

# Colorado Early Childhood Workforce Survey 2017

*Research to  
Practice  
Brief 2*

## Supporting the Educational Attainment and Professional Development Needs of Colorado's Early Educator Workforce

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### KEY FINDINGS

- ▷ In general, early educators felt prepared to meet the care and learning needs of typically developing children but are in need of an expanded set of professional development opportunities focused on the care and learning needs of English language learners, children who have experienced adversities in their lives, and children with special health, learning, and behavioral support needs.
- ▷ Lead teachers felt more prepared to provide instruction across curricular areas than assistant teachers, indicating that in-service professional development tailored to career and expertise levels may be important for meeting the diverse needs of the workforce.
- ▷ A significant percentage of early educators forgo in-service professional development because of the cost of attending, having to take unpaid workdays to attend, or not having access to substitute coverage while in trainings.
- ▷ Family child care providers often felt that in-service professional development and college classes in ECE were geared toward center-based teachers and that tailored training options and family child care degree cohorts may motivate more to participate in professional development and pursue degree attainment.
- ▷ There is a high desire by many early educators to pursue educational advancement, yet the cost of higher education and lack of convenient course offerings for working adults prevent many from enrolling.

## INTRODUCTION

It's undeniable that early educators have a complex job. And in recent years, their jobs have grown even more complex as efforts to expand high-quality early care and education (ECE) services to Colorado's most vulnerable children have also grown. Many early educators now work in programs where they support the needs of dual-language learners, children with special health and learning needs, and children who have experienced a variety of adversities in their young lives, including poverty, homelessness, and abuse<sup>i</sup>. As research has increasingly demonstrated the important role that ECE can play in closing the achievement gap<sup>ii</sup> and as more rigorous academic standards have been expanded into elementary schools<sup>iii</sup>, many early educators are also now required to provide instruction in literacy, math, and science to prepare children for kindergarten and beyond.

Indeed, early educators have jobs that bear a great deal of responsibility that require both a foundational level of knowledge gained through formal academic preparation and access to ongoing professional development opportunities to meet the complex learning needs of Colorado's youngest children<sup>iv</sup>. Yet because there are few educational requirements to obtain jobs in the field, early educators come to their roles with a variety of educational and preparatory experiences ranging from a high school diploma to a graduate degree, often in fields other than in Early Childhood Education. Thus, in national surveys of preschool teachers, significant proportions indicate that they do not feel prepared to provide instruction



across multiple subject areas<sup>v</sup> or to meet the care and learning needs of children from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds<sup>vi</sup>. Consequently understanding the areas in which early educators in Colorado feel both prepared and under-prepared is essential to developing higher education curriculum and ongoing, in-service professional development that meets the needs of Colorado's early educator workforce.

Given the important role that early educators' play in the lives of children and families, calls have also been made by the Institute of Medicine and National Research Council<sup>vi</sup> to raise minimum educational requirements for early educators to the level of a Bachelor's degree (B.A.<sup>1</sup>). In addition,

<sup>1</sup> For ease of reading, references made to a Bachelor's degree are abbreviated as a B.A. degree but also refer to Bachelor's of Science or B.S. degrees.

Head Start now mandates that at least 50% of teachers in a center have a B.A. in ECE. Colorado Shines, the state's quality rating and improvement system, also awards points to ECE programs, in part, based on their staff's professional credentials. As a result of this increased focus on professional preparation and qualifications, some early educators in Colorado are considering pursuing a degree.

Yet for many professionals in the field, pursuing a degree can be challenging. Many early educators work in low-wage jobs and are considered non-traditional students who have to balance school, work and often family-life. In addition, many feel underprepared academically for the demands of college coursework. For these reasons, many early educators are unable to afford and access higher education, and when they do, they are at-risk for not completing a degree<sup>viii</sup>. Consequently, understanding the supports that they would need to pursue higher education is of critical importance when developing a comprehensive set of strategies to elevate the knowledge and skills of early educator workforce in Colorado.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The purpose of this research brief is to understand the professional development needs of Colorado's early educator workforce. Specifically this research brief will address the following questions:

1. In what areas do early educators feel prepared and underprepared to meet the development and learning needs of Colorado's youngest children?
2. What barriers do early educators experience in accessing in-service professional development?
3. What percentage of early educators wants to continue their education, and what supports do they perceive they would need to do so successfully?

## SAMPLE

The sample used for this research brief includes 2,306 lead teachers, 1,118 assistant teachers, and 496 family child care providers across Colorado who provide early care and education (ECE) services to children birth through five. Of the teaching staff in center and school-based programs, approximately 45% worked in community-based programs, 30% worked in Head Start, and 25% worked in public school-based ECE classrooms. For the purposes of this study, community-based ECE centers are defined as programs that are not housed in public schools and do not receive Head Start funding, Head Start centers are defined as centers receiving Head Start funding but not located in public schools, and public school-based ECE programs are defined as any classroom that is located in a public school and/or governed by a school district. For more information about the sample and how it was collected, please see the *Colorado Early Childhood Workforce Survey 2017 Final Report*<sup>ix</sup>.

## RESULTS

### RQ# 1. *In what areas do early educators feel prepared and underprepared to meet the development and learning needs of Colorado’s youngest children?*

To address this research question, early educators in this sample were asked to rate, on a 1-4 scale, with 4 meaning well-prepared, how prepared they felt to meet the care and learning needs of different children and to provide instruction across curricular areas. Table 1 displays results by job role.

In general, early educators perceived themselves to be prepared to meet the care and learning needs of typically developing children and to work with families. Across job roles, they felt less prepared to meet the needs of children with special health care needs, English language learners, and children who have experienced trauma. Family child care providers also reported feeling less prepared to meet the care and learning needs of children with developmental delays, children with challenging behaviors, children living in poverty, and children from diverse cultural and language backgrounds than teachers in center and public school-based ECE settings<sup>2</sup>. When considering instruction, lead teachers reported feeling most prepared to teach across multiple subject areas.

**Table 1. Perceptions of Preparation for Job**

	Lead Teachers		Assistant Teachers		Family Child Care Providers	
	Mean	Std Dev.	Mean	Std Dev.	Mean	Std Dev.
<b>How prepared to meet the care and learning needs of:</b>						
Typically developing children	3.67	0.75	3.55	0.75	3.69	0.61
Children with developmental delays	3.12	0.79	2.94	0.84	2.85	0.87
Children with special health care needs	2.87	0.87	2.72	0.90	2.55	0.96
English language learners	2.97	0.93	2.94	0.95	2.71	1.12
Children from diverse cultural backgrounds	3.18	0.81	3.10	0.84	2.99	0.92
Children living in poverty	3.16	0.87	3.12	0.86	2.89	0.93
Children who have experienced trauma	2.79	0.87	2.71	0.90	2.62	0.94
Children with challenging behaviors	3.14	0.79	2.98	0.82	2.90	0.84
<b>How prepared to provide instruction in:</b>						
Language arts/literacy	3.26	0.84	2.98	0.88	3.14	0.91
STEM	3.30	0.81	3.08	0.86	3.13	0.88
Creative arts	3.42	0.80	3.18	0.86	3.28	0.85
<b>How prepared to:</b>						
Conduct and use child assessments	3.45	0.80	3.17	0.83	3.12	0.87
Work with diverse families	3.52	0.79	3.30	0.83	3.59	0.76
Provide supervision to assistant teachers	3.11	0.91	NA	NA	NA	NA
Run a business	NA	NA	NA	NA	3.63	0.68

<sup>2</sup> In instances throughout this brief where key differences among types of early educators are highlighted, the differences are statistically significant at the 0.05 level.

## RQ#2. What barriers do early educators experience in ongoing training and professional development?

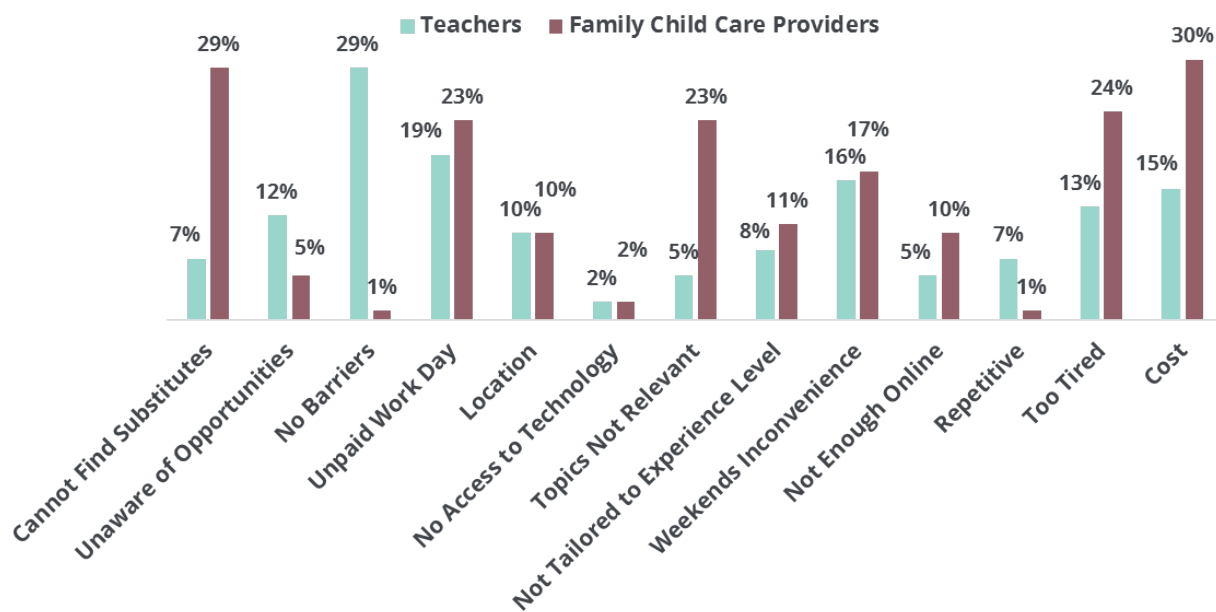
Center and public-school based teachers<sup>3</sup> and family child care providers were also asked to report on the barriers that they experienced in accessing training and professional development opportunities. As can be seen in Figure 1, family child care providers experienced significantly more barriers than teachers. For instance, 30% of teachers in this sample reported that they do not experience any barriers, compared to 1% of family child care providers.

With respect to teaching staff in center and public school-based programs, the most frequently nominated barriers that prevented them from participating in professional development opportunities were financial in nature, with:

- 19% indicating that they have to take unpaid workdays to attend trainings, and
- 15% indicating that the cost of professional development was prohibitive for them.

In addition, 16% of teachers reported that most professional development opportunities in their communities were offered on weekends so that teachers could attend and not have to take an unpaid workday. However, these 16% felt that weekends were times in which they needed and wanted to be with their families, so they often elected not to participate.

Figure 1. Barriers to In-service Professional Development



<sup>3</sup> Lead and assistant teachers working in center and public school-based ECE programs were combined to address this research question.



Family child care providers in this sample also experienced a complicated set of inter-related barriers to accessing training and professional development, many of which were also financial in nature. For instance,

- 30% indicated that the cost of professional development was prohibitive to them,
- 29% reported that they could not find or afford to pay for substitutes while attending trainings, and
- 23% reported that the cost of taking an unpaid workday to attend professional development often prevented them from participating.

Approximately 17% of family child care providers also reported that most professional development in their communities occurred on weekends and interfered with their family lives, and 24% reported that they were too tired from their work with children to attend trainings on weekends or evenings.

Importantly, 23% of the sample of family child care providers also indicated that they did not participate in professional development because they felt that most trainings were tailored toward teachers in early learning centers and were not perceived as being relevant to providers who work in home-based ECE programs.

### ***RQ#3. What percentage of early educators wants to continue their education and what supports do they perceive they would need to do so successfully?***

Teachers<sup>4</sup> and family child care providers not currently enrolled in a college or university were asked about whether they would like to pursue a degree in Early Childhood Education or a related field. Results suggest a high desire by many early educators to pursue higher education. In this sample, 66% of teachers and 81% of family child care providers were not currently enrolled in a degree or certificate program. Of these, approximately 87% of teachers and 73% of family child care providers indicated they would like to pursue a degree or certificate, if provided support.

Figure 2 displays the types of supports these early educators believed they would need to pursue educational advancement. In general, the supports fell into six categories: financial, course structure, student services, course content, academic support, and employer support.

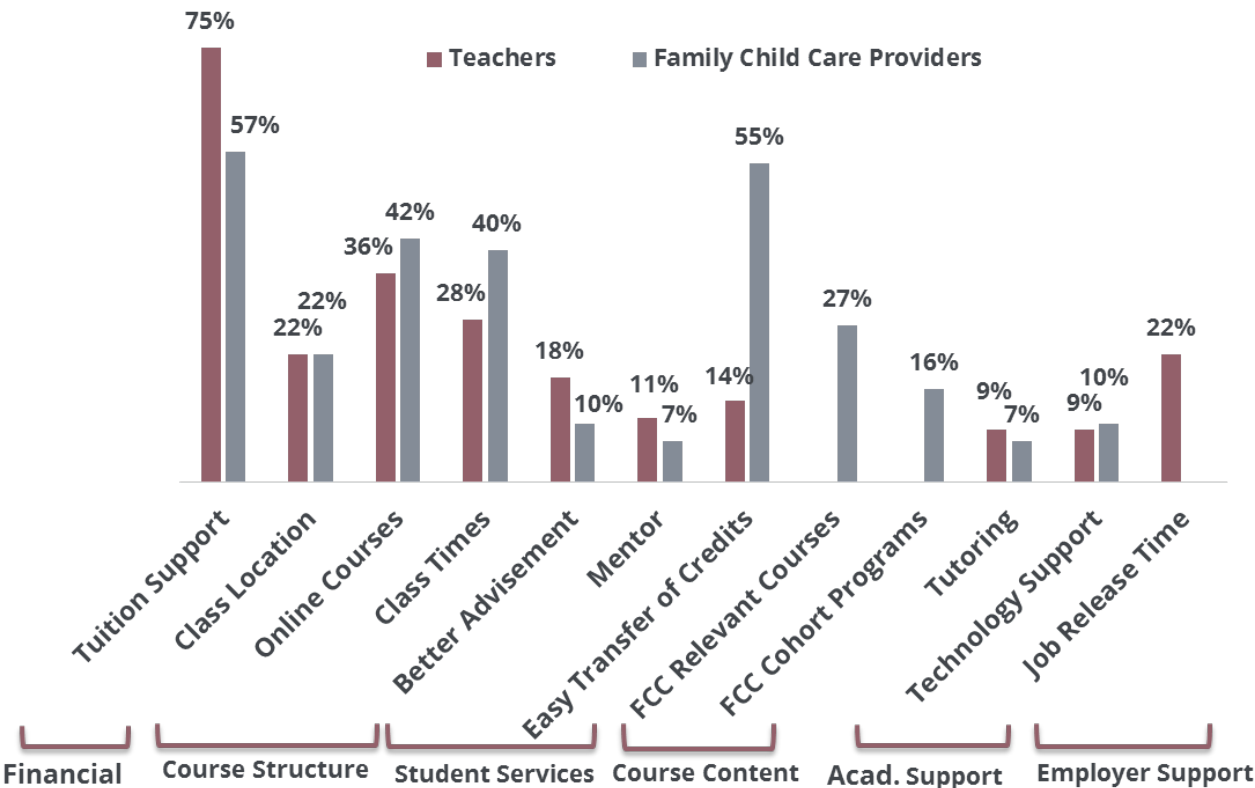
***Financial.*** Given the low wages earned by many early educators, financial support was by far the most commonly mentioned assistance needed to pursue higher education. Approximately 75% of teachers and 57% of family child care providers believed that tuition assistance would be essential to be able to enroll in school.

<sup>4</sup>Lead and assistant teachers working in center and public school-based ECE programs were combined to address this research question.

**Course Structure.** Of particular importance for both family child care providers and teachers were more convenient class times (e.g., nights and weekends), more on-line course options, and more convenient course locations.

**Student Services.** Early educators varied in the student services that they believed would support their success in school. For example, 18% of teachers and 10% of family child care providers noted a need for better advisement to ensure that they take the right classes needed toward a degree that would meet their career goals. Approximately 11% of teachers and 7% of family child care providers also indicated that having a mentor to help them navigate school and work life and apply what they are learning in college courses to their work with children would be helpful. Approximately 14% of teachers and 55% of family child care providers also indicated that they would need easier transfer of prior course credits into a degree program.

Figure 2. Supports Needed to Pursue Higher Education



**Course Content.** Course content was of particular relevance to many family child care providers. Approximately 27% felt that college course work needs to be more relevant to home-based ECE programs, while 16% reported that having family child care provider degree cohort options would be an important incentive for them to enroll in school.

**Academic Support.** In general, most early educators did not feel that they needed academic support. Only 9% of teachers and 7% of family child care providers noted that tutoring would be an important aid for them to be able to pursue higher education successfully. Only 10% of teachers and 9% of family child care providers reported that they would need support for using technology.

**Employer Support.** To help balance the demands of work and school life, approximately 22% of teachers noted that job release time would be important for enabling them to pursue educational advancement.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY & PRACTICE

The results of this research brief suggest several important areas in which Colorado as a state and local communities might consider investing in workforce development efforts.

### ***Building a Substitute Pool***

For instance, local communities may consider funding a shared services substitute pool that ECE programs and family child care providers can access for their staff to be able to attend trainings during the workday so that programs do not have to shoulder the double financial burden of paying staff and a substitute. By far, the biggest barrier to both teachers and family child care providers participating in in-service professional development was having to take unpaid days to attend, and many teachers and providers felt that attending professional development on weekends and evenings interfered with their family lives.

### ***Designing In-Service Professional Development and College Classes Focused on Dual-Language Learners, Early Adversity, and Children with Special Health, Learning, and Behavioral Support Needs***

The results of this research brief also suggest that both teachers and family child care providers felt underprepared to meet the learning needs of dual-language learners, children with special health, learning and behavioral needs, and children who have experienced significant adversity in their lives. As Colorado considers revisions to their early childhood professional development plan, and as institutions of higher education consider their course offerings, it may be important to ensure that there are





more learning opportunities, both credit and non-credit bearing, for early educators to build their knowledge and skills in caring for and instructing these children.

### ***Tailored Professional Development***

Colorado may consider efforts to tailor in-service professional development opportunities to an early educator's career level and work context. Results from this brief suggest that lead teachers have different professional development needs than assistant teachers and family child care providers with respect to professional development content. States such as Georgia have developed their Early Childhood Professional Development System to target training opportunities to "beginning," "intermediate," and "advanced" professionals to ensure relevancy in training opportunities across a professional's career. Similarly, the results of this brief suggest that a sizable number of family child care providers forego professional development in their communities because they perceive that the content is too geared toward teachers in centers. Modifying trainings to be more responsive to the needs of home-based family child care providers may be an important strategy to motivate them to participate.

### ***Developing a Scholarship Program Linked to Retention***

One of the most significant findings in this research brief is the high demand and desire by both teachers and family child care providers to pursue more higher education. Given the very low wages earned by most early educators<sup>x</sup>, shouldering the cost of a college degree is likely impossible for a majority of the workforce. Colorado may consider investing much more significantly in scholarship programs that are linked to both degree attainment and staff retention in their jobs. New York State recently made tuition free in state colleges and universities under the Excelsior Fellowship. After graduation, students are required to work in the state for five years, and if they leave, their scholarship converts to a student loan. Colorado might consider a scholarship program like New York State's that requires substantial work commitments to meet the dual goals of advancing the educational qualifications of the ECE workforce and retaining them in their jobs.

### ***Scan of Colorado's Institutions of Higher Education***

Given the emphasis on degree attainment for early educators, it will be important for Colorado to assess the extent to which its colleges and universities are prepared to support and innovate to meet the educational needs of Colorado's early educator workforce. A scan of ECE degree programs will be important to better understand the extent to which convenient courses and on-line course offerings are available and where gaps exist, the capacity of faculty, the student support services provided (e.g., ECE advisors, tutoring, etc.) and the articulation agreements in place that foster seamless credit transfers between two- and four-year programs and that enable degree persistence and accelerate success.

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