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# Summary and Recommendations from the Early Childhood Education Workforce Well-Being Research-to-Policy Convening

Hosted by Yale University School of Medicine and the  
Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska

**RESEARCH BRIEF**

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Buffett  
Early Childhood  
Institute  
*at the University of Nebraska*

## Background

This brief summarizes the main conclusions and recommendations from the Early Childhood Education Workforce Well-being Research-to-Policy Convening hosted by Yale University School of Medicine and the Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska on the campus of Yale University March 10–11, 2023. The convening’s purpose was to assemble some of the most prolific and cutting-edge researchers in the area of early childhood education workforce well-being from across the United States to summarize briefly the current state of research regarding the well-being of early educators and identify areas where (a) enough research exists to inform actionable policy and (b) future research is most needed to answer key questions.

Twenty-four leading researchers from universities across the nation were joined by eight additional stakeholders representing leaders in early childhood education policy, systems supports and practicing professionals. (See Appendix for a list of participants). These practitioners and provider organizations actively participated in the meeting to provide a practitioner perspective throughout all conversations. The group defined early educator broadly to include early childhood care and education provided in child care centers, home-based settings, schools, Head Start, and other settings.



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# The State Of Research On Early Educator Well-Being

*The meeting was based on a fundamental premise: for our children to be well, their adult caregivers need to be well. The active ingredients of early childhood work are the quality of the relationships among children, families, and educators.*

Lasting impact on children cannot be made without attending to the adults who care for them, and practice, policies, and funding must be designed to strengthen the relationships among children, families, educators and communities.<sup>1</sup> This fact makes the growing data about early childhood workforce well-being all the more troubling. Across every study the research is clear and consistent: on every measure, the well-being of the early childhood workforce is worse than their peers<sup>2</sup> compared to both similarly paid professionals and women in general.<sup>3</sup>

Early childhood professionals demonstrate remarkable resilience and strength, despite working under exceedingly challenging circumstances. The workforce is experiencing chronic and acute stress and professionals are under supported and under resourced, have extensive expectations placed on them with little meaningful support, and often perform immensely challenging and important work under grueling circumstances. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, early educators navigated numerous additional stressors while providing education and care services for children and often lacked the tools to meet children's increasingly complex needs. Promising professional development, coaching, and mental health support models that serve both professionals and children are increasing, but they are only funded to meet a fraction of the need.

As researchers, practitioners, and policy leaders have explored early educator workforce well-being more deeply, an increasingly troubling picture emerges.<sup>4</sup>



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- **High levels of food insecurity:** Alarming rates of food insecurity among early childhood professionals ranging from 24% to 61%<sup>5</sup>
- **Concerns about paying monthly bills:** Most professionals working with young children (75%) express worries about meeting their monthly financial obligations<sup>6</sup>
- **Financial struggle:** About half of assistant teachers are on public assistance and about a third of lead teachers have a second job to make ends meet<sup>7</sup>
- **Lack of healthcare, paid sick leave, and benefits:** Health care, paid sick leave, and other benefits are rarely available<sup>8</sup>
- **Impact of COVID-19 on well-being:** The well-being of early childhood professionals, including their mental health, financial concerns, food insecurity, physical health, and classroom stress, was already low before the pandemic, and these conditions worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>9</sup>
- **High prevalence of chronic diseases and depression:** Chronic diseases (e.g. asthma, obesity) are more common,<sup>10</sup> and potentially diagnosable depression is two to three times higher in this workforce compared to women overall, with a majority of respondents reporting high levels of stress and emotional exhaustion<sup>11</sup>
- **High levels of depression and burnout among leaders:** Early childhood education directors and leaders also report high levels of depression (38%), burnout and exhaustion with indicators of these conditions comparable to K-12 leaders<sup>12</sup>
- **Increasing turnover (e.g. 40% for Virginia) and staffing challenge:** A majority of the workforce indicates mental distress and express intention to leave the early childhood field<sup>13</sup>
- **High demands, limited resources:** Teachers are emotionally stressed<sup>14</sup> and often feel ineffective in their jobs and, due to limited funding and a significant workforce shortage, often experience a lack of job resources (planning time, stable co-teachers, mental health supports), stressful work environments, long hours, rare breaks, and limited support from supervisors or peers<sup>15</sup>
- **Systemic challenges:** Specific demographic groups report unique stressors, such as pay differences and challenging working conditions for Black and Hispanic professionals,<sup>16</sup> and targeted aggression, particularly increasing for Asian American professionals during recent years<sup>17</sup>

Since this convening, several programs we discussed have been proven effective. The five University-based early childhood educator wellness models including Georgetown’s Promoting Resilience and Mental Health in Educational Settings for Early Childhood (PROMISE) program, Colorado’s Well-Being of the Early Childhood Workforce in Low-Resourced Locations (WELL) program, Nebraska’s Cultivating Healthy Intentional Mindful Educators (CHIME) program, Oklahoma’s Happy Teacher Wellness project, and Virginia’s Well-Being First model, represent comprehensive, innovative interventions that improve Early Head Start and Head Start staff well-being, classroom quality, and child outcomes.<sup>18</sup>

There was new energy at the beginning of the pandemic and a significant federal infusion of funding to states, but recently there seems to be a drift back to the previous, broken system that did not work for families, providers, or employers. While the issues for the early care and education workforce are similar to those faced by other low-wage, under-appreciated and under-supported sectors, the stakes are profoundly high as the early childhood workforce is essential to young children’s health, well-being, and foundational skills for learning.

*To put it simply: too many demands with pay and work instability and too few resources translates to high stress and turnover.<sup>19</sup> The significant negative impact of this turnover on children’s development and well-being is well documented.<sup>20</sup>*

While this is not new news, our understanding of the complexity and persistence of workforce challenges is deepening. There is a growing awareness of provider well-being including a more nuanced understanding of depression and stress (such as by measuring cortisol), the pervasiveness and impact of obesity for a large majority of the workforce; disrupted and poor sleep among most practitioners; wage and benefit disparities that are particularly distinct by demographics, setting, and age group of children served; poor air and environmental quality that contribute to poor health and conditions like asthma in early childhood workplaces; and other stressors that contribute to higher levels of depression and chronic disease among the early childhood workforce.

Workforce culture and climate—including leadership support, coworker relationships, job autonomy, organizational transparency—can buffer stress, or they can exacerbate it and prompt teachers to leave.<sup>21</sup> Organizational culture has a profound impact on professionals’ self-perception, feelings of efficacy, and commitment to the profession. The systems and



Kyong-Ah Kwon, Ph.D., Early Childhood Education Workforce Well-being Research-to-Policy Convening, New Haven, Connecticut, March 2023

structures surrounding early childhood programs can negatively impact well-being and increase staff turnover. These include overly burdensome paperwork; licensing and monitoring requirements that impose disproportionate penalties on some providers; cash bonuses that inadvertently push professionals over the benefits cliff given the high percentage of professionals on public assistance or working second jobs; and professional development experiences, coaching, or other quality improvement supports that are not relevant or responsive to their individual needs. Individually and collectively, these factors have a profound impact on early childhood professionals’ well-being, motivation, and commitment to the field.

Given these challenges, what should come next? While approaches that focus on individuals can have meaningful impact, systemic solutions are critical if we are truly to respect and support the early educators who serve our children and families. Teachers are often told to take mental health breaks or “just take a deep breath,” when what they really need are adequately funded systems that set them up for success in caring for children. The information above paints a picture of deeply systemic problems that need to be addressed through significant reforms.

Recommendations to inform policy, implications for practice, new research partnerships, and opportunities to expand the research agenda are outlined below. These recommendations focus on the roles of researchers, funders, and policymakers. This list of recommendations is neither comprehensive nor prioritized. It is offered to spark further discussion.

# Recommendations For Researchers

- **Create additional opportunities for researchers to work together to accelerate learning and application of findings to practice and policy.** Many researchers work individually or with their peers in an ad hoc manner. Early-career scholars and scholars from unique backgrounds will especially need collaboration opportunities to build the next generation of researchers in this field. There are untapped opportunities for researchers to work collaboratively and accelerate new research and research-to-practice/policy opportunities and learn from each other; share questions, measures, analytical approaches; and create data use agreements to share data and findings.

## Research Spotlights from the Field

- Head Start University Partnership (HSUP) created common measures that can be used across the field for comparisons and power of analysis<sup>22</sup>
- Educare Network employs common data collection across more than two dozen sites, has researchers analyze complex data within and across sites, and summarizes findings in ways that inform improved policy and practice<sup>23</sup>
- District of Columbia Early Childhood Innovation Network is aligning questions, measures, and analysis efforts across studies to achieve greater learning and understanding

There are opportunities for researchers to work together on shared challenges, such as designing studies so results can be positioned to inform policy and practice; sharing data back to participants and communities in ways that are useful to them; funding stipends for practitioners to participate in research projects; ensuring representation, particularly from under-represented communities; and creating ways to gather data without overburdening educators; and gathering data from professionals after leaving a position to better understand turnover.

- **Create interdisciplinary connections with adjacent fields.** There are many similarities between professionals across caregiving fields, including healthcare, eldercare, and long-term care, and these similarities could lead to

more opportunities to understand well-being issues across these fields. Researchers from a wide range of disciplines (e.g., economists, anthropologists, public health) should collaborate to inform each other's methodologies, analytical approaches, access to broader data sets, effective ways of translating research findings to practice, and other details to expand and accelerate learning.

- **Design and conduct research, programing and policy translation in close partnership with the early childhood education workforce.** There are inherent tensions in this approach, however, as commitments to being collaborative, interdisciplinary, and trusting often are tested by competition and perceived scarcity of resources.
- **Translate research into policy recommendations through strategic communications.** While policymakers need the information researchers can provide, researchers and policymakers operate in vastly different landscapes and timeframes and often speak past each other. Decision makers too often are not exposed to the invaluable findings of researchers, and the language researchers use is often inaccessible or not presented at the correct moments for impactful change. Engaging communications expertise and developing bridges with experts who understand the policy context, the needs of decision makers, and the strengths of early childhood researchers can inform new ways to make research findings more accessible and applicable to policymakers.
- **Explore what does and does not work to inform policy improvements over time.** Sometimes the impact of policies can be dramatically improved with relatively small revisions. Close partnerships between researchers, practitioners, and policymakers can inform regular policy improvements and more impactful investments.



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## Recommendations For Funders

- **Work with researchers to identify where funding is needed to do the work that the field most needs.** There are critical issues that need research attention for which funding is not currently available. Too often, funded projects require very linear approaches that do not reflect the communities and professionals being studied. The field would be strengthened by funding agencies and philanthropy, practitioners, and researchers working together to identify high-impact and pressing-needs research topics, centering more work on the unique realities of the workforce and families.
- **Dedicate funds to rapid cycle research to focus on the most pressing problems identified by early childhood educators.** Increased funding should be invested in researching the unique realities, strengths, and needs of under-represented professionals, such as family child care providers; family, friend, and neighbor care providers; early education leaders; and specific demographic groups. Further, considering the principles of community-informed and participatory action research, partnerships between practitioner-centered organizations, such as All Our Kin, and early childhood researchers should be created to efficiently design and implement research projects focused on the most pressing issues facing practitioners. Dedicating funding to rapid-cycle research that produces findings and recommendations focused on critical workforce challenges would more efficiently inform policy improvements.

- **Expand methods of research that are funded.** The field would benefit from more balanced quantitative and qualitative approaches that center and reflect the experience and language of the individuals who compose the early education field. Widely used tools can miss critical nuance that would help produce more informative findings and more effective recommendations. Also, rapid cycle research should be expanded to more quickly and responsively inform the work of decision makers in the public and private sectors, as well as to provide answers back to early childhood professionals more quickly.



## Recommendations For Policymakers

- **Expand and make permanent policies that systemically improve early educator well-being.**

These include funding child care subsidies or other early childhood programs like PreK based on the actual cost of care (using the federally approved alternative methodology) rather than market rates; expanding and making permanent policies that were allowed during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as subsidy reimbursements based on enrollment not attendance, streamlining family eligibility and redetermination for services, expanding eligibility for families, and substantially increasing overall investment; investing in workforce recruitment and retention; funding evidence-based models for workforce mental health supports; and expanding models that have successfully moved from a compliance approach to a continuous quality improvement and partnership model and which invest in provider well-being.

- **Apply the research findings that have been replicated for many years.**

We do not need additional studies to confirm that wages are too low, too few have health and other job benefits, poor access to supportive professional development or career advancement opportunities, and that high turnover negatively impacts children's development and the industry overall. These are not surprises and do not need further confirmation. Instead, the findings need to be taken seriously and immediately applied to more responsive early learning policy, funding,

and infrastructure focused on the needs of providers. Policy and funding decisions need to support these professionals to learn and grow, not merely engage in compliance. There are some places where the research has been applied successfully to create investments and initiatives that are having a measurable impact on child and workforce well-being such as Cultivating Healthy Intentional Mindful Educators (CHIME)<sup>24</sup> or Happy Teacher Project.<sup>25</sup> Access to these types of investments is significantly limited, however, and very uneven.

- **Invest in leadership development so educators can be leaders in their own programs and beyond.**

Provide a promotional track to help early educators committed to the field and decrease turnover and leaving for other fields, such as the public schools. Opportunities for early childhood education leaders are critical to influence identity, agency, skills, and behaviors, and to provide new energy, perspective, excitement for their own growth and development, and inspiring work environments that can support their teams. Leadership resources should focus on creating supportive and responsive organizational cultures, positive work climate, and quality physical environments inclusive of all roles including teachers, assistants, food and facilities support staff, janitors, drivers, family liaisons, and others. Also important are internal communication and team structure; family engagement and relationship development; effective program management including budgeting, contracting, and fundraising; coaching and mentoring; and reflective supervision.



- **Address the widespread early childhood teacher shortage in ways that focus on well-being.** Provide intentional onboarding and tailored supports for new educators; maintain both quality and stability, balance teachers' well-being (e.g., mental health breaks, working four days/week) and children's development (e.g., attachment); support the physical and emotional demands of being an early childhood educator; and provide benefits to teachers (e.g., health insurance, retirement, paid sick leave and vacation, free or reduced cost child care for their own families).
- **Build a workforce pipeline.** This pipeline should be one that recognizes critical birth through age 8 competencies and work experiences; provides content in a wide range of topics in multiple languages designed to be practice-based and immediately applicable to the setting where the early educator works; makes available communities of practice to support implementation of new skills and intentional learning and affinity groups; offers stackable badges, credentials, and degrees so there are opportunities for incremental and intentional career advancement; recognizes new and meaningful ways to measure teacher competency other than only degrees; offers college opportunities built with and for the early

childhood workforce that provide critical supports such as release time, shared planning time, classes offered at convenient times and locations, computers, internet access, cohorts, and other effective supports for first-generation college students.

- **Develop supportive, user-centered approaches to simplify administrative burdens,** including streamlining paperwork, simplifying monitoring through user-friendly technology, expanding access to shared services models, and providing responsive support to the early educator workforce to shift from compliance to continuous quality improvement.
- **Engage researchers on key questions of policy.** These include defining how success should be measured in areas such as program quality and child growth and learning; aligning early childhood metrics in responsive and developmentally appropriate ways from early childhood through grades K-3; developing program standards that measure workforce well-being and provide responsive, respectful healing supports to address workforce needs as part of an overall continuous improvement approach; designing professional development, compensation, and other policies so infant-toddler teachers do not leave for better supported jobs in preschool or other age groups.



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# Appendix

## Conveners

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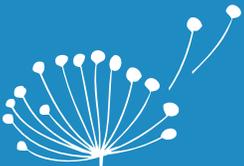
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