRIS systems should be designed to measure teacher turnover, one of the most important determinants of quality.

Policymakers must better understand the composition of the workforce—including the educational backgrounds, roles, and career pathways—to better support a workforce that is vital to child development, family stability and economic growth.

To contribute to this understanding, this report analyzes comprehensive data from eight state workforce registries: Illinois, Maine, Montana, Nevada, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, and Tennessee. These registries provide a unique opportunity to examine the structure of the early childhood workforce, including workforce roles, educational attainment, and retention patterns over time.

By examining these data, this report seeks to better understand how workforce preparation and credential pathways can relate to workforce stability.



⁵ Herbst, C. M. (2025). The declining relative quality of the child care workforce. *Economics of Education Review*, 109, 102726.

⁶ Economics & Child Care: Where Are We Now and Where Do We Go?. (2025). Child Care Aware of America and the Buffett Early Childhood Institute. <https://www.childcareaware.org/economics-and-child-care/>



Methodology

This report draws on three years—2023, 2024, and 2025—of state workforce registry data provided by eight states: Illinois, Maine, Montana, Nevada, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, and Tennessee. Researchers examined descriptive patterns in workforce participation, turnover, and retention over time.

About State Workforce Registries

Workforce registries are state data systems that track information about early childhood workforce, including their education, training, and employment in licensed center and home-based programs. These systems help states monitor workforce supply, support professional development, and inform policy decisions related to workforce development.

The dataset includes individuals employed in licensed early childhood programs and recorded as active state registry users during the years included in the analysis.

Individuals had to meet the following criteria:

- Active state registry users as of January 1, 2023
- Employed in licensed early childhood programs
- Working in direct care roles
- Identified as either full-time or part-time staff

Direct care workers are the core individuals responsible for providing early childhood education and care in licensed settings. These roles included:

- Center-based (CB) directors
- Center-based (CB) assistant directors
- Center-based (CB) teachers
- Center-based (CB) assistant teachers
- Licensed home-based (HB) program owners
- Licensed home-based (HB) assistants

Methodology

Workforce Measures

Workforce participation was defined as the number of individuals recorded as active state registry users and employed in licensed programs in each year of the dataset. Changes in workforce participation between 2023 and 2025 were used to assess workforce retention across the participating states.

Workforce roles were categorized based on state registry classifications identified above.

Educational attainment was categorized based on the highest level of education reported in the state registry. Categories included:

- High school diploma (HS) or equivalent
- Professional credential (including the Child Development Associate CDA®)
- Some college coursework
- Associate degree (AA)
- Bachelor's degree (BA)
- Master's degree (MA)

If early childhood-specific degrees were identified, they were analyzed.

Retention was assessed by examining whether individuals who were active in the workforce in 2023 remained active in 2024 and 2025. Retention rates were also compared across educational attainment categories to better understand how workforce preparation relates to workforce stability.

Data Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings.

First, state workforce registries vary across states in how they collect and maintain data. While state registries provide valuable information about workforce composition, differences in reporting practices and participation requirements may affect comparability across states (see Appendix A).

Some states did not report complete data for all variables. For example, certain states did not provide data for specific workforce roles or educational categories in some years. In addition, some demographic information, such as race and ethnicity, was not reported by all state registry users.

Finally, training data were not included in the analysis due to differences in how states define and record professional development activities. These differences made it difficult to conduct consistent cross-state comparisons.

Despite these limitations, state workforce registries represent one of the most comprehensive sources of data available for examining the early childhood workforce across multiple states.⁷



⁷ Daro, A. M., Welch, G. W., Belcher-Badal, K., & Mayfield, W. (2026). Utilizing state workforce registries and targeted surveys to investigate workforce wellbeing. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 74, 79-91.

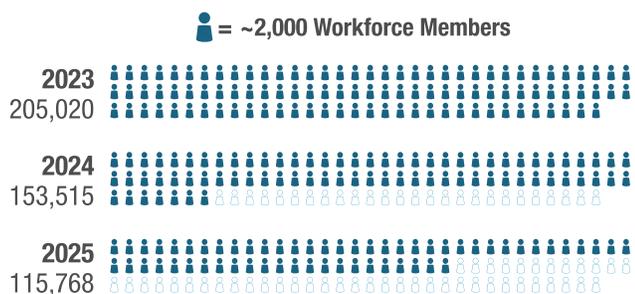


Across the Eight States

State workforce registry data from eight states provide a snapshot of how the early childhood workforce is changing over time. Analysis of state workforce registry data from Illinois, Maine, Montana, Nevada, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, and Tennessee illustrates the scale of the persistent challenges the child care workforce faces.

In 2023, the participating state registries included more than 205,000 early childhood workforce members in licensed programs. By 2025, that number had declined to 115,768, meaning that only 56 percent of the 2023 workforce in eight states remained active two years later.

FIGURE 1. BETWEEN 2023 AND 2025, MORE THAN 70,000 WORKFORCE MEMBERS LEFT THE WORKFORCE ACROSS THE PARTICIPATING STATES.



The decline was particularly pronounced among teaching staff, specifically center-based teachers and assistant teachers, who represent the core of the early childhood workforce.

Across the states studied, individuals with CDA® credentials and associate degrees showed some of the highest levels of workforce retention.

However, the analysis also revealed an important pattern: educators with professional credentials and early childhood degrees are more likely to remain in the field.

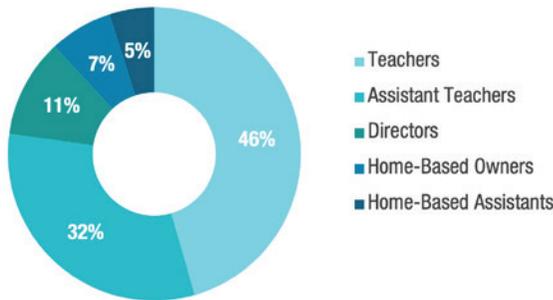
Workforce Demographics and Program Types

The early childhood workforce reflects the varied communities it serves, yet demographic patterns raise concerns about future workforce supply.

The early childhood workforce is largely composed of teachers (46 percent) and assistant teachers (32 percent) working in center-based settings, with smaller but critical segments operating home-based programs (12 percent).

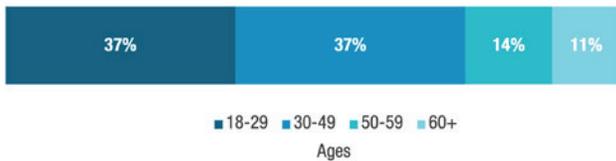
Across the Eight States

FIGURE 2. MOST EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS WORK IN TEACHING ROLES*



*Values may not add to 100% due to rounding.

FIGURE 3. THE EARLY CHILDHOOD WORKFORCE INCLUDES A LARGE SHARE OF YOUNGER EDUCATORS*

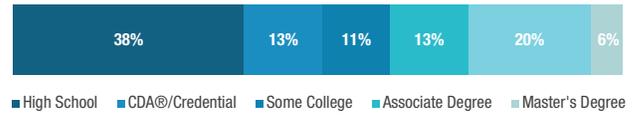


*Values may not add to 100% due to rounding.

Most early childhood educators enter the field with a high school diploma or credential, but many have some postsecondary training.

The early childhood workforce is one in transition—many educators have pursued some postsecondary education, but relatively few hold degrees specifically in early childhood education.

FIGURE 4. EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT VARIES WIDELY ACROSS THE WORKFORCE *



*Values may not add to 100% due to rounding.

A Higher Percentage of Educators with Credentials or Degrees Remain in the Workforce

Retention rates:

CDA@/Credential: 65%

Associate Degree: 63%

ECE Associate: 70%

The following pages detail findings on workforce turnover and retention from the eight state registries.



Turnover and Retention of Illinois' Early Childhood Workforce



Quality child care is vitally important, not only for child development, but also for a thriving economy. However, recent research indicates that the quality of the child care workforce is decreasing. High turnover rates, low compensation, and inconsistent qualifications contribute to the current instability of the child care market.⁴

How Illinois Supports the Early Childhood Workforce

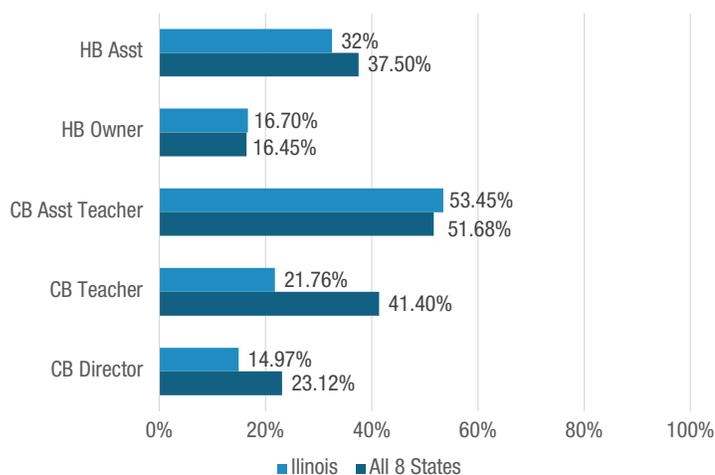
- Supports career advancement through a career lattice and Registry-approved professional development
- Incentivizes early childhood credentials and college degrees through financial scholarships and reimbursements
- The Gateways to Opportunity Registry collects comprehensive workforce data and provides professional development resources

Turnover

FIGURE 5. ILLINOIS WORKFORCE TURNOVER

There were 69,449 child care workers in 2023. Registry participation status was tracked through 2025 to estimate turnover and retention rates in the state.

Illinois' turnover over two years was 24,368 teachers, or 56% of the workforce.



Center-based assistant teachers had the highest turnover, followed by home-based assistants and center-based teachers.

Participation in Illinois Gateways to Opportunity is mandatory for all individuals working in licensed child care settings. The Gateways to Opportunity Registry collects comprehensive data (demographics, role, compensation, professional development progress, and credentials), tracks pre-training credentials, ongoing professional development, and alignment with core competencies each year.

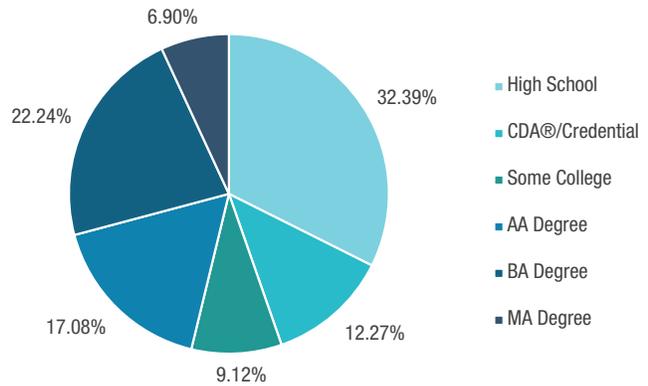
⁴ Herbst, C. M. (2025). The declining relative quality of the child care workforce. *Economics of Education Review*, 109, 102726.

Credentials

FIGURE 6. ILLINOIS CREDENTIALS

68% of the workforce in 2023 had a high school diploma or a higher education degree.

- 32% had a high school diploma
- 22% had a BA
- 17% had an AA

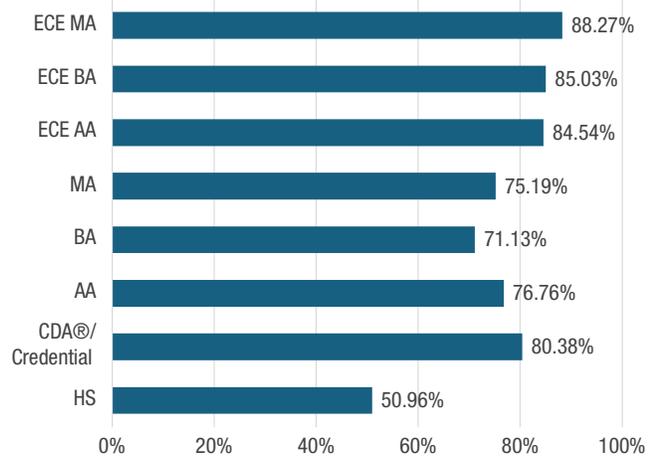


Center directors are required to have a combination of fieldwork, an early childhood credential, and a higher education degree. Center-based teachers must have a combination of field and early childhood credential. Assistants and home-based providers do not have minimum qualifications.

Retention

FIGURE 7. ILLINOIS WORKFORCE RETENTION BY EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

Teachers with a CDA®, ECE credential, or early childhood degree showed the highest rates of retention.



Conclusion

Illinois' turnover rate is high (46%), and it is higher than the average of the eight states studied (44%). As of now there is no direct research that quantifies the association between early childhood credentialing and retention, but given that those with a CDA®, state ECE credential, or an early childhood degree have higher retention rates it should be explored. The U.S. can learn from Illinois' emphasis on early childhood credentials in the director and teacher roles, and the integration of the Registry early childhood credential.

Turnover and Retention of Maine's Early Childhood Workforce



Quality child care is vitally important, not only for child development, but also for a thriving economy. However, recent research indicates that the quality of the child care workforce is decreasing. High turnover rates, low compensation, and inconsistent qualifications contribute to the current instability of the child care market.⁵

How Maine Supports the Early Childhood Workforce

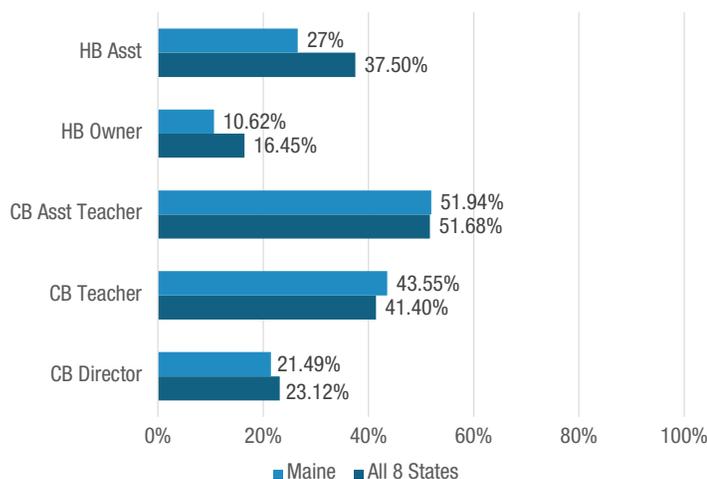
- Offers flexible training options through an apprenticeship program, early childhood credential, and higher education
- Incentivizes ongoing training through financial scholarship and loan forgiveness
- Aligns workforce qualifications with monthly wage supplements (Early Childhood Workforce Salary Supplement System)
- The Gateways to Opportunity Registry collects comprehensive workforce data and provides professional development resources

Turnover

FIGURE 8. MAINE WORKFORCE TURNOVER

There were 7,579 child care workers in 2023. Registry participation status was tracked through 2025 to estimate turnover and retention rates in the state.*

Maine's turnover over two years was 2,925 teachers, or 39% of the workforce.



Center-based assistant teachers had the highest turnover, followed by center-based teachers and home-based assistants.

Participation in Maine Roads to Quality Professional Development Network (MRTQ PDN) is mandatory for all individuals working in licensed child care settings. The MRTQ collects comprehensive data (demographics, role, compensation, professional development progress, and credentials), tracks pre-training credentials, ongoing professional development, and alignment with core competencies each year.

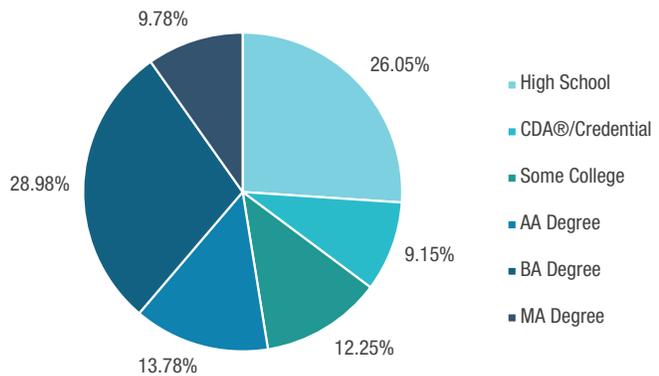
⁵ Herbst, C. M. (2025). The declining relative quality of the child care workforce. *Economics of Education Review*, 109, 102726.

Credentials

FIGURE 9. MAINE CREDENTIALS

Most of the workforce in 2023 had a high school diploma or a higher education degree.

- 28% had a BA
- 26% had a high school diploma
- 14% had an AA

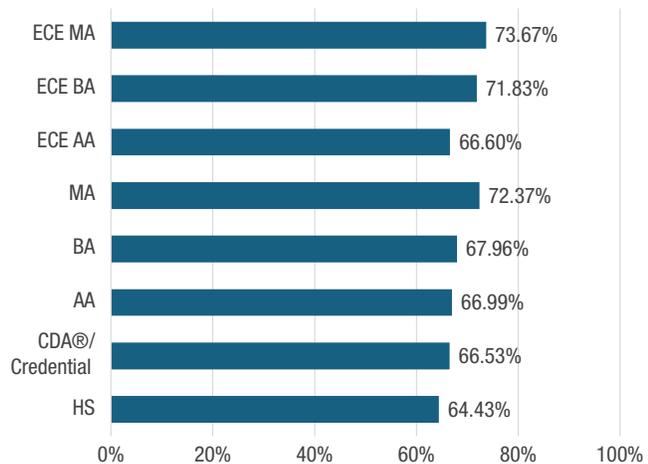


Center directors are required to have a combination of fieldwork, an early childhood credential, and/or a higher education degree. Center-based teachers must have a combination of field and early childhood credential or CDA®. Assistants and home-based providers do not have minimum qualifications.

Retention

FIGURE 10. MAINE WORKFORCE RETENTION BY EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

Teachers with an early childhood degree or an MA showed the highest rates of retention.



Conclusion

Maine's turnover rate is moderate (39%), and it is lower than the average of the eight states studied (44%). As of now there is no direct research that quantifies the association between early childhood credentialing and retention, but given that those with an ECE credential, or an early childhood degree have higher retention rates it should be explored. The U.S. can learn from Maine's varied workforce supports and how financial incentives are paired with ongoing training.

Turnover and Retention of Montana's Early Childhood Workforce



Quality child care is vitally important, not only for child development, but also for a thriving economy. However, recent research indicates that the quality of the child care workforce is decreasing. High turnover rates, low compensation, and inconsistent qualifications contribute to the current instability of the child care market.⁶

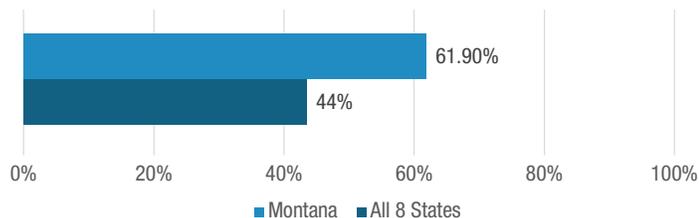
How Montana Supports the Early Childhood Workforce

- Supports career advancement and ongoing professional development through the Montana Career Path, which offers flexible training options
- Expands training access and affordability through free trainings and a CDA® apprenticeship program
- Invests in workforce development through sustainable funding like the Growth and Opportunities Trust
- The Early Childhood Project (ECP) Practitioner Registry collects comprehensive workforce data

Turnover

FIGURE 11. MONTANA WORKFORCE TURNOVER

There were 1,187 child care workers in 2023. Registry participation status was tracked through 2025 to estimate turnover and retention rates in the state.



Montana's turnover over two years was 735 teachers, or 62% of the workforce.

Participation in Montana's ECP Practitioner Registry is mandatory for all individuals working in licensed child care settings. The Montana Early Childhood Project collects comprehensive data (demographics, role, compensation, professional development progress, and credentials) and tracks pre-training credentials, ongoing professional development, and alignment with core competencies each year.

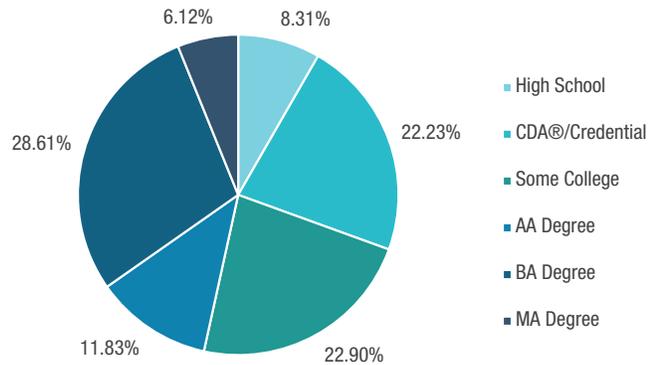
⁶ Herbst, C. M. (2025). The declining relative quality of the child care workforce. *Economics of Education Review*, 109, 102726.

Credentials

FIGURE 12. MONTANA CREDENTIALS

74% of Montana’s child care workforce in 2023 had a CDA®, ECE credential, or higher education.

- 29% of teachers have a BA
- 23% had some college
- 22% had a CDA®/state ECE credential

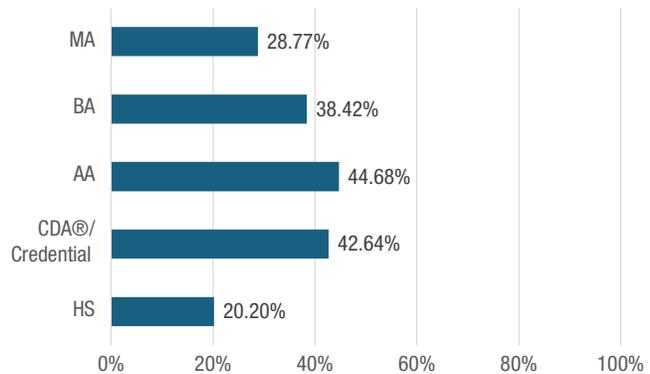


Teachers, assistants, and home-based owners are required to have a high school diploma or General Educational Development Test (GED), early childhood pre-training, and fieldwork hours to work in a licensed child care center in the state. Center-based directors are required to have a CDA®, state ECE credential, or a higher education degree, and fieldwork hours.

Retention

FIGURE 13. MONTANA WORKFORCE RETENTION BY EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

Teachers with a CDA®, ECE credential, or AA showed the highest rates of retention.



Conclusion

Montana’s turnover rate is high (62%), and it is higher than the average of the eight states studied (44%). As of now there is no direct research that quantifies the association between early childhood credentialing and retention, but given that those with a CDA®, state ECE credential, or associates degree have higher retention rates it should be explored. The U.S. can learn from Montana’s flexibility in recognizing the combination of fieldwork and credentials and how higher education is integrated into the career pathway for child care workers.

Turnover and Retention of Nevada’s Early Childhood Workforce



Quality child care is vitally important, not only for child development, but also for a thriving economy. However, recent research indicates that the quality of the child care workforce is decreasing. High turnover rates, low compensation, and inconsistent qualifications contribute to the current instability of the child care market.⁷

How Nevada Supports the Early Childhood Workforce

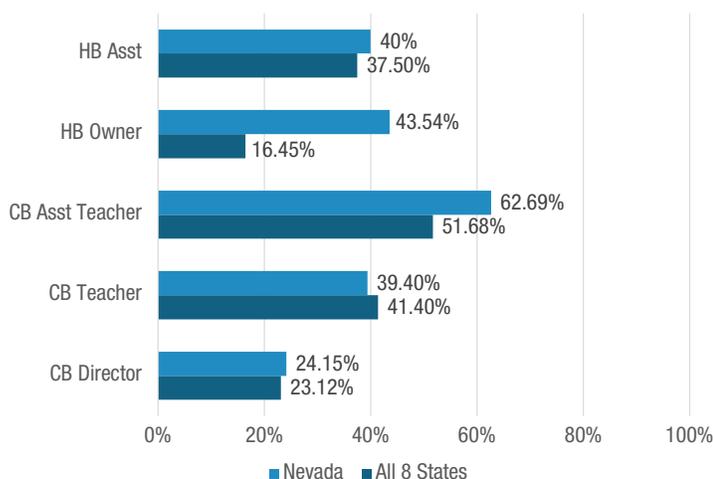
- Supports career advancement through competency-based education
- Expands training access and affordability through free trainings and a CDA® credentials pathway
- Integrates data across licensing, registries, QRIS, and higher education
- The Nevada Registry collects comprehensive workforce data and publishes frequent workforce analyses, which are used to inform decisions about workforce stipends and incentives

Turnover

FIGURE 14. NEVADA WORKFORCE TURNOVER

There were 5,830 child care workers in 2023. Registry participation status was tracked through 2025 to estimate turnover and retention rates in the state.

Nevada’s turnover over two years was 2,683 teachers, or 46% of the workforce.



Center-based assistant teachers had the highest turnover, followed by home-based owners and assistants.

Participation in Nevada’s Registry is mandatory for all individuals working in licensed child care settings. The Nevada Registry collects comprehensive data (demographics, role, compensation, professional development progress, and credentials), tracks pre-training credentials, ongoing professional development, and alignment with core competencies each year, and publishes analyses on public dashboards.

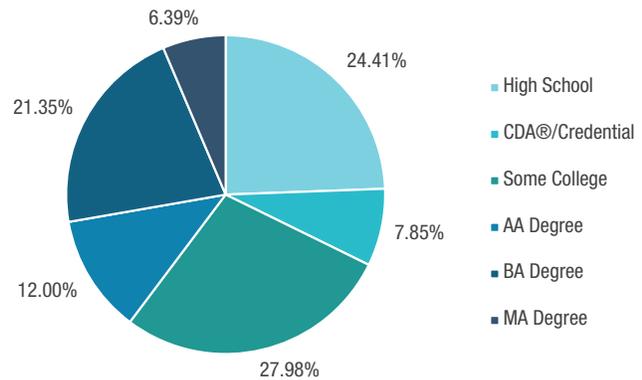
⁷Herbst, C. M. (2025). The declining relative quality of the child care workforce. *Economics of Education Review*, 109, 102726.

Credentials

FIGURE 15. NEVADA CREDENTIALS

72% in 2023 had a high school degree, some college, or a higher education degree.

- 27% had some college
- 21% had a BA
- 24% had a high school degree

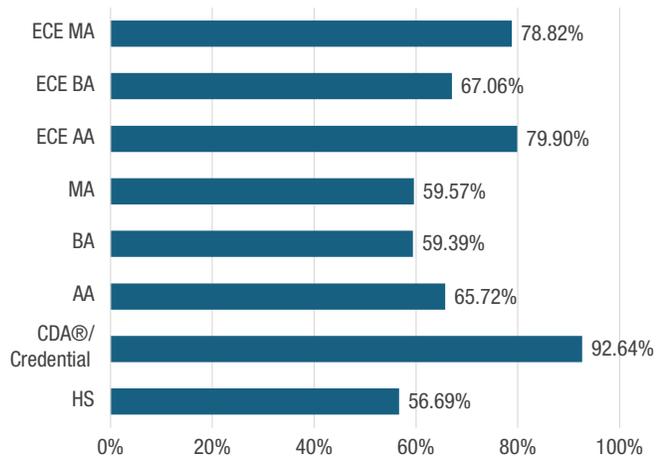


Center directors are required to have early childhood training, fieldwork hours, and a CDA®, general college degree, or ECE college degree. Teachers, assistants, and home-based owners do not have minimum qualifications, but must be enrolled in one Registry-approved early childhood courses.

Retention

FIGURE 16. NEVADA WORKFORCE RETENTION BY EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

Teachers with a CDA®, ECE credential, or early childhood degree showed the highest rates of retention.



Conclusion

Nevada’s turnover rate is high (46%), and it is comparable to the average of the eight states studied (44%). As of now there is no direct research that quantifies the association between early childhood credentialing and retention, but given that those with a CDA®, state ECE credential, or associates degree have higher retention rates it should be explored. The U.S. can learn from Nevada’s flexibility in recognizing the combination of fieldwork and credentials and integration of Registry-approved ongoing early childhood training.

Turnover and Retention of Oklahoma's Early Childhood Workforce



Quality child care is vitally important, not only for child development, but also for a thriving economy. However, recent research indicates that the quality of the child care workforce is decreasing. High turnover rates, low compensation, and inconsistent qualifications contribute to the current instability of the child care market.⁸

How Oklahoma Supports the Early Childhood Workforce

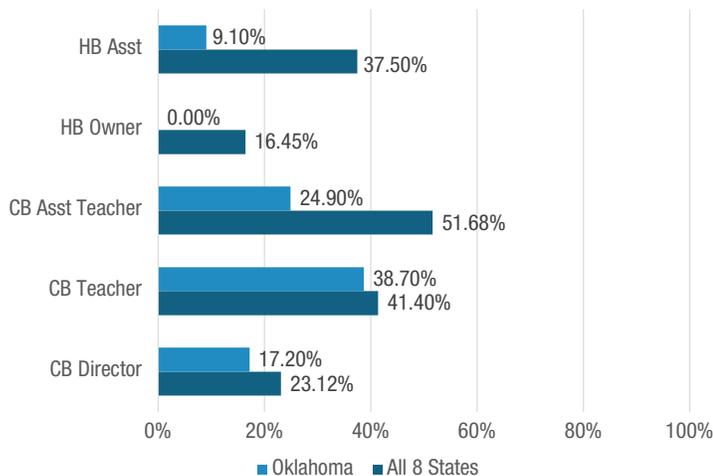
- Incentivizes ongoing training through financial scholarships
- Provides workforce benefits through Oklahoma Strong Start program, a no-cost child care benefit for child care employees
- Aligns workforce qualifications with financial supplements to center-based and home-based providers (Child Care Wage Supplement)
- The Oklahoma Professional Development Registry (OPDR) collects comprehensive workforce data and provides professional development resources

Turnover

FIGURE 17. OKLAHOMA WORKFORCE TURNOVER

There were 27,156 child care workers in 2023. Registry participation status was tracked through 2025 to estimate turnover and retention rates in the state.

Oklahoma's turnover over two years was 11,937 teachers, or 44% of the workforce.



Center-based teachers showed the highest turnover, followed by center-based assistant teachers. Home-based owners showed almost no turnover.

Participation in Oklahoma Professional Development Registry (OPDR) is mandatory for all individuals working in licensed child care settings. The OPDR collects comprehensive data (demographics, role, compensation, professional development progress, and credentials), tracks pre-training credentials, ongoing professional development, and alignment with core competencies each year.

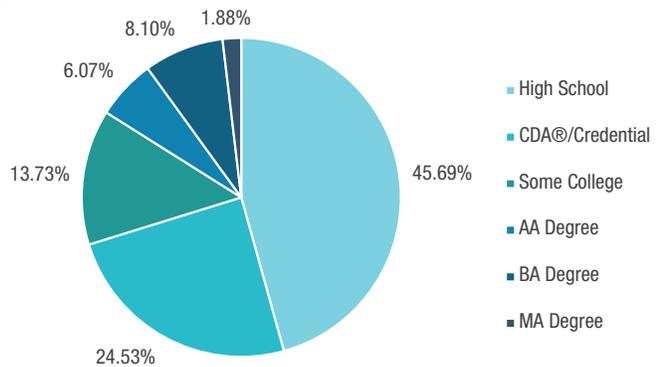
⁸ Herbst, C. M. (2025). The declining relative quality of the child care workforce. *Economics of Education Review*, 109, 102726.

Credentials

FIGURE 18. OKLAHOMA CREDENTIALS

71% of the workforce in 2023 had a high school diploma, CDA®, or an early childhood credential

- 46% had a high school diploma
- 25% had a CDA® or early childhood credentials

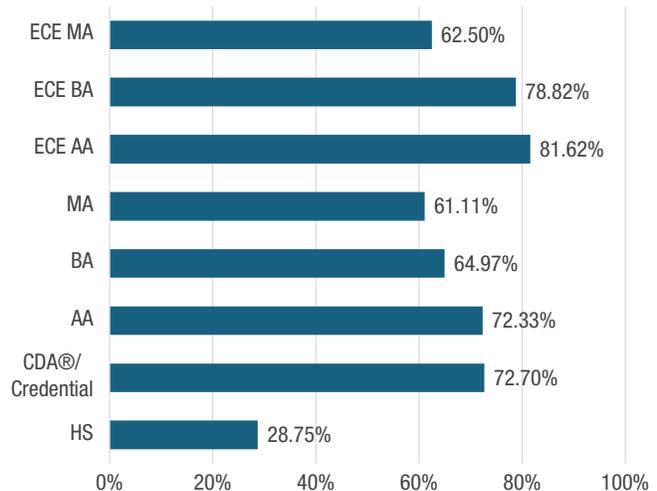


Center directors are required to have a Oklahoma Director’s Credential. Teachers must have an Oklahoma Professional Development Ladder certificate and a Competency Certificate. Assistants and home-based providers do not have specific credential requirements.

Retention

FIGURE 19. OKLAHOMA WORKFORCE RETENTION BY EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

Teachers with a CDA®, early childhood credential, AA, or and early childhood degree showed the highest rates of retention.



Conclusion

Oklahoma’s turnover rate is high (44%), and comparable to the average of the eight states studied (44%). As of now there is no direct research that quantifies the association between early childhood credentialing and retention, but given that those with a CDA®, early childhood credential or an early childhood degree have higher retention rates it should be explored. The U.S. can learn from Oklahoma’s alignment of financial awards with the workforce career ladder and strong integration of training with the registry.

Turnover and Retention of Oregon’s Early Childhood Workforce



Quality child care is vitally important, not only for child development, but also for a thriving economy. However, recent research indicates that the quality of the child care workforce is decreasing. High turnover rates, low compensation, and inconsistent qualifications contribute to the current instability of the child care market.⁹

How Oregon Supports the Early Childhood Workforce

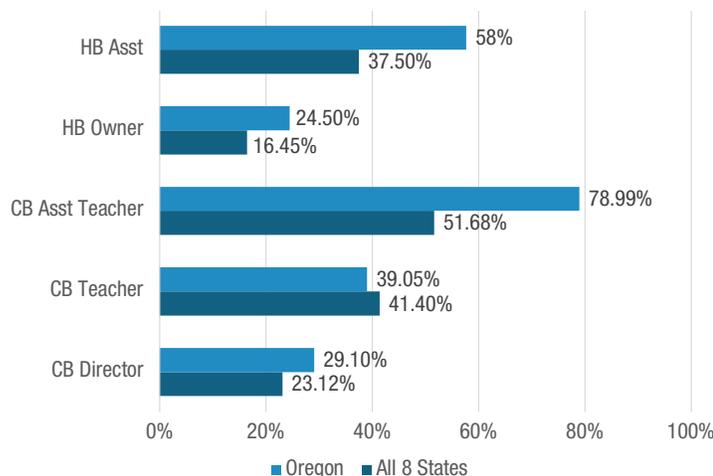
- Provides clear workforce career pathways linking roles to competencies and training opportunities
- Incentivizes ongoing training through financial scholarships
- Provides workforce benefits such as a state OregonSaves retirement account
- The Oregon Registry Online (ORO) collects comprehensive workforce data and provides professional development resources

Turnover

FIGURE 20. OREGON WORKFORCE TURNOVER

There were 14,597 child care workers in 2023. Registry participation status was tracked through 2025 to estimate turnover and retention rates in the state.

Oregon’s turnover over two years was 6,794 teachers, or 47% of the workforce.



Center-based assistant teachers showed the highest turnover, followed by home-based assistants.

Participation in Oregon’s Registry Online (ORO) is mandatory for all individuals working in licensed child care. The ORO collects comprehensive data (demographics, role, compensation, professional development progress, and credentials), tracks pre-training credentials, ongoing professional development, and alignment with core competencies each year.

⁹ Herbst, C. M. (2025). The declining relative quality of the child care workforce. *Economics of Education Review*, 109, 102726.

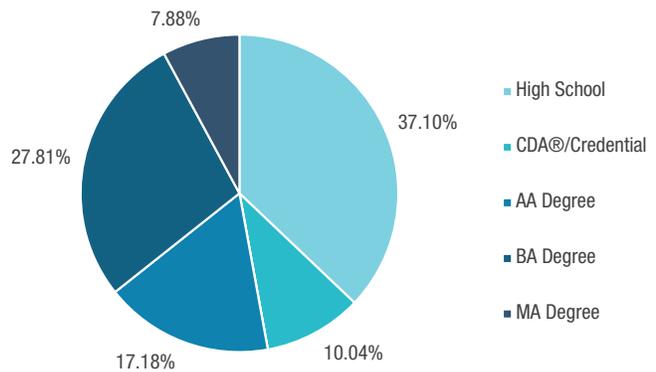
Credentials

FIGURE 21. OREGON CREDENTIALS

66% of the workforce in 2023 had a high school diploma or BA.

- 38% had a high school diploma
- 28% had a BA

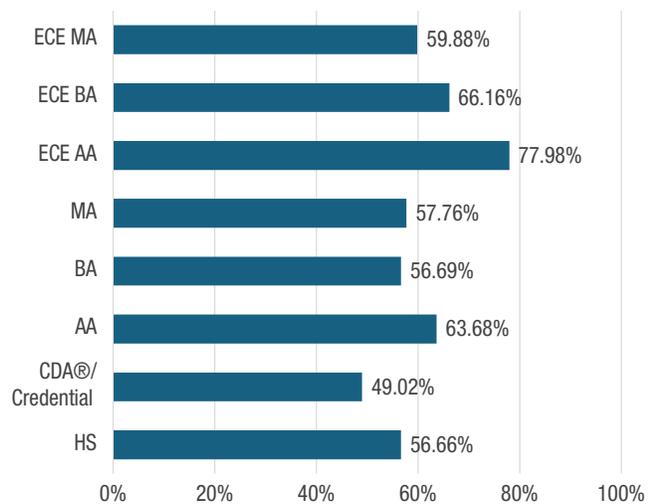
Directors are required to have a flexible combination of fieldwork, college courses in early childhood and management. Teachers and home-based providers must have a combination of a CDA®, early childhood degree, fieldwork, and competency-based training. Assistants are required to have orientation training.



Retention

FIGURE 22. OREGON WORKFORCE RETENTION BY EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

Teachers with an early childhood degree showed the highest rates of retention.



Conclusion

Oregon’s turnover rate is high (47%), and comparable to the average of the eight states studied (44%). As of now there is no direct research that quantifies the association between early childhood credentialing and retention, but given that those with an early childhood degree have higher retention rates it should be explored. The U.S. can learn from Oregon’s flexible training requirements and how higher education is integrated into the ORO Career Lattice.

Turnover and Retention of Pennsylvania's Early Childhood Workforce



Quality child care is vitally important, not only for child development, but also for a thriving economy. However, recent research indicates that the quality of the child care workforce is decreasing. High turnover rates, low compensation, and inconsistent qualifications contribute to the current instability of the child care market.¹⁰

How Pennsylvania Supports the Early Childhood Workforce

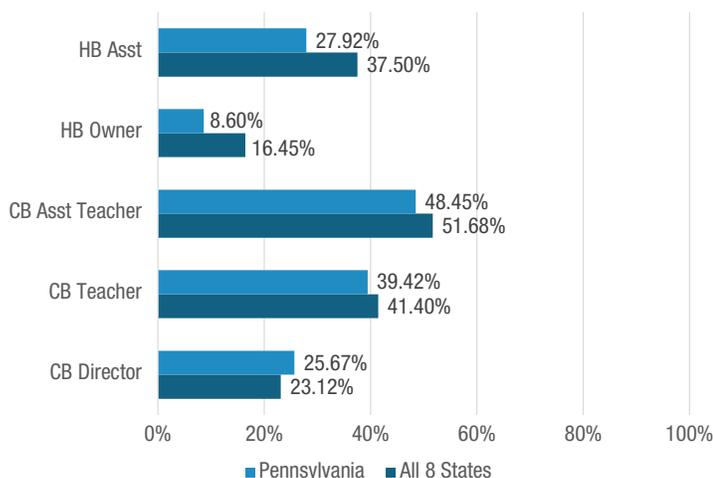
- Provides clear workforce career pathways linking roles to competencies and training opportunities through the PA Keys Career Pathways
- Supports workforce professional development through an apprenticeship program
- Incentivizes ongoing training through financial scholarships
- The Pennsylvania Professional Development Registry (PPDR) collects comprehensive workforce data, provides professional development resources, and analyzes and publishes a public facing workforce dashboard

Turnover

FIGURE 23. PENNSYLVANIA WORKFORCE TURNOVER

There were 51,828 child care workers in 2023. Registry participation status was tracked through 2025 to estimate turnover and retention rates in the state.

Pennsylvania's turnover over two years was 23,035 teachers, or 56% of the workforce.



Center-based assistant teachers showed the highest turnover, followed by home-based assistants

Participation in Pennsylvania's Professional Development Registry (PPDR) is not mandatory for all individuals working in licensed child care. The PPDR collects comprehensive data (demographics, role, compensation, professional development progress, and credentials), tracks pre-training credentials, ongoing professional development, and alignment with core competencies each year. Workforce data is collected, including compensation data, via a registry and analyzed via regularly updated in public-facing workforce data dashboards.

10

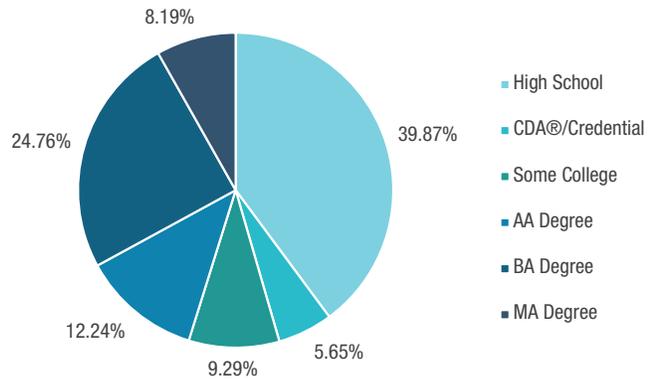
Herbst, C. M. (2025). The declining relative quality of the child care workforce. *Economics of Education Review*, 109, 102726.

Credentials

FIGURE 24. PENNSYLVANIA CREDENTIALS

78% of the workforce in 2023 had a high school diploma, BA, or AA:

- 40% had a high school diploma
- 25% had a BA
- 13% had an AA

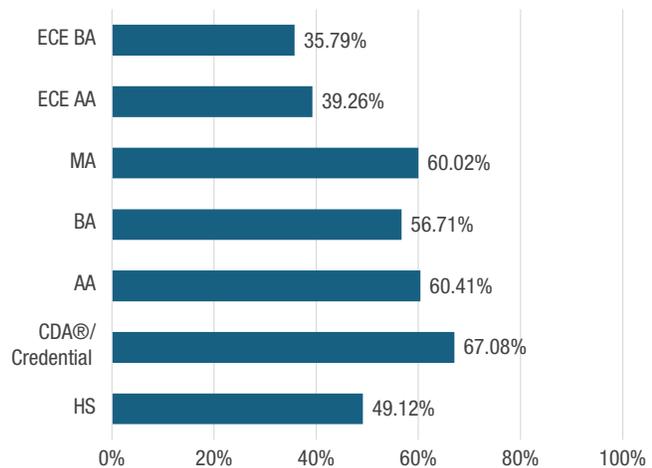


Center directors and teachers are required to have a combination of higher education degree in early childhood or fieldwork hours. Assistants and home-based staff must be enrolled in Registry-approved early childhood training.

Retention

FIGURE 25. PENNSYLVANIA WORKFORCE RETENTION BY EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

Teachers with a CDA®, early childhood credential, or higher education degree showed the highest rates of retention.



Conclusion

Pennsylvania’s turnover rate is high (56%), and is higher than the average of the eight states studied (44%). As of now there is no direct research that quantifies the association between early childhood credentialing and retention, but given that those with a CDA® or early childhood credential have higher retention rates it should be explored. The U.S. can learn from Pennsylvania’s varied workforce supports and alignment of financial awards to ongoing training.

Turnover and Retention of Tennessee’s Early Childhood Workforce



Quality child care is vitally important, not only for child development, but also for a thriving economy. However, recent research indicates that the quality of the child care workforce is decreasing. High turnover rates, low compensation, and inconsistent qualifications contribute to the current instability of the child care market.¹¹

How Tennessee Supports the Early Childhood Workforce

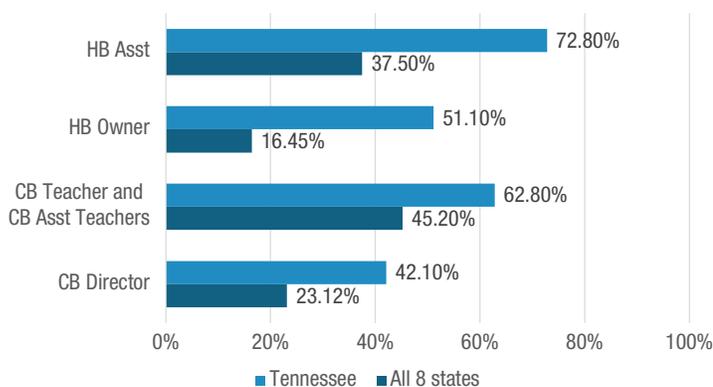
- Supports professional development through free trainings
- Incentivizes ongoing training through financial awards like Child Care WAGE\$
- Collects and publishes workforce data through a state-run data dashboard
- The Tennessee Professional Archive of Learning provides professional development resources

Turnover

FIGURE 26. TENNESSEE WORKFORCE TURNOVER

There were 27,394 child care workers in 2023. Registry participation status was tracked through 2025 to estimate turnover and retention rates in the state.

Tennessee’s turnover over two years was 16,775 teachers, or 61% of the workforce.



Participation in Tennessee Professional Archive of Learning (TNPAL) is mandatory for all individuals working in licensed child care settings. The TNPAL collects comprehensive data (demographics, role, compensation, professional development progress, and credentials).

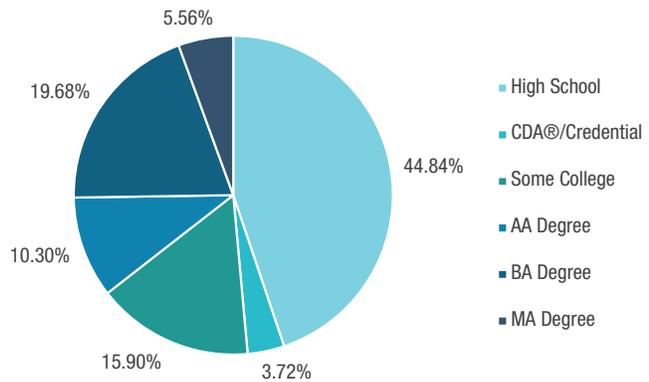
¹¹ Herbst, C. M. (2025). The declining relative quality of the child care workforce. *Economics of Education Review*, 109, 102726.

Credentials

FIGURE 27. TENNESSEE CREDENTIALS

81% of the workforce in 2023 had a high school diploma, BA or some college.

- 45% had a high school diploma
- 20% had a BA
- 16% had some college

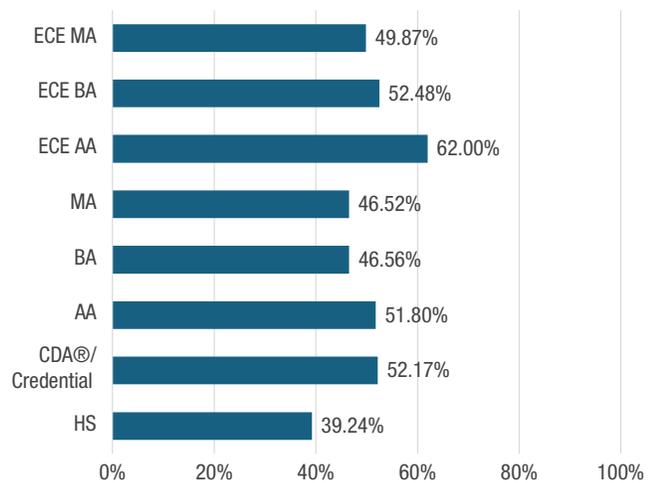


Center directors are required to have a BA, or a combination of a high school diploma, early childhood training and business training. All other center-based and home-based roles must have early childhood pre-training.

Retention

FIGURE 28. TENNESSEE WORKFORCE RETENTION BY EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

Teachers with an early childhood degree, CDA®, early childhood credential, or AA showed the highest rates of retention.



Conclusion

Tennessee’s turnover rate is high (61%), and higher than the average of the eight states studied (44%). As of now there is no direct research that quantifies the association between early childhood credentialing and retention, but given that those with a CDA®, early childhood credential or an early childhood degree have higher retention rates it should be explored. The U.S. can learn from Tennessee’s commitment to pairing financial incentives with ongoing training.

Interpreting the Data

Taken together, the data reveal a workforce experiencing both instability and transition. The following findings summarize the key patterns that emerged from the cross-state analysis.

Finding 1: The workforce is shrinking and turning over quickly.

High levels of turnover can disrupt relationships between educators and children, increase operational challenges for providers and reduce the overall stability of child care systems.

Only about 56 percent of the individuals active in 2023 remained active in the workforce two years later. The decline was particularly pronounced among teaching staff—the core instructional workforce in programs. Center-based teachers and assistant teachers accounted for the largest reductions in workforce participation.

One-third of the workforce is under 30 and roughly one-third (38 percent) reported a high school diploma as their highest level of educational attainment.

Finding 2: Education level and credential pathways matter for retention.

The CDA® credential plays a unique role in the workforce. Unlike traditional degrees which may require lots of time and funds, the CDA® provides an accessible pathway into the profession while building foundational knowledge in child development.

Importantly, the analysis suggests that educational preparation contributes to workforce stability. Individuals with early childhood-specific degrees showed even higher levels of retention.

Evidence also suggests the credential may support career advancement.

In a national survey conducted by the Council for Professional Recognition, 51 percent of CDA® holders reported receiving a pay increase after earning the credential.

Finding 3: State workforce registries provide valuable insights but are underutilized.

State workforce registries provide one of the most comprehensive sources of data available for understanding the early childhood workforce. Yet, state registry systems vary widely across states in who is required to participate, what information they collect and how the data are used.

Many states do not regularly use these systems to generate workforce turnover reports or analyze workforce trends.



Policy Recommendations

Understanding the makeup of the child care workforce and how credentials and education levels influence workforce stability is essential if we are to expand access to child care and improve program quality. These eight states provide a snapshot of the persistent challenges the child care field faces.

The following are three key recommendations policymakers should consider moving forward.

Recommendation 1: Expand access to the CDA®.

The findings from this analysis suggest that credential pathways play an important role in workforce stability. Across the eight states analyzed, those with credentials or associate degrees, specifically in early childhood studies, showed some of the highest retention rates in the workforce. Strengthening entry-level credential pathways and focusing on in-depth early childhood training may therefore be an effective strategy for improving workforce stability.

The CDA® credential is one of the most widely recognized and accessible entry credentials in the early childhood field. Investments in the CDA® could produce the greatest and most immediate return in investment for states trying to stabilize their workforce.

Compared with degree programs, the CDA® can be completed more quickly and at lower cost, making it a practical workforce development strategy for states.

Investing in the CDA® is one of the fastest and most scalable ways states can strengthen the early childhood workforce.

States can strengthen early childhood workforce training by:

- Providing scholarships, tuition assistance, or college credits for CDA® training
- Supporting CDA® apprenticeships and field-based training programs
- Integrating the CDA® into state career pathway frameworks and QRIS systems
- Aligning CDA® attainment with financial rewards, like higher compensation or bonuses
- Ensuring the CDA® is an entry point to associate and bachelor's degree programs

Recommendation 2: Better utilize state registry systems.

Strengthening state workforce registry systems and improving cross-state data consistency could significantly improve states' ability to monitor workforce stability and evaluate workforce investments.

States can strengthen state workforce registries by:

- Requiring participation from all individuals working in licensed programs
- Standardizing data collection on workforce roles, credentials, employment and compensation
- Regularly analyzing workforce data
- Producing regular workforce turnover and retention reports
- Using data to set clear goals to reduce turnover
- Integrating state registry data with other early childhood data systems

Recommendation 3: Target higher education investments toward program leadership.

Program directors play a critical role in shaping instructional quality, supporting teachers, and managing program operations. Research suggests that stronger leadership is associated with higher program quality and improved staff retention.

States may achieve the greatest return on higher education investments by prioritizing degree pathways for program directors and site leaders, while maintaining accessible credential pathways for entry-level educators.

Potential strategies include:

- Implementing apprenticeships targeting management and business training
- Offering leadership scholarships for directors pursuing associate or bachelor's degrees
- Linking director credential requirements to degree pathways
- Providing leadership development programs focused on program management and instructional leadership





Conclusion

The early childhood workforce is essential infrastructure for families, businesses and state economies. Yet, programs struggle to recruit and retain qualified educators. Low wages and limited career pathways are two areas which drive high turnover across the field, raising serious concerns about workforce stability and the long-term sustainability of child care systems.

This analysis found across eight states, the child care workforce—one that is under-supported and under-credentialed—is shrinking rapidly. While the findings highlight significant challenges, they also reveal important opportunities for strengthening the workforce.

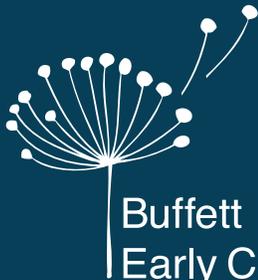
While not a direct correlation, this data suggests that strengthening credential pathways—particularly the CDA®—may play an important role in improving workforce stability, as educators with credentials or early childhood degrees were significantly more likely to remain in the workforce.

In addition, low wages remain one of the most significant barriers to workforce stability in early childhood education. While this report did not analyze wages, states should consider compensation strategies that reward educators for achieving credentials and degrees.

Appendix A

The following chart demonstrates state’s data collection capabilities: their ability to measure workforce turnover, state registry functions and data integration abilities, and mandatory vs voluntary data collection across various settings and populations of the workforce.

| Category | Question | Illinois | Maine | Montana | Nevada | Oklahoma | Oregon | Pennsylvania | Tennessee |
|--|---|----------|-------|---------|--------|----------|--------|--------------|-----------|
| Ability to support investigating turnover | Does your state have a lever or policy that requires people employed in a licensed child care setting to participate in the registry? | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| | Does your registry require an annual update to the registry user's profile? | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| | Can the registry director or employer update the employment data in the user profile? | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | | | | |
| | Is your data integrated with Child Care Licensing? In other words, does it touch, inform, or get used by licensing staff? | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| | Does your registry verify training attendance? | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| | Does your registry verify formal education? | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| | Does your registry archive inactive users? | ✓ | ✓ | | | | | ✓ | ✓ |
| | Do you already have a turnover report for your state? | | | | | | | | |
| Ability to measure turnover of the workforce | Can your registry disaggregate data by Center Type? (Faith-based, For-Profit, Not-for-Profit, Corporate, etc.) | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | | |
| | Can your registry disaggregate by licensed capacity? (i.e. 1-9 children, 10-20 children, 20-50 children, etc.) | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| | Can your registry tell us who moved between employers from year to year? | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ |
| | Can your registry tell us who was no longer employed in direct care, from one date to another? | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| Registry functions and data collection | Registry has ability to disaggregate by full-time vs part-time employment | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ |
| | Registry has ability to disaggregate by For Profit, Not-for-Profit settings | ✓ | | | | ✓ | | | |
| | A data integration with Child Care Resource and Referral Organizations exists | ✓ | | | | | | | ✓ |
| | A data integration with CCLicensing exists | ✓ | | ✓ | | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| | A data integration with QRIS exists | ✓ | | ✓ | | | ✓ | ✓ | |



Buffett
Early Childhood
Institute

at the University of Nebraska

2111 S. 67th St., Suite 350
Omaha, NE 68106
402.554.2924

buffettinstitute.nebraska.edu

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