# Recruiting and Retaining Local Early Childhood Education Workforce

## A Review for Wilder's Child Development Center

Authors: Yue Zhang and Monica Idzelis Rothe

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# Summary

**Stress and burnout is real in our profession. Working with children is wonderful work. It is fulfilling work, but it is hard work… And it is hard work for NOT a lot of wages. So if your economic situation is giving you stress and then your work situation is giving you stress, who is going to keep doing that?**

– Training program staff

The early childhood education (ECE) workforce supports child development and family stability but faces significant challenges in recruitment and retention. Wilder Research, in collaboration with the Wilder Foundation's Child Development Center, conducted a study to better understand ECE workforce conditions in Minnesota, focusing on the Twin Cities metro area. The study included a literature review and key informant interviews with representatives from 7 local ECE centers and 10 teacher preparation programs.

## Key findings

- **ECE students have varied reasons for pursuing the field of early education.** Local ECE students are highly engaged and motivated, driven by a passion for teaching, career advancement, or job requirements. While some students, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, experienced challenges in balancing responsibilities, their engagement has improved post-pandemic.

- **Despite interest in the field, Minnesota is experiencing child care and ECE workforce shortages.** The state faces significant shortages in child care workers, with turnover rates averaging 30% annually. Workforce instability is driven by financial insecurity and a declining number of licensed family child care providers.

- **Local ECE centers are experiencing significant challenges in recruiting, hiring, and retaining staff.** Many centers, particularly community-based nonprofits, have struggled with low application rates and challenges in attracting and recruiting qualified candidates. Retention of younger staff compared to more experienced staff is especially difficult.

  - **Low pay and lack of benefits have been one of the most prevalent challenges.** Many ECE workers in Minnesota experience financial insecurity, with 16% living below 200% of the federal poverty level. Inadequate compensation and benefits contribute to feelings of being undervalued.

  - **ECE workers also experience high-stress work environments and job dissatisfaction.** Heavy workloads, demanding work environments, and the complexity of responsibilities lead to high stress, burnout, and frustration, further impacting staff retention.

- **Efforts to improve ECE recruitment and retention are happening across sectors.** Teacher preparation programs are leveraging financial aid, strengthening community partnerships, and enhancing hands-on learning experiences to attract, support, and prepare students. To enhance staff recruitment and retention, local centers are leveraging grants to enhance compensation and benefits, supporting the adaptation and development of both new and existing staff, and fostering a positive workplace culture.

# Recommendations

Based on these findings, the following recommendations are proposed for various stakeholders to support and sustain the local ECE workforce.

At the systems-level:

- **Enhance compensation and benefits to improve financial stability for ECE workers.** State policymakers and funding agencies should enhance investment in initiatives that improve compensation and benefits for ECE workers and promote pay parities, such as the Great Start Compensation Support Payment Program, the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP), Retaining Early Educators through Attaining Incentives Now (REETAIN), and American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) Child Care Stabilization funding.

- **Strengthen the workforce pipeline and career pathways to attract young workers.** Teacher preparation programs can leverage Early Childhood and Family Education (ECFE) Teacher Shortage Grant Program and dual-enrollment options to attract young educators and strengthen the workforce pipeline.

At the center-level:

- **Leverage resources to increase compensation and benefits for staff.** Beyond leveraging grants and resources in the system to improve the compensation and salary for staff, centers can enhance staff benefits, such as paid time for professional development and retention bonuses to further support workforce stability.

- **Support staff well-being and professional growth in a positive workplace culture.** ECE centers can foster a positive workplace culture by promoting staff well-being initiatives, mentorship programs, paid professional development opportunities, and paid time off policies to help prevent excessive stress and burnout among employees.

- **Utilize experts and statewide networks to advocate for ECE workforce.** Centers can leverage local expertise and networks, such as Child Trends, the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, and the Minnesota Children's Cabinet to advocate for policies and funding that support the long-term stability of the ECE workforce.

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# Background

The early childhood education (ECE) workforce is essential to supporting child development and family stability, yet it faces persistent challenges in recruitment and retention nationwide. The Wilder Foundation's Child Development Center in Saint Paul, Minnesota sought to better understand the scope of this issue locally and potential strategies for enhancing staff recruitment and retention. The following section summarizes the national landscape of ECE workforce issues, outlines the goals of the study conducted by Wilder Research in collaboration with the Child Development Center—which focuses on the local context— and presents the guiding research questions.

## The landscape of the early childhood education workforce nationally

Across the United States, the early childhood education (ECE) workforce faces multi-faceted challenges in recruiting and retaining quality educators. Despite the important role ECE plays, the field is characterized by low compensation, limited benefits, and high levels of stress across the country (Swigonski et al., 2021). These issues have been compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, which exacerbated financial instability, enrollment disruptions, and staffing shortages (Swigonski et al., 2021).

One of the major barriers to workforce stability is the inadequate compensation for ECE educators. The national median hourly wage for child care workers is approximately $14— Black and Hispanic women are paid even less ($11.3 and $12.6, respectively), far below what is needed for a sustainable living, contributing to a persistent crisis in workforce retention nationwide (Vogtman, 2017; Coffey & Khattar, 2022). Low payment causes many educators to live near or below the poverty line, making it difficult to cover basic living expenses and contributing to high turnover rates (Gillispie et al., 2021).

In addition to low payment, the lack of benefits and professional development opportunities further impedes workforce retention—child care workers are twice as likely as the general workforce to lack employer-provided health insurance (Coffey & Khattar, 2022). Opportunities for professional growth to support ongoing education and skill development, such as paid time for training or career advancement pathways, are rare in the sector, discouraging educators from staying in the field (Whitebook et al., 2018).

Stress is another significant factor influencing ECE workforce retention. The demands of managing groups of children, meeting regulatory requirements, and responding to families' needs create a high-pressure environment (Whitebook et al, 2018; Swigonski et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic intensified stress among early childhood educators, with many experiencing increased feelings of anxiety and burnout (Swigonski et al., 2021). A study

conducted in Indiana shows that, following the pandemic, 46% of early childhood educators reported moderate stress levels, while 18% reported severe stress (Swigonski et al., 2021).

In response to these challenges, governments at the federal and state level(s) have implemented various strategies and resources to support the ECE workforce. To stabilize the sector and support child care providers facing financial challenges from COVID-19, the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) established the Child Care Stabilization Fund in 2021 to sustain providers, support educators, enhance affordability, and improve program quality (Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, 2021). To address the workforce compensation issue, the new federal Head Start guidance allows programs to reduce enrollment in favor of increasing staff compensation, creating an opportunity to move toward compensation parity between early childhood and elementary school teachers (Minnesota Department of Education, 2023). Several states have launched initiatives to provide bonuses, increase access to training, and create wage scales that reflect the value of ECE work. For example, Virginia's Teacher Recognition Program offers financial incentives to educators who remain in their roles for a specified period, resulting in measurable reductions in turnover rates (Bassok et al., 2021). However, broader systemic reforms are needed to achieve lasting change across the nation (Gillispie et al., 2021).

While there is a substantial body of literature about this topic, both nationally and in Minnesota, it is also important to understand the local context. Wilder's Child Development Center (CDC), like other ECE centers nationwide, has experienced challenges with recruiting, hiring, and retaining staff over the years, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Localized information is essential for developing effective, targeted solutions that will address Wilder CDC's needs while also informing strategies for other local stakeholders working to stabilize and support the ECE workforce.

## The current study

This study was designed to focus on the local context in Saint Paul, Minnesota by exploring the challenges around and strategies supporting workforce recruitment and retention in local ECE centers, the motivations and challenges faced by students pursuing ECE certification or diploma programs, and strategies to support students in successfully completing their studies and advancing their careers.

The following research questions were identified to guide the study:

- What is the current landscape of the ECE workforce in the state of Minnesota and the Twin Cities metro area, especially Saint Paul?

- What staffing challenges are local ECE centers facing? How widespread are these challenges?

- What key factors contribute to staffing challenges in ECE centers, including barriers at individual, center, regional, and societal/economic levels, and what strategies have been implemented to recruit and retain staff in the current climate?

- What factors influence enrollment trends, student motivations, and persistence in local ECE teacher preparation programs, and how do these programs implement strategies to support student success in entering and remaining in the field?

The following sections present the methods and key findings from a literature review and key informant interviews conducted with local ECE centers and teacher preparation programs. The full literature review is available [here](#).

# Methods

A comprehensive literature review was conducted to explore the local landscape, challenges, trends, and strategies influencing the ECE workforce. Informed by the literature review, Wilder researchers utilized qualitative methods to gather insights from two key stakeholder groups in the ECE ecosystem: local ECE centers and teacher preparation programs.

## Literature review

The literature review was conducted by exploring a range of sources, including peer-reviewed articles, government-issued documents, and reports issued by research institutions. The literature review began with a broad scoping exploration, which was then narrowed down to 20 key pieces of literature. This review provided a foundation for understanding the current landscape (both nationally and in Minnesota) and informing the development of interview protocols.

## Key informant interviews

Wilder Research conducted key informant interviews with representatives from local ECE centers and teacher preparation programs. The contact list for these interviews was developed in collaboration with the director of Wilder's Child Development Center (CDC), which ensured that the outreach targeted the most relevant individuals and organizations. Wilder Research interviewers reached out to 9 ECE centers and 12 teacher preparation programs, completing interviews with 7 ECE centers and 10 teacher preparation programs.

Interviewers used semi-structured protocols tailored to each stakeholder group (see Appendices A and B). Virtual and remote interviews were conducted in fall and winter 2024 via WebEx and phone calls, with each interview lasting approximately 30 to 60 minutes, depending on the scope of interviewees' services and the depth of topics covered. In some

cases, follow-up inquiries were made to gather additional information or input from another staff member.

In total, Wilder Research conducted interviews with directors, recruitment team members, and program coordinators from 7 local ECE centers. These centers included both for-profit and nonprofit organizations, serving between 52 and 190 children and employing between 10 and 44 staff members per center. Additionally, 10 interviews were conducted with department directors, professors, and curriculum coordinators from local ECE teacher preparation programs at both two-year and four-year institutions. Each program served approximately 30 to 200 students across all years, tracks, and certifications or degree levels. Detailed information about the interviewed organizations can be found in Appendix C.

All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed thematically to investigate key patterns shared by interviewees. Themes and sub-themes were categorized by stakeholder group to capture their unique perspectives, while key findings were integrated and cohesively reported.

# Key findings

Informed by the literature review and key informant interviews with ECE center staff and teacher preparation program participants, this section summarizes local interest in the field of early education, the widespread challenges centers face in recruiting, hiring, and retaining staff, particularly in the Twin Cities (Saint Paul) metro area, and the efforts being taken by teaching institutions and early childhood centers to address these challenges.

## ECE students have varied reasons for pursuing the field of early education

Interviewees from all ten teacher training programs reported that their students demonstrate high levels of engagement and strong interest in their studies. Traditional students enrolling directly from high school are primarily motivated by an intrinsic interest and genuine passion for teaching and working with young children (n=6). Non-traditional students and those already employed in local centers are driven by the need to meet job requirements, such as obtaining licensure or meeting performance standards (n=6), as well as the desire to advance their positions and education or explore broader opportunities in the field (n=8). Additionally, some students express a commitment to improve educational practices and outcomes in the field (n=3) or bring knowledge back to their home countries and communities after graduation (n=1).

> They're very highly motivated especially in the first weeks of the semester. Many of them have a lot of siblings or nieces and nephews; some of them are parents themselves and oftentimes that spurs their interest in working with young children… It's just fun to watch their eyes light up when they discover things and have a good time learning about kids real quick.
> – Training program staff

> Most of my students work in the field, so they're very engaged because they can use what they're learning directly in their field every day… I think they are intentionally engaged… They are invested in what they're doing.
> – Training program staff

> We've seen more of students coming in because they're told they have to go back to school. It's more like 'I have to meet the requirements.' Maybe it coincides with the uptick in the quality rating and improvement systems and the Parent Aware [rating] which requires centers and programs to raise their qualifications of their educators because they need to meet the next level of quality. – Training program staff

Four program representatives noted that some students were struggling to stay fully engaged, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Challenges that hindered students' motivation and engagement included the pressure of managing multiple responsibilities in life (n=3), the lack of prior work experience and confidence to work as an ECE educator (n=2), and logistical barriers, such as transportation issues (n=1).

> Of course during the pandemic, they couldn't engage very much. When we were on Zoom, they had their cameras off and they wouldn't talk and it was really, really tough. It was the toughest years I've ever taught and I've been in the field for over 30 years. Right after we came back from the pandemic, the students were struggling with turning in assignments and getting to class. It was just a big transition back and probably last fall [in 2023], I started noticing much more engagement, completion, and being on task. –Training program staff

> During COVID in particular, I had a lot of students who would share like, 'I'm mandated to stay at work for 12 hours or more, and by the time I get home from work, I can't even keep my eyes awake to read a book.'
> – Training program staff

## Despite interest in the field, Minnesota is experiencing child care and ECE workforce shortages

As the literature indicates, in the state of Minnesota the challenges mirror national trends. Wilder Research estimates that there are over 40,000 early childhood educators in Minnesota but staffing shortages remain acute, with turnover rates averaging 30% annually (Valorose et al., 2023).

A major driver of these workforce shortages is the broader instability in the child care sector. Even before the pandemic, Minnesota lacked nearly 80,000 child care slots (Casale et al., 2020). The state has also experienced a sharp decline in licensed family child care providers, dropping from over 10,000 in 2011 to fewer than 6,300 in 2023, which has shifted reliance to center-based care (Werner, 2016; Valorose et al., 2023).

The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated these challenges. Enrollment disruptions in licensed centers during the pandemic further destabilized the sector, as centers struggled to maintain financial stability while complying with health and safety regulations (Tran, 2021). Black providers (80%) were significantly more likely to report experiencing, or expecting to experience, financial loss not covered by federal or state grants compared to White providers (37%; Ulmen et al., 2023).

However, raising tuition was not a viable solution to financial stress for many centers. Parents in Minnesota already face child care costs ranging from 15-50% of their income, with infant care being among the least affordable in the country (Child Care Aware of America, 2022). The high cost of child care limits the feasibility of tuition increases as a means of addressing financial instability. Given these constraints, providers have limited flexibility to increase wages or improve compensation for their workforce, making it difficult to attract and retain staff.

## Local ECE centers are experiencing significant challenges in recruiting, hiring, and retaining staff

**Recruitment.** According to interviewees, staff recruitment remains challenging for local ECE centers. Three centers reported low job application rates and frequent no-shows during the hiring process. Five centers noted that many job applicants or new hires did not meet key expectations or job requirements, further exacerbating staffing challenges. Centers requiring specialized skills, such as multilingual proficiency, faced even greater difficulties in finding qualified candidates.

> The number of direct applications in Saint Paul is much lower than in other communities—for example, Shoreview, New Hope, and Minneapolis. It's even more difficult to get qualified and experienced applicants in Saint Paul. – Center staff

> We get many applications, and out of those applications, maybe 10% of the people actually have experience in child care or in education… Out of the people with whom we set up interviews, maybe 50% show up. I think people who are very qualified are likely being interviewed by many different facilities in the area. So, many times, when it's time to interview with us, they have already found something else—even when we try to get to them early in their search, it never seems like it's early enough. – Center staff

**Hiring process.** Inconsistent hiring policies across employers adds complexity to the hiring process. For example, one interviewee from a center mentioned that teachers and staff who had completed the required in-service training hours for licensing or professional development often had to repeat similar training when joining a new employer, as these hours were not formally transferable or recognized across different organizations.

Additionally, centers struggle to fill full-time positions with part-time staff, as doing so disrupts workforce consistency of care for children and families. One center attempted to combine part-time staff and coordinate their schedules, but this approach was not ideal. As the center representative explained, "This is something we definitely try to avoid, knowing that a consistent routine in the classroom is what is most beneficial for the kids."

> One of our organization's goals is to have full-time staff at all levels in order to provide stability for the children. Plus, the parents want to see the same teacher with their children when they drop them off in the morning and pick them up in the afternoon. – Center staff

> That's really difficult to do [to fill full-time positions with part-time employees]. This happens because people do not necessarily want to work full time. Not everyone needs to work 40 hours a week or is interested in having that. People want flexibility that we just don't have. We need consistency for the children. – Center staff

**Retention.** Retention challenges differ among local centers depending on individual experiences, roles, and whether the center is for-profit or nonprofit. While experienced and lead teachers tend to remain longer, younger and first-time aides often leave sooner, as experienced by the centers interviewed. Among the seven centers, interviewees at the three for-profit centers reported that they were satisfied with their current staff retention. For example, one interviewee at a for-profit center, who only hired lead teachers, stated that their retention rate was usually over 80%; another center had only two staff members leave in the past six months.

Comparatively, local community-based nonprofit centers expressed more concerns with staff turnover in the interviews. High staff turnover not only caused staffing challenges but also disrupted partnerships needed to provide ECE students with practical experience, creating obstacles for the field placement component of ECE programs.

> We have young people who come just to see how it is, whether they like it or not, and eventually they need to go back to college. We have older people who are a little more stable in retention, but the young people maybe stay for a few months or a year. **– Center staff**
>
> About half the time, those who leave sooner than expected can't give you a reason why—they say it's personal. There are transportation issues and homelessness. **– Center staff**
>
> In the past, we've collaborated with some local centers and local organizations, but for a lot of reasons, it's been harder and harder to work with partner sites because of the high amount of turnover amongst the teaching staff, the directors and all of that. It's just been really hard to ensure that the students would get a continuity of experience.
> **– Training program staff**

## CONTRIBUTORS TO RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION CHALLENGES REVOLVE AROUND LOW PAY AND HIGH STRESS

In accordance with the national landscape, the interviews with local ECE centers and teacher preparation programs, as well as the existing literature, low pay and high stress are key factors contributing to ECE staff turnover and individuals leaving the field.

**Low pay and lack of benefits have been one of the most prevalent challenges for ECE workers**

Literature indicates that many ECE educators in Minnesota have faced financial insecurity, with over half earning less than $44,000 annually and 16% living below 200% of the federal poverty level (Valorose et al., 2023). Wage disparities persist, particularly for educators of color, who earn significantly less than their White counterparts even when controlling for education level (Gillispie et al., 2021). Echoed by several interviewees from teacher preparation programs (n=8), low wages are a significant barrier. This financial instability

has made it difficult for many educators to remain in the field, particularly for staff at nonprofit centers, where the demands of the job often outweighed the financial benefits.

Some centers acknowledged that they can only offer limited, market-rate wages to employees (n=3). As one center noted, they have to adhere to payment standards and guidelines for teachers, assistants, and aides, and they can only adjust wages in line with minimum wage increases. As a result, some educators left the center and the field for higher-paying jobs in industries such as retail or fast food, where they could earn comparable or better wages with less physical and emotional stress.

> **The wages are not that high. We struggle with this… They [the teachers] want to be paid a higher amount, especially if they say they have experience working with kids or have a degree. – Center staff**
>
> **Maybe 25% [of my students] or so are not yet working in the [early childhood] profession or can't afford to work in the profession yet. They're working in other jobs that frankly pay better than early childhood does, and so they're trying to get enough education to maybe be a lead teacher or a little higher level so they can actually afford to work in early childhood. – Training program staff**

In addition to low wages, inadequate benefits further contribute to workforce challenges. Teacher preparation programs reported that insufficient compensation and benefits led to potential educators feeling undervalued and questioning whether their degrees were worth the financial investment (n=4). The literature also highlights that the lack of employment benefits, such as health care, retirement plans, paid planning time, and professional development opportunities, further undermined career growth and job satisfaction (Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, 2021).

> **When students do the licensure tracks, regardless of background, I think a lot of the pathway tends to be towards working in an elementary school versus the preschool and child care space. I think primarily the main reasoning behind that is that they've invested a lot of money into completing all of that coursework and the public school space just is going offer better compensation. – Training program staff**
>
> **The downside is the compensation. We know that the field of early childhood education has fewer people who want to go into the profession because nobody wants to work for peanuts and have so much responsibility. It is a huge responsibility for our students to go out into the field because they're dealing with young children from many diverse families. It is a tough job, but there is not [enough] value given added to that job. Every time I speak to my students, they say, 'I'm not going to be a teacher for long.' It's kind of scary. – Training program staff**

**ECE workers experience high-stress work environments and job dissatisfaction**

Literature shows that high levels of stress, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, have impacted Minnesota educators' economic well-being and mental health, with significant increases in anxiety and depression reported during the pandemic (Whitebook et al., 2018; Warner et al., 2021). Teacher preparation programs (n=9) echoed that high job stress, burnout, and frustration stemming from heavy workloads, demanding work environments, and the complexity of responsibilities negatively influence staff retention in the ECE field. Growing bureaucratic expectations, such as training and qualification requirements, further intensified these pressures, making it increasingly difficult for educators to sustain long-term careers in the field.

> **Stress and burnout is real in our profession. Working with children is wonderful work. It is fulfilling work, but it is hard work. And, again, maybe especially hard work when you consider the economic benefits. Families are not always easy. Children are not always easy. Sometimes people discover that it's really not just playing with kids all day. And it's hard work for NOT a lot of wages. So if your economic situation is giving you stress and then your work situation is giving you stress, who is going to keep doing that? – Training program staff**
>
> **Even though some get paid time off for illness for their job, when they want to use it, their director's like, 'Well, but we need you. You have to come in. I don't care if you're sick.' And so it's like, you're giving me this benefit, but you still want me to come because they're so short [of teachers]. [People working in the field] feel a lot of pressure to not take care of themselves. – Training program staff**

Many interviewees from programs (n=5) and centers (n=6) mentioned that unrealistic expectations and job dissatisfaction—stemming from a lack of understanding of the demanding work environment—contributed to turnover of younger staff. While some younger staff adapted well and remained in their roles, others found the work environment more demanding than anticipated. Child care work requires constant engagement and an "all hands on deck" approach, which proved more challenging than some had expected. Those who struggled to connect with children or manage the job's demands often chose to leave.

Job dissatisfaction also came from a disconnection between classroom training and real-world application. Barriers to implementing learned techniques, along with resistance to new ideas from more experienced colleagues, discouraged some students to stay in the workplace (n=2).

> **I think a lot of students, after a couple of years, are burnt out or really disillusioned with what they were hoping to accomplish versus what they feel they're able to accomplish. We see a lot of students graduate and then, I don't want to say bounce around cause I think a lot of them**

will stay in an entire school year and then move somewhere else and see where else might be a better fit for them. I think that tends to be a bigger challenge for a lot of students as managing the stresses of reality with the ideals that they acquired in school. – Training program staff

Some people think child care is easy, and once they get here and realize it's not just playing with kids, they leave. A lot of people think it's playing with kids and it will be fun, but the turnover comes when they realize it's not that. This happens more with aides than teachers. And with aides there are a lot in first-time jobs. – Center staff

What I hear often from my students and the reason they changed their job is they come in and they learn quality techniques and high quality information. They take it back to their program and the teacher that's been in that room for ten years says, 'Oh, we don't do it that way.' And they just shut down any new ideas and they're like, why should I give them a try? So [my students] leave that center or they leave the field completely. – Training program staff

## Efforts to improve ECE recruitment and retention are happening across sectors

Addressing the issues of recruitment and retention in the early childhood education field needs to happen at two levels: the teacher preparation programs and institutions training the future workforce, and the early childhood settings in which those students will work. The following highlights the local efforts underway in each sector.

### ECE TEACHER PREPARATION PROGRAMS ARE MAKING TARGETED EFFORTS TO RECRUIT STUDENTS AND BETTER PREPARE THEM FOR THE WORKFORCE

Local teacher preparation programs interviewed did not express a significant need to increase student recruitment, as their enrollment remained stable, program capacity was consistent, and enrollment numbers had recovered following the COVID-19 pandemic. However, some programs noted that recruitment is hindered by systemic barriers. Four interviewees identified the lack of a holistic approach to training, coaching, recognition, and support for the ECE workforce as a challenge. Two programs highlighted that negative media portrayals of ECE jobs discouraged potential students and workers by depicting the field as undervalued. Another interviewee pointed to the lack of clear, direct pathways from high school to postsecondary ECE programs, which limited younger students' awareness of the profession and their interest in pursuing it.

To enhance student recruitment and preparation, local teacher preparation programs are implementing numerous strategies to improve academic and career pathways, increase exposure and outreach, provide financial, educational, practicum, and career development resources, and create a supportive learning environment for students.

**Enhancing pathways and exposure to applied settings to engage new students**

**Strengthening community partnerships.** In Minnesota, initiatives like Grow Your Own address workforce shortages by creating diverse pathways into early childhood education careers (Minnesota Department of Education, 2023). Informed or utilized by such initiatives and other community resources, eight out of ten teacher preparation programs identified strong partnerships with local employers and community-based centers as a key strategy for sustaining student recruitment. Programs offer tuition discounts for students working at partner centers, making further education more accessible for these students. These partnerships not only enhanced students' skills and confidence through hands-on experience, on-the-job training, and apprenticeships but also strengthened their employability by establishing direct pipelines to future workplaces.

> We try to work with lots of different places. We work with United Way, the Boys and Girls Club, St. David's, Clara's House, and all the Head Starts—they're big at helping recruit students. I work with a lot of four year colleges and two year colleges. So we try to collaborate on a lot of grants or just different ideas. — Training program staff
>
> We have so many great partners. Our admissions team will go out to the schools like the New Horizon School and the Endeavor Schools. We also offer partnerships with centers. One of the options is that they get a 10% discount for all their employees to any program at our institution. So, if their school leader wanted to go on and get a business degree, they could take part in that partnership too. So that outreach has been really helpful. – Training Program staff

**Engaging in early outreach to attract and engage high-school students.** To recruit a younger generation of future students, programs are implementing efforts to connect high school students with postsecondary early childhood education opportunities (n=5). These initiatives included creating clear pathways and targeted outreach, offering free summer classes and enrichment opportunities, such as Postsecondary Enrollment Options (PSEO) to engage students in free college-level courses while still in high school. These strategies aim to increase early interest in the ECE field.

> We've started conversations with some high schools. Because we are a for-profit institution, we're not eligible to do PSEO. So, what we do instead is we have something called Early Honors, which encourages the higher performing students that are interested in taking some college courses while they're still high school students. They take them at very little cost. They just pay an equipment fee. They do not pay tuition.
> – Training program staff

> **We could bring in 25 high school students next summer. During the summer, they would take two classes for free. Because PSEO doesn't work in the summer, we're working with the Family and Consumer Science folks that are teaching early education courses at the high school level, offering different courses. So that ideally, these students would be able to earn their certificate before they graduate from high school.**
> **– Training program staff**

**Conducting marketing and outreaching efforts.** Interviewees from programs identified effective strategies to attract prospective students, including increasing marketing and outreach efforts, such as media campaigns, onsite visits, and informational booths (n=5). For example, one program regularly shares inspiring stories on Facebook, while another hosts monthly online information sessions to provide prospective students with detailed insights into their offerings and answer questions in real-time. In addition to engaging prospective students, one program enhanced its visibility by tracking student retention after graduation, thereby strengthening alumni connections. This effort monitored long-term program success and fostered a supportive and interconnected student community.

In addition to the above, one interviewee described how their program modified entrance requirements to eliminate enrollment barriers and make enrollment more accessible. For prospective students who did not fully meet all the program's enrollment requirements, the program allowed them to enroll conditionally and complete the remaining prerequisites while pursuing their studies.

**Providing support and resources to better prepare existing students**

**Offering financial aid and grant opportunities.** According to interviewees, offering scholarships and various forms of financial support played a critical role in helping students access and continue their education (n=7). These included reducing tuition through federal and state financial aid programs such as the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), North Star Promise, T.E.A.C.H. scholarship, and Minnesota Dream Act (n=7), offering department scholarships and in-house grants (n=5), and leveraging community resources such as private donations (n=1) and workforce development scholarships (n=1). One program actively sought grant resources specifically for BIPOC students to support a more diverse student population.

> **I typically have a couple of students that receive T.E.A.C.H. scholarships... We have a lot of local scholarships through our foundation that students can apply for... My assumption is, for the students who are local and taking advantage of the scholarship programs, I think they're selecting the college partially because of the financial opportunity to not have any loan debt when they're in school. – Training program staff**

> It's always been a strategy to recruit BIPOC students. We're one of the most diverse campuses in the state, and we're just very excited that there are more and more opportunities to financially support BIPOC students.
> – Training program staff

> Knowing how the compensation will be when students actually enter the field, we are always looking for scholarship and funds for our students. We have a handful of specific departmental scholarships that are available for the undergraduate students, but most of the funding opportunities are at the graduate level for the licensure students just by the nature of how funds get allocated. But just knowing that a lot of the non-licensure students are going into probably the lowest compensated jobs in the field, we're always looking out for funding for them. We actually just got a grant through the state that is targeting the teacher shortage, and we collaborated with the Parent and Family Education License program and the Early Childhood Special Education program. We got a good amount of money to provide some scholarships for students.
> – Training program staff

**Connecting students with academic and career development resources.** Programs are making efforts to improve students' access to additional curriculum, practical learning opportunities, and career development pathways. This includes offering online courses through partner institutions (n=3), providing professional networking opportunities (n=3), and connecting students to potential job opportunities through both virtual and in-person career fairs (n=3).

Programs also leveraged community resources to support students (n=4). For instance, the Trainer and Relationship-based Professional Development Specialist Support (TARSS) program at the University of Minnesota supports trainers, coaches, and professional development specialists in early education, while partnerships with organizations like children's museums offer unique practice settings for students.

**Providing enriching and high-quality field and practicum experiences.** Interviewees described the importance of their programs providing enriching and rewarding field experiences, particularly those with a community-based focus and high-quality placements. Most programs require field experience courses or a capstone project (n=9). One program incorporates video-based observations and practical guidance within exploration courses to provide practical learning opportunities.

Early and high-quality field placements and internships provide students with real-world experience, allowing them to apply their knowledge early in their learning and professional development. While securing high-quality placements with experienced mentors on site poses challenges—due to factors like COVID-19 or general workforce shortages (n=4)—most programs are making efforts to develop and maintain strong, ongoing partnerships with local ECE centers to enhance internships, observation opportunities, fieldwork, and career prospects for students (n=8). For example, three programs leverage on-campus fieldwork opportunities by partnering with centers operated by their colleges; two have

adopted the Grow Your Own model, enrolling employees from partner centers as students; and two secured internship and practicum opportunities through personal connections with local centers. Additionally, one program highlighted the use of alumni networking as another method for strengthening ties between the program and local ECE centers.

> We have a couple of field experiences that are pretty significant that students have to do right at the beginning of the program. We want to get them hands-on experience, get them involved in early childhood programming right away, so they are involved in community-based programs right at the beginning of the program. – Training program staff
>
> We try to get the students into the field. In a lot of their classes, they do field work, and so they're in the field almost right away when they're enrolled in their programs. And they're supposed to do the assignments that are related to the field work, like if they learn how to do anecdotal observations, then they have to go and do them in the field. That's helpful. – Training program staff

**Strengthening support for students from faculty and peers.** Strengthening the support offered by faculty and peers, along with offering mentorship opportunities and alumni connections, was identified by six programs as vital for keeping students engaged. Support from faculty, including personalized guidance on course planning and one-on-one communication, helped students navigate challenges and feel valued. Peer support for students encouraged student collaboration and motivation, while tailored practicum mentorship offered students valuable career insights. Together, these efforts created a strong support system that promoted student success and retention.

> Typically I will connect with the students through the advising process, decide what their background experience has been, what their interests are in the future. I have one student who I just met with recently, who was a little bit quieter and has been interested in a quieter setting. So we talked about a Montessori setting. If that's the right match for students, they're going to do a field experience in a Montessori setting. – Training program staff
>
> Part of my responsibility as a faculty is to do faculty advising. We also have academic advisors. I try to meet with as many of my students as possible and we plan out like, what have you taken? What are you going to take each semester until you graduate? And then every semester we meet—did you actually complete the ones you thought you were going to? Let's get you registered for the next. And so our retention is strong. – Training program staff
>
> For us, it's a blessing because we don't have tons of students, so we don't have huge classes. We always know our students individually and we can build relationships with them. Then, when they come in and they seem disengaged, we can check in with them to figure things out. – Training program staff

**Creating a supportive learning environment.** Some interviewees (n=3) noted that their programs are adapting class formats to accommodate diverse learning styles and needs, incorporating options such as online courses and hands-on applications. Programs also make course adjustments to address key educational challenges encountered in real-world situations (n=3). To support students' social-emotional needs and better prepare them for future careers, program staff focus on helping students manage anxiety and maintain a healthy work-life balance (n=3).

In addition, faculty work to foster resilience and adaptive mindsets, helping students realistically understand the content and responsibilities they would face in their future work environments (n=3). Encouraging students to advocate for systemic change in the ECE field was also highlighted as a way to inspire long-term commitment and passion for the profession (n=3).

## ECE CENTERS ARE IMPLEMENTING A RANGE OF STRATEGIES TO RECRUIT, HIRE, AND RETAIN STAFF

To enhance staff recruitment and retention, local centers are implementing strategies focused on improving compensation and benefits, supporting the adaptation and development of both prospective and current staff, and developing strong relationships with staff.

### Increasing compensation, incentives, and benefits

According to the literature, the bonuses offered through programs like Minnesota's Retaining Early Educators through Attaining Incentives Now (REETAIN) have been effective in supporting the ECE workforce by providing financial incentives for educators to remain in the field (Shaw et al., 2019). Efforts to improve wages and benefits, including the Great Start Compensation Support Payment Program, are also underway (Valorose et al., 2023). In 2023, the Minnesota Legislature made substantial investment decisions, allocating approximately $1 billion for 2024 and 2025 to enhance child care and ECE initiatives. This includes $316 million for child care worker compensation, expanded the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) eligibility, and a $252 million increase for Early Learning Scholarships prioritizing infants and vulnerable families (McVan, 2023; Minnesota's Children's Cabinet, 2023).

Five of the seven centers interviewed have utilized the Great Start Compensation funds to either offer bonuses or increase staff wages. The centers mentioned that any remaining funds were usually allocated to paid time off, retirement accounts, or additional bonuses. Four of these centers highlighted the positive impact of Great Start on recruitment and retention, which helped "bring the pay closer to competitive wage levels," according to one center.

Although few centers had the resources to increase base pay, they were making efforts to improve compensation through annual raises, referral bonuses, and merit- and development-based incentives to reward staff efforts and growth (n=6). One interviewee described how they were intentional about ensuring annual performance reviews were supportive in nature to help staff achieve their full regular merit and yearly raises. Four centers sought additional grants and funding opportunities, including but not limited to Stabilization Grants, Think Small Grants, and Ampact stipends to support teacher bonuses. Centers also encouraged and provided support for teachers to apply for scholarships on their own, such as the T.E.A.C.H. scholarship run by Child Care Aware (n=2).

> **The center does give out bonus pay to recognize things like reliable attendance, individual growth and development—if they are working toward their online CDA or if they are going to school in-person.**
> **– Center staff**
>
> **We have adjusted our pay scale over the last few years, and it continues to be examined through market research every year. We also have the Great Start grant in which teachers are paid a grant payment at the end of each month for each hour they work directly in a classroom. So, in addition to their paycheck, they are getting a grant paid out to them monthly for about $2 an hour. – Center staff**
>
> **Our school is committed to being at the top of the wage scale when it comes to children in any market. Specifically, for our Saint Paul schools, we pay higher than some of the competitors, and we continue to be committed to staff salaries being the first conversation at the table every year… [The Great Start Compensation funds] have gone into the wages of our staff. We benefited from these funds when it came to our annual wage increases. – Center staff**

Five out of seven centers enhanced staff benefits packages, particularly after the pandemic, by offering various combinations of a retirement plan, a pension plan, medical insurance, and insurance coverage for life, disability, dental, vision, and pets. They also guaranteed holidays, paid leave days, and weekend rest, encouraged extended vacations (e.g., 4-8 weeks at one center), and provided gift cards or discounted child care services as a way to show appreciation.

> **Staff members get 50% off of child care costs if their children go here [the center], but we have made some adjustments to that if there are specific situations for different people. We try to work with people's individual circumstances. – Center staff**
>
> **We offer medical, dental, pet insurance. The pet insurance is something we never had before [the pandemic]. We also have a 503(b) retirement savings plan, a pension plan, and a free gym membership for the employee and their family. – Center staff**

**Reforming hiring strategies and staffing practices**

To enhance recruitment, several centers (n=4) are routinely implementing marketing and outreach strategies, including leveraging social media platforms, posting on job boards, and participating in job fairs.

Centers have also made adjustments to improve the effectiveness of their hiring strategies. Specifically, three centers have intentionally increased engagement with job candidates, implementing a more comprehensive screening and hiring procedure to ensure a better fit between candidates and job expectations. They also enhanced their orientation and onboarding training to better prepare new hires.

> Before, if someone was late or did not show up for an interview, I would send them a rejection and move on. Now, I have to send a follow-up, saying 'I'm sorry. We weren't able to connect, and if you are still interested, we would like to connect'... I ask a few questions that lead into that fact that our children are not robots and that we are addressing children where they are at. One of the questions we ask is: 'Working with children can sometimes become challenging. How do you manage your personal stress when the children's behaviors become escalated?' and 'How are you going to deal with it?' This can help people think about the reality of the job. The first round of interviews is virtual. The second round of interviewing is at the center sites. I want applicants to see, hear, feel, and smell our environment. I want people to have a full experience. Some people get into the center and decide it's not for them. – Center staff

> We have adjusted it [the hiring process] and now do a 3-step interview process: A phone interview, an in-person interview, and then we have the applicant come and visit the classroom for part of a day to see if they are still interested and want to move forward with taking the job. Then we do the orientation, which we have broken down into a 6-week training process. We put this approach into our process because we know that there are a lot of applicants who are re-entering the workforce and we want to try to make sure for us that we are meeting the needs of the staff we are hiring—to give them extra support, to let them know that management is here for them. We support them in whatever area they need support in. – Center staff

Three centers have adapted their scheduling practices for staff, such as offering part-time options to fill full-time positions and hours, to accommodate staff availability. However, as mentioned earlier, centers need to consider the implications of such options on staffing consistency to ensure stable relationships between educators, students, and families. Even when using part-time staff, centers aim to assign them to the same weekdays or class sessions, allowing students and parents to regularly interact with familiar staff members, rather than encountering different staff from day to day.

> **Every classroom has its lead teacher who is full time. There might be some assistant or aide positions that we piece together with more part-time staff, but anytime we have a part-time staff we are aiming for consistency within that role and schedule, and the regular expectations on the part of the kids. So, if it's a Tuesday, for example, the children know who the part-time staff is, who is coming to assist, not to replace or fill in for their regular full-time lead teacher. – Center staff**

## Supporting professional development and job training

Literature shows that many Minnesota ECE centers provide professional development resources and mentorship programs to help educators build skills and resilience (Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, 2021; Valorose et al., 2023). The centers interviewed also addressed that personalized, job-embedded training and development opportunities are part of their key strategies to foster long-term retention (n=3). Efforts to support staff's personal and professional needs were made in various ways across centers. They encourage staff to pursue advanced ECE curriculum or degrees by providing connections to local institutions, such as Minneapolis College, and offering tuition support for staff's professional growth through various grants opportunities (e.g., the Child Care Services Regional Grant, the T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood Scholarship, the Grow Your Own program).

> **We have established really strong mentor programs and onboarding and continuing education programs that support our staff to grow and develop within our school. We will cover 100% of the cost for an individual's CDA or Associate in Early Childhood… We partner with the T.E.A.C.H. scholarship program here in Minnesota. We have programs set up to mentor individuals from day one who are new to the school or industry. We know the first 90 days of any job are really telling for a new hire, so we aim to make first 90 days a welcoming period. – Center staff**
>
> **[Our employees have] access to education. Through a partnership with MCTC, our early childhood staff team members can have free college classes there. – Center staff**

**Fostering strong relationships with staff and promoting well-being**

All of the centers (n=7) emphasize the importance of developing strong relationships with their staff by fostering a sense of belonging, promoting a family-oriented atmosphere, showing appreciation, practicing positive leadership, and creating a supportive work environment. One of the centers sought to create a more inclusive and welcoming environment by enhancing its culturally responsive curriculum and practices.

> We have 40 different people—all different backgrounds, cultures, and life, and I just trust them to be who they are and do what they do. I trust my staff to know that what they are doing is best for the kids in their care. – Center staff
>
> Internally, we try to make it a family environment where [employees] feel welcome and feel part of [the center]. We celebrate birthdays; we do appreciation weekly. We acknowledge staff on regular basis—for example, Teacher of the Month... Many of the teachers are immigrants who are far from home, and being able to celebrate special dates is very popular. – Center staff
>
> We are focused on making sure that staff feel supported, fulfilled, and are engaged. [The school director] and the management team are very intentional about connecting with each staff person every day, and assisting with anything they need. [The school] is implementing 'conscious discipline,' which is a classroom management tool for both the teachers and children. – Center staff

Two centers make use of on-site resources to support staff's work-life balance and address their physical and emotional needs. They provide wellness rooms where staff can take short breaks to recharge, as well as access to fitness facilities to encourage physical well-being.

> When staff have a stressful day, they can go take yoga on their break, and then come back. We provide this. We offer medical, dental, and pet insurance. The pet insurance is something we never had before. We also have a free fitness membership for employees and their family. – Center staff

# Conclusions and recommendations

The findings of this study highlight the ongoing challenges of recruitment and retention in Minnesota's ECE workforce. While localized efforts and state initiatives, such as wage enhancement programs and professional development opportunities, have made progress in supporting the ECE workforce, a more sustainable systemic approach involving policymakers, teacher training institutions, ECE centers, and community organizations is needed. The stability of the ECE ecosystem may be enhanced through the following strategies.

At the systems-level:

■ **Enhance compensation and benefits to improve financial stability for ECE workers.** Competitive wages and benefits are critical to reducing turnover, particularly for the lowest-paid centers. State policymakers have increased investments in early childhood education to improve wages and financial stability for ECE workers through initiatives such as the Great Start Compensation Support Payment Program, the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP), and the Retaining Early Educators through Attaining Incentives Now (REETAIN) initiative. However, policies ensuring pay parity with K-12 educators remain limited. Given the long-standing wage disparities in the field, the state needs to re-envision compensation structures to attract and retain a stable ECE workforce. Expanding targeted compensation initiatives, such as the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) Child Care Stabilization funding, could provide greater long-term financial sustainability for ECE professionals.

■ **Strengthen the workforce pipeline and career pathways to attract young workers.** Strengthening the pathway from high school to postsecondary ECE programs and careers is essential for building a sustainable workforce. Targeted outreach efforts, financial aid opportunities, and apprenticeship programs can help training institutions attract and retain young students. Expanding investment in initiatives such as the Early Childhood and Family Education (ECFE) Teacher Shortage Grant Program, dual-enrollment opportunities (e.g., PESO, CTE pathways), high school career exploration initiatives, and structured mentorship programs can further support young professionals entering the ECE field. Additionally, it is important to shift the narrative around ECE careers by highlighting the growing recognition of their value, greater investment in the system, improvements in financial incentives, and expanded career advancement opportunities. Promoting success stories and available initiatives may help attract more young professionals to the field.

At the center-level:

- **Leverage resources to increase compensation and benefits for staff.**
  Beyond leveraging grants, initiatives, and resources mentioned above to improve the compensation and salary for staff, ECE centers can enhance staff benefits (e.g., paid time for professional development, retention bonuses, comprehensive benefits packages) to further support workforce stability, reduce work stress, and recognize the vital role of ECE workers.

- **Support staff well-being and professional growth in a positive workplace culture.**
  Expanding access to paid professional development, mentorship programs, and well-being initiatives can enhance job satisfaction and reduce burnout among ECE workers. Implementing flexible staffing models, leadership development programs, and workplace wellness resources can further improve the workplace conditions. To strengthen professional growth, ECE centers may leverage DHS-funded programs such as Child Care Wayfinder and Empower to Educate. These initiatives provide long-term career development support including individualized guidance, financial assistance, training packages, and job placement support.

- **Utilize experts and statewide networks to advocate for ECE workforce.** Minnesota has a passionate network of early childhood education advocates. Centers can leverage expertise and resources from organizations such as Child Trends, the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, and the Minnesota Children's Cabinet to enhance their workforce development efforts. More resources can be found in the full literature review here.

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# Appendix

## A. Interview protocol for ECE Centers

**ECE workforce interviews: ECE Centers**

**An evaluation project for Wilder's Child Development Center (CDC)**

Introduction/recruitment

Hello, my name is _____ and I work for Wilder Research. We are working with the Wilder Foundation's Child Development Center in St. Paul's Frogtown neighborhood on a research project about the early childhood education workforce. Specifically, we are interested in learning more about challenges and opportunities related to teacher recruitment and retention, and are reaching out to other centers in St. Paul to learn about their experiences in this area.

We are hoping to conduct a brief telephone interview with someone at your center about your experiences with teacher recruitment and retention. The interview should last about 30 minutes. We plan to combine the information we learn through these interviews with other information we are also gathering for this project.  This includes interviews with teacher preparatory programs about how people interested in working in the field of early childhood are preparing and entering the workforce, as well as a review of the literature on the early childhood education workforce in Minnesota. All of the findings will be integrated and published in a report that we would be happy to share with your center when it's complete.

Who would be the best person to talk with at your center about hiring and retaining teachers? (CONNECT WITH RECOMMENDED PERSON – REPEAT INTRO ABOVE WITH CORRECT PERSON)

(ONCE CONNECTED WITH CORRECT PERSON):

Would you be willing to participate in a 30-minute interview?

- YES → SCHEDULE A TIME.

- No → Thank you for your time. If you should change your mind, please contact me at (YOUR CONTACT INFORMATION). Also, if you have any centers in the area you think we should talk to, would you mind sharing those with me?

Before we begin, I want you to know that this interview is voluntary and confidential. You can choose to end the interview at any time or skip any questions we may ask you. Nothing you say in this interview will be personally linked back to you in any of our reporting. Only our internal

research team will have access to your individual responses. We may use select quotes in our reports but will remove identifiable information to protect your privacy.

Lastly, I would like to record this interview so that I can make sure my notes accurately reflect what you said. No one beyond our Wilder Research team will have access to this audio recording. Is it okay with you for me to record today's interview for this purpose?

- Yes → *begin recording*

- No → That's just fine. As we do the interview, I may pause now and then to make sure my notes are caught up with what you say.

Do you have any questions for me before we get into the interview questions?

**Interview questions for ECE centers**

1. Please tell me a little about your Center (AS NEEDED, PROBE FOR THE FOLLOWING – ESTIMATES ARE FINE):

    a. Number and ages of children served, number of classrooms?

        i. Total number of children served?

        ii. How many children by age groups/age ranges (e.g., by classroom)?

    b. Do any children or their families receive:

        i. CCAP (MN Child Care Assistance Program)?

        . How many or what proportion of children/families?

        ii. MDE's Early Learning Scholarships?

        . How many or what proportion of children/families?

    c. Are you affiliated with or participate in any of these accreditations or organizations:

        i. Head Start?

        ii. NAECY (pronounced NAY-SEE)?

        iii. Parent Aware?

        iv. Any others?

    d. What is your current staffing (all staff, including number of teachers and other staff, both FT/PT)? How many are teachers, assistants, or aides?

2. Have you had challenges recruiting and/or retaining teachers, assistants, or aides, either currently or in the past? Can you speak to some of these challenges?

    a. Have you ever had to fill a full-time position with multiple part-time positions?

3. What are you currently doing to recruit and retain teachers, assistants, and aides?

4. Is your current approach different than what you have done in the past? If yes → Why did you change your approach? How is the current approach working?

5. Have you adjusted how you are paying/incentivizing teachers, assistants, and aides? In what ways? Has this had an effect on recruitment or retention?

6. Have you taken advantage of the Great Start compensation funds that are being offered?

    a. If yes → Can you tell me more about how you are using those funds? Do they seem to have had an impact on teacher recruitment/retention? How so?

    b. If no → Is there a reason you haven't?

    c. Are there other initiatives, grants, or funding that your center has tapped into to support teachers, assistants, and aides?

        i. If YES: a) What are they?  b) Has [name funding source] had an impact on teacher recruitment or retention?  c) If YES,  In what ways?

7. Is there anything else about your center's approach to teacher recruitment and retention that you'd like to share?

We are talking to a number of other centers in the area but if there are any in particular you think we should speak with, please let me know. (RECORD NAME OF CENTER/STAFF)

# B. Interview protocol for ECE teacher preparation programs

**ECE workforce interviews: Teacher preparation programs**

**An evaluation project for Wilder's Child Development Center (CDC)**

Introduction/recruitment

Hello, my name is _____ and I work for Wilder Research. We are working with the Wilder Foundation's Child Development Center in St. Paul's Frogtown neighborhood on a research project about the early childhood education workforce and issues of teacher recruitment and retention. As part of this project, we are reaching out to ECE teacher preparatory programs and colleges across the Twin Cities as well as Central and Southern Minnesota. Specifically, we are interested in learning about the experience of and trends observed by programs in preparing the future workforce.

We are hoping to conduct a brief telephone interview with someone at your institution about your ECE teacher prep program. The interview should last about 30 minutes. We plan to combine the information we learn through these interviews with other information we are also gathering for this project. This includes interviews with early childhood education centers about their experiences with teacher recruitment and retention, as well as a review of the literature on the early childhood education workforce in Minnesota. All of the findings will be integrated and published in a report that we can share with you when it is complete.

Who would be the best person to talk with at your institution about your ECE teacher prep program? (CONNECT WITH RECOMMENDED PERSON – REPEAT INTRO ABOVE WITH CORRECT PERSON)

(ONCE CONNECTED WITH CORRECT PERSON):

Would you be willing to participate in a 30-minute interview?

- YES → SCHEDULE A TIME.

- No → Thank you for your time. If you should change your mind, please contact  me at (YOUR CONTACT INFORMATION). Also, if you know of other programs, at other institutions, you think we should talk to, would you mind sharing those with me?

Before we begin, I want you to know that this interview is voluntary and confidential. You can choose to end the interview at any time or skip any questions we may ask you. Nothing you say in this interview will be personally linked back to you in any of our reporting. Only our internal research team will have access to your individual responses. We may use select quotes in our reports but will remove identifiable information to protect your privacy.

Lastly, I would like to record this interview so that I can make sure my notes accurately reflect what you said. No one beyond our Wilder Research team will have access to this audio recording. Is it okay with you for me to record today's interview for this purpose?

- Yes → begin recording

- No → That's just fine. As we do the interview, I may pause now and then to make sure my notes are caught up with what you say.

Do you have any questions for me before we get into the interview questions?

**Interview questions for Teacher Prep programs**

1. I'd like to learn a little more about the teacher preparatory program you offer and the students you serve. Starting with the program itself, can you tell me about:

    a. The type of training or preparation you provide, in terms of the degrees/credentialing offered

    b. The format of instruction (in-person, online, or hybrid?)

    c. The structure of the program (flex path, accelerated, or guided?)

Now turning to the students, can you tell me about (ESTIMATES ARE FINE):

    d. The number and background of students served in these various programs or tracks each year (BACKGROUND INCLUDES THINGS LIKE RACE/ETHNICITY, AGE, INCOME/ABILITY TO AFFORD PROGRAM)

    e. Whether scholarships are offered to students (→ if so, what proportion receive scholarships?)

    f. How students are connected to community childcare, either for internships or observation opportunities? How do you share that information with your students?

        i. Do you have relationships or connections with specific ECE centers in the community? If yes → In what ways are you partnering with local centers?

2. Can you tell me about the trends you have observed in terms of the number of students entering your ECE prep program? Are more or fewer students entering now compared to 5 or 10 years ago?

3. What are students' primary motivations for entering the program? What are their career aspirations?

4. How would you describe students' level of engagement in the program? (ADD AS NEEDED – ARE THEY SHOWING UP, PARTICIPATING, INTERESTED/EXCITED/MOTIVATED TO BE THERE?)

    a. Have you seen changes in this over the years?

    b. If yes → What do you think is contributing to this change?

5. What are you currently doing to promote your program to students?

    a. What seems to be most successful in recruiting students to your program?

    b. Has your approach changed over the years? If yes → how so, and why?  Are any approaches or changes being made to address local challenges, such as teacher shortages, turnover, and cultural needs?

6. What challenges or barriers are your students encountering when they enter the workforce?

    a. Do you know how many (for example, what proportion) remain in the field?

    b. If they don't, do you know why some choose to leave the field?

7. Is there anything else you would like to share about your ECE program?

# C. Description of local ECE centers and teacher preparation programs interviewed

In collaboration with the Wilder Foundation's Child Development Center, Wilder Research conducted interviews with 7 local ECE centers and 10 teacher preparation programs. Below is a description of the organizations that were interviewed.

## LOCAL ECE CENTERS INTERVIEWED

Interviews with local ECE centers targeted a mix of nonprofit and for-profit models in the Saint Paul area. This focus was selected to explore strategies and challenges faced by centers with similar operational models to Wilder's Child Development Center. Additionally, some large nonprofit centers were included to provide broader context and knowledge. Table C1 shows the basic information of the seven centers interviewed.

### C1. Description of ECE centers interviewed

|  | A | B | C | D | E | F | G |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Number of children served** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Total (fulltime & part-time) | 52 | 130 | 190 | 142 | 60 | - | 146 |
| Infant | 6 | 30 | 28 | 22 | 18 | - | 22 |
| Toddler | 12 | 40 | 42 | 37 | 19 | - | 63 |
| Preschooler/pre-K | 27 | 60 | 80 | 77 | 17 | - | 61 |
| **Staffing** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Fulltime teachers | 8 | 12 | 20 | 40 | 5 | - | 25 |
| Other staff (e.g., asst., aides, non-class staff) | 2 | 17 | 24 | - | 18 | - | 16 |

Source. Interviews with ECE center representatives.

Note: 1) The interviewee from Center F did not provide information mentioned above; 2) the discrepancies between the total numbers and the sum of each sub-group's information are due to interviewees estimating the counts based on their knowledge, which may result in slight deviations in some data.

Among the seven centers, five had children or their families receiving the Minnesota Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) resources, and five utilized Minnesota Department of Education's Early Learning Scholarships to support their staff and families. Only one center, a private school, did not use any of these resources.

In terms of participation in accreditations, six centers engaged in one or more accreditations provided by Head Start, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), Parent Aware, the National Early Childhood Program Accreditation (NECPA), and/or Cognia Accreditation—with four centers participating in multiple accreditations. Only one center had not participated in any at the time of the interview but indicated they were working toward accreditation.

## ECE TEACHER PREPARATION PROGRAMS INTERVIEWED

Representatives from local colleges and universities offering ECE diploma or certification programs were engaged based on their roles and their relevance in preparing students for careers in early childhood education.

As shown in Table C2, most of these programs consisted primarily of non-traditional students. These students did not enroll directly after high school; many already had work experience in the ECE field and needed to balance work, life, and study commitments. Additionally, three interviewees mentioned that a significant number of their students came from low-income backgrounds.

All the programs interviewed emphasized diversity and reported efforts to enroll and support BIPOC students. Although more than half of the programs are predominantly White, the proportion of BIPOC students remains robust. Additionally, seven out of ten programs observed an increase in the diversity of their student composition, enrolling more racially diverse individuals, younger students, and multilingual users.

### C2. Description of ECE teacher preparation programs interviewed

|  | A | B | C | D | E | F | G | H | I | J |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Total number of students** (all years, all tracks) | 180-200 | 50 | - | - | 40 | 200 | 30 | 100 | 40 | - |
| **Student characteristics** | | | | | | | | | | |
| Primarily non-traditional students | √ | | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | | √ | √ |
| Predominantly White | √ | √ | | √ | √ | | | √ | √ | |
| BIPOC student rate | > school's average | | | 25% | 12% | Highly diverse | 75-80% | 30% | 30-40% | |
| **Type of training** | | | | | | | | | | |
| Certificate | √ | | | | √ | √ | √ | | √ | √ |
| Diploma | √ | | | | √ | √ | √ | | | √ |
| Associate degree | √ | | | √ | √ | √ | √ | | √ | √ |
| Bachelor's degree | √ | √ | √ | √ | | | | √ | √ | |
| Master's degree | | √ | | √ | | | | | | |

Source. Interviews with ECE teacher preparation program representatives.

Note. 1) The student counts were estimates provided by interviewees. Interviewees from programs C, D, and J did not provide exact counts of their students. 2) The interviewees from programs B, C, and F did not provide details for the information mentioned above. 3) Programs offering Bachelor's degrees include general ECE degrees, specialized degrees in Early Childhood Special Education, and degrees with or without licensure requirements.

Of the ten programs interviewed, four did not experience significant fluctuations in enrollment numbers, maintaining strong enrollment rates even during the COVID-19 pandemic. In contrast, five programs reported declines in enrollment in recent years, primarily due to the pandemic; however, three of these programs saw an increase in enrollment post-pandemic. One program experienced over a 40% increase in student enrollment in recent years.

In terms of program design, five programs offered hybrid courses, with two prioritizing in-person teaching and learning. Three programs exclusively provided online courses. Two programs offered both in-person and online courses for different degrees, with in-person requirements specifically for licensure and Montessori credential training that demanded higher levels of teacher-student interaction.

Although nine out of 10 programs provided guided and set pathways, most allowed course plans to be flexible and highly accommodating for students (n=7). Additionally, four programs included stackable credentials to help students build their qualifications incrementally, enabling them to progress in their education or career at their own pace. All the interviewed two-year colleges (n=5) supported students in taking advantage of transfer pathways to four-year institutions.

Wilder Research, a division of Amherst H. Wilder Foundation, is a nationally respected nonprofit research and evaluation group. For more than 100 years, Wilder Research has gathered and interpreted facts and trends to help families and communities thrive, get at the core of community concerns, and uncover issues that are overlooked or poorly understood.

451 Lexington Parkway North
Saint Paul, Minnesota 55104

651-280-2700 | www.wilderresearch.org

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