Compensation, Benefits, and the Early Childhood Workforce: Insights from Three Surveys

A Report Prepared by:

Child Care Initiative
North Central Michigan College

Introduction

To better understand how compensation and benefits affect the lives of the Early Childhood Workforce, the North Central Michigan College (NCMC) Child Care Initiative (CCI) created three surveys: one for applicants to the Early Learning Center (ELC) program at NCMC, one for new hires at the ELC, and one for the Early Childhood Education (ECE) Workforce in the region.

Executive Summary

This report explores how compensation and benefits influence workforce decisions in early childhood education (ECE), from beginning in the field to remaining in or leaving jobs. Surveys of applicants and new hires at North Central Michigan College's Early Learning Center, along with a regional ECE workforce survey, provide insights into the complex factors that shape career choices in this important sector.

Across all groups surveyed, salary and benefits were highly influential, but not the only factors affecting decisions. Applicants and new hires appreciated NCMC's reputation, location, and Reggio Emilia approach. At the same time, many in the broader ECE workforce mentioned passion for children, relationships with co-workers, and work-life balance as reasons they stay in the field. However, low wages and limited access to benefits remain ongoing barriers to workforce stability, often cited as the main reasons professionals might leave their roles for better pay or improved benefits.

Findings emphasize the urgent need for strategies that make ECE careers sustainable, including raising wages, expanding benefits, funding professional development, and promoting cost-sharing models that help close the gap between what families can afford and the true cost of high-quality care. Tackling these challenges is vital to recruit and keep skilled educators, cut down turnover, and strengthen the early learning system for children, families, and communities.

Key Findings

Attraction

- "Organization-NCMC," "Location," and "Reggio Emilia" were the top three factors identified by the ELC Applicants that impacted their decision to apply for a position at the ELC.
- "Reggio Emilia," "Working for NCMC," "Location," and "Other" (returning to the field of Early Childhood Education after working in other industries) were the top three factors identified by the ELC New Hires that impacted their decision to apply for their current position.
- "Location," "Summers Off," and "Salary" were the top three factors identified by the ECE Workforce that impacted their decision to apply for their current position.

Retention

- On average, when asked what impact salary and benefits have on their decision to stay in their current positions, ECE Workforce survey respondents identified salary and benefits as a score of 3.92 and 3.34, respectively (on a scale of 1=No impact at all, 5=Very impactful).
- Beyond salary and benefits: “The children, Co-workers, The hours, and The families” were the most cited factors for why the ECE Workforce stays in their current position.

Movement

- “Higher pay,” “Paid time off,” and “Benefits” are the top three factors identified by the ECE Workforce survey that would impact their decision to leave their current position.

Methodology, Survey Population and Answers

Applicant Survey

The survey produced varied results regarding attraction to the position. The most influential factors for applicants were the Organization (NCMC), Location, and Reggio Emilia programming. The survey also showed that respondents considered salary and benefits to be "Very Impactful" or "Impactful" when applying for a position at the ELC.

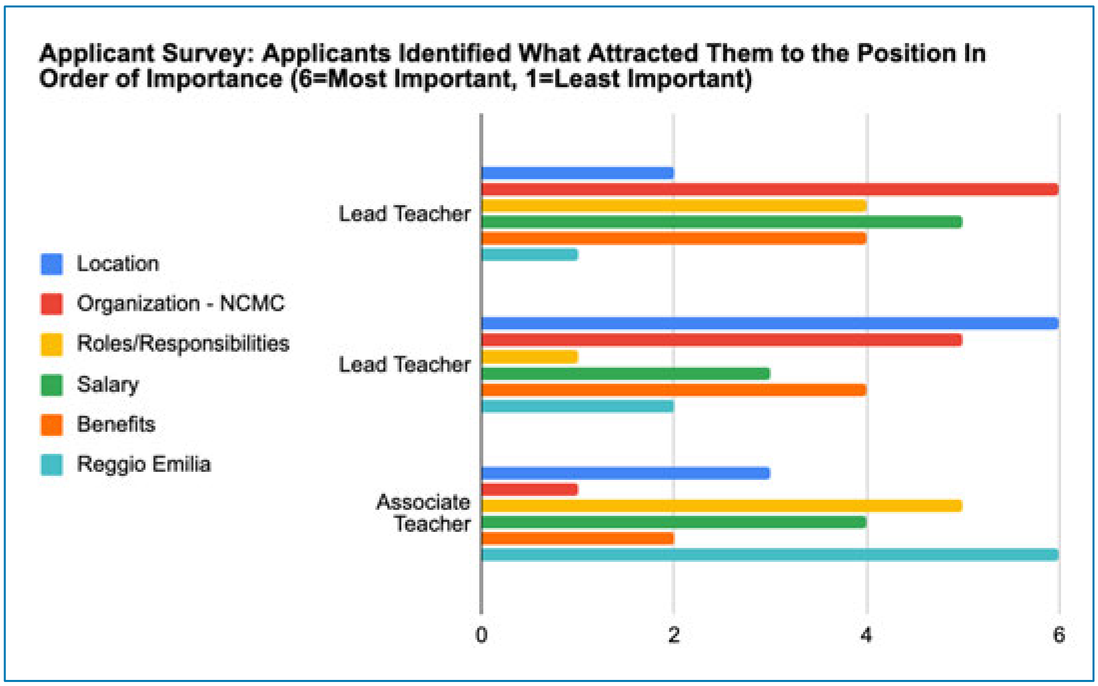
Research Question

- What impact did salary and benefits have on your decision to apply for the ELC position?

Survey Population/Answers

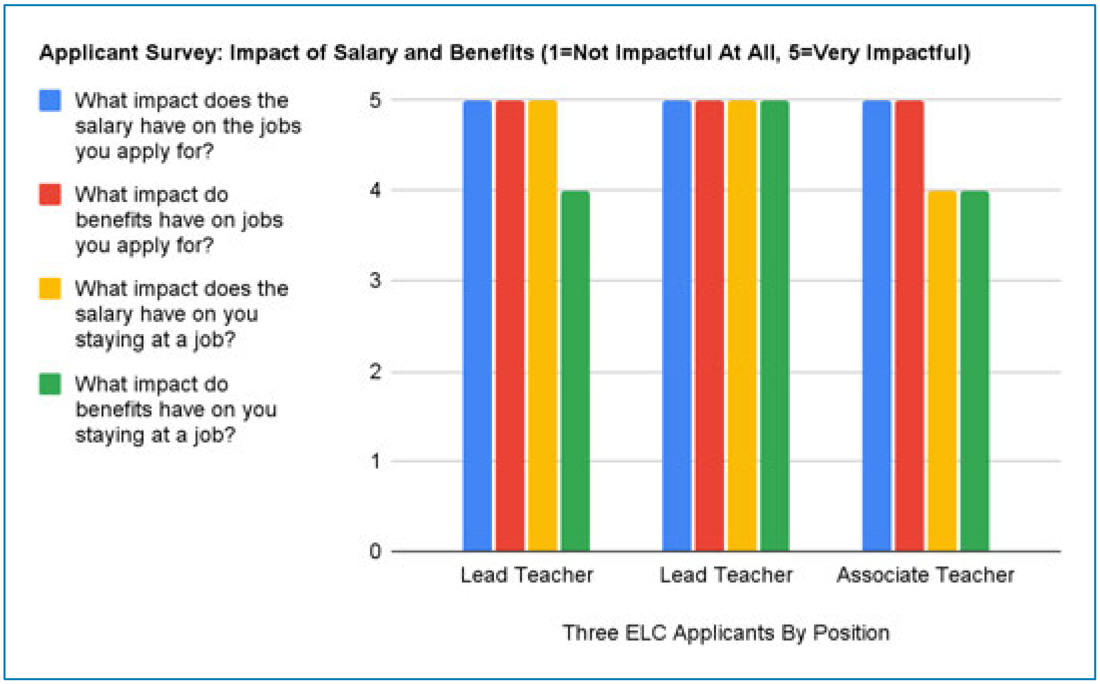
The survey was sent to a total of eleven applicants, with three responding. Two of the three respondents applied for the Lead Teacher position at the Early Learning Center, and one applied for the Associate Teacher position.

Regarding what attracted the applicants to the positions, their answers varied significantly. Without demographic data, it is difficult to conclude responses related to household makeup, income, and other factors. The respondents identified various factors that they considered most important in choosing the position. ELC applicants mentioned: “Organization-NCMC,” “Location,” and “Reggio Emilia.” For the least important factors, they listed: “Reggio Emilia,” “Role/Responsibilities,” and “Organization-NCMC.”



Each of the three respondents ranked “Salary” differently: 2nd, 4th, and 3rd in importance, with an average of 3.00. Similarly, “Benefits” was ranked 3rd by two respondents and 5th by the other, averaging 3.67.

When asked how much salary influenced their job applications, all three respondents answered, “Very Impactful.” Regarding how salary affected their decision to stay at their current job, two said “Very Impactful,” and one said “Impactful.” When asked about the benefits’ effect on staying at their current job, one replied “Very Impactful,” while two said “Impactful.”



New Hire Survey

All new ELC employees responded to the survey. Organization (NCMC), Other (returning to the field), Location, and Reggio Emilia were the main factors influencing their decision to apply. Additionally, applicants rated salary as a mean of 4.25 on a scale of 1-5 (1=Not Impactful At All, 5=Very Impactful), and benefits as a mean of 3.75 regarding how impactful they were in their decision to apply.

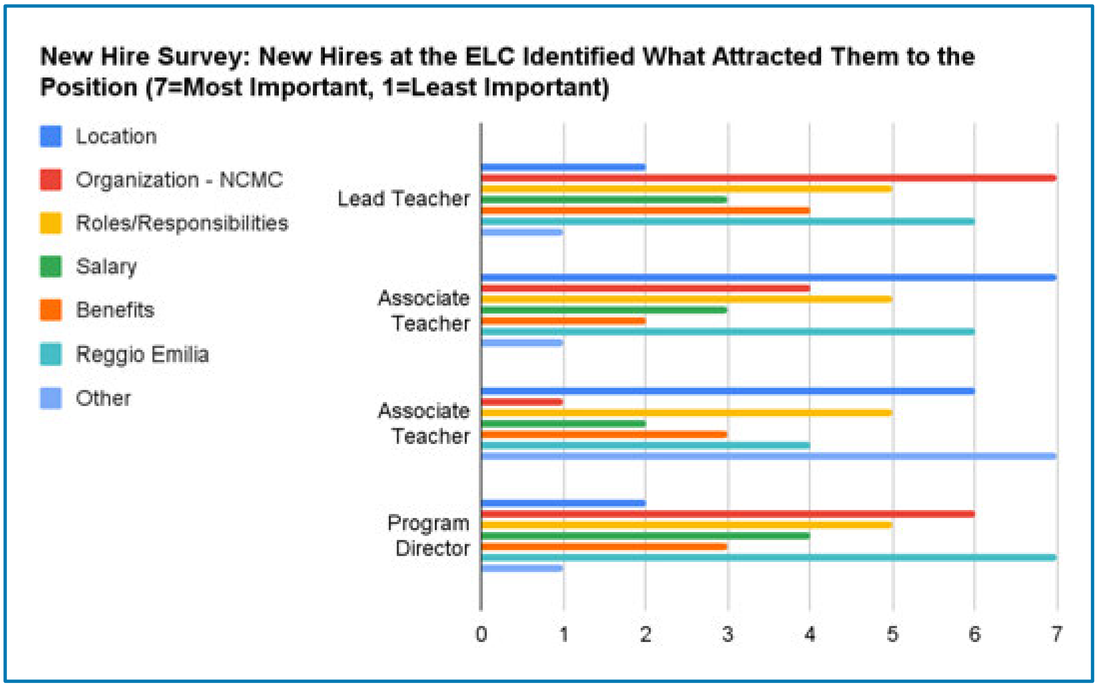
Research Question

- What impact did salary and benefits have on your decision to apply for the ELC position?

Survey Population/Answers

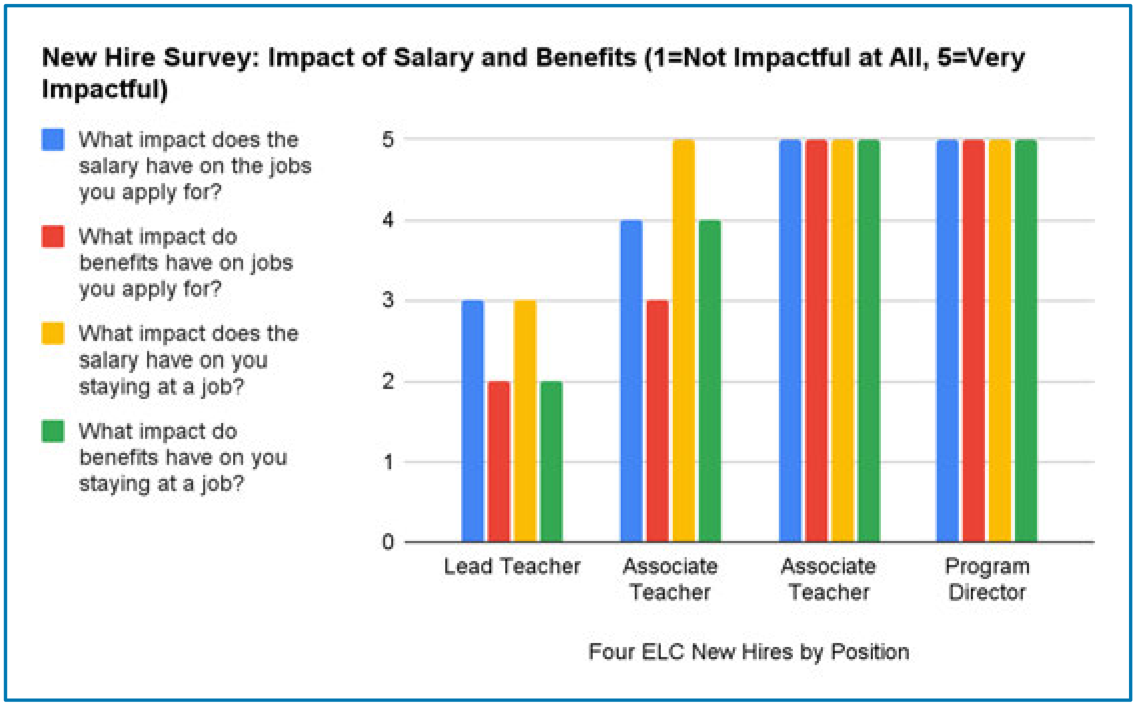
The new hire survey was distributed to four new hires: a Program Administrator, a Lead Teacher, and two Associate Teachers. When the new hires were asked to identify what attracted them to their current position, their responses were varied. For the Program Director, the most important factor was “Reggio Emilia programming”. For the Lead Teacher, “working for NCMC” was the most important factor. One of the Associate Teachers identified “Location" as the most important factor, while the other identified “Other" explaining that returning to the field of Early Childhood Education after working in different industries was the most significant factor.

Additionally, when examining the importance of "Salary" on the survey, the Program Director ranked it 4th on a scale of 1-7. In contrast, two new hires (Lead Teacher and Associate Teacher) ranked it 5th, and the other Associate Teacher ranked it 6th. Salary, therefore, had a mean of 5. Benefits ranked similarly, with the Lead Teacher identifying its importance as 4th on the scale. An Associate Teacher and the Program Director ranked it 5th on the scale of what attracted them to the position, while the other Associate Teacher ranked Benefits 6th on a scale of 1-7. Benefits also had a mean of 5.



When the four new hires at the ELC were asked to rank the impact salary has on the jobs that they apply for, two answered "Very Impactful," one answered "Impactful", and one answered, "Somewhat Impactful." Similarly, when asked about the impact of salary on their decision to stay at a job, three respondents answered, "Very Impactful", and one answered, "Somewhat Impactful". The salary had a mean of 4.25 for applying for jobs and 4.5 for staying in a job.

When asked about the impact of benefits on the jobs they applied for, two respondents described it as "Very Impactful," one as "Somewhat Impactful," and one as "Not Impactful." Similarly, when asked about the effect of benefits on their decision to stay at a job, two answered "Very Impactful," one answered "Impactful," and one answered, "Not Impactful." Benefits had a mean score of 3.75 for applying for jobs and 4.0 for staying at a job.



ECE Workforce Survey

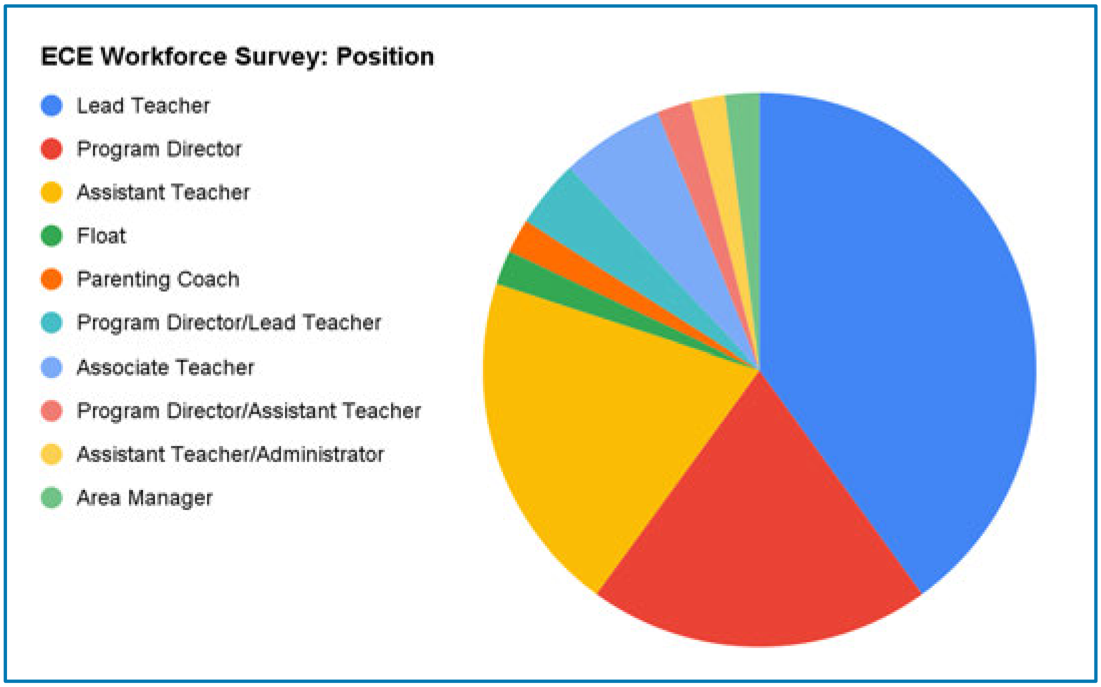
Responses to the ECE Workforce Motivations Survey, distributed to ECE programs in the north central region, highlighted both personal and workplace factors shaping educators' decisions to accept and remain in their roles. Based on substantial survey respondent input, several factors were identified as attracting the ECE workforce to their positions and influencing their decision to stay. The top factors included 1) Location, 2) Summers Off, and 3) Other (which encompassed children, co-workers, and working hours). When asked specifically about the impact of wage and salary on their decision to remain, the average response was 3.92 on a scale of 1-5, with 1 indicating 'No impact at all' and 5 meaning 'Very impactful.' The average response to the same question regarding benefits was 3.34. Survey respondents also noted factors that would influence their decision to leave their current position, such as 1) Higher Pay, 2) Paid Time Off, and 3) Benefits.

Research Questions

- What factors attracted you to your current position?
- What impact did salary and benefits have on your decision to apply for your current position?
- What impact do salary and benefits have on your decision to stay in your current position?
- What other factors impact your decision to stay in your current position?

Survey Population

The ECE Workforce Motivations Survey was sent to twenty-one programs in Charlevoix, Cheboygan, Emmet, and Otsego counties. We estimated that it was then distributed to 225 early childhood educators. Fifty individuals from various positions and programs responded.



Survey Sample by Program/Position/Years of Service

Of the 50 survey respondents, 36% (n=18) work in preschool—state funded (GSRP), 20% (n=10) work in childcare—privately funded, 14% (n=7) work in preschool—privately funded, 12% (n=6) work in preschool—federally funded, 4% (n=2) work in childcare—agency owned, 2% (n=1) work in childcare—Harbor Springs Public Schools, 2% (n=1) in a community-based program, 2% (n=1) in an ESD, 2% (n=1) in a private owned childcare center but in a GSRP classroom, and 2% (n=1) in a public preschool with various funding mechanisms.

Regarding positions, 40% of respondents (n=20) are lead teachers, 20% (n=10) are assistant teachers, 20% (n=10) are program directors, 6% (n=3) are associate teachers, 4% (n=2) are program directors/lead teachers, 2% (n=1) are floaters, and 2% (n=1) are area managers. The remaining 6% (n=3) identified as a parenting coach (n=1), program director/assistant teacher (n=1), and assistant teacher/administrator (n=1).

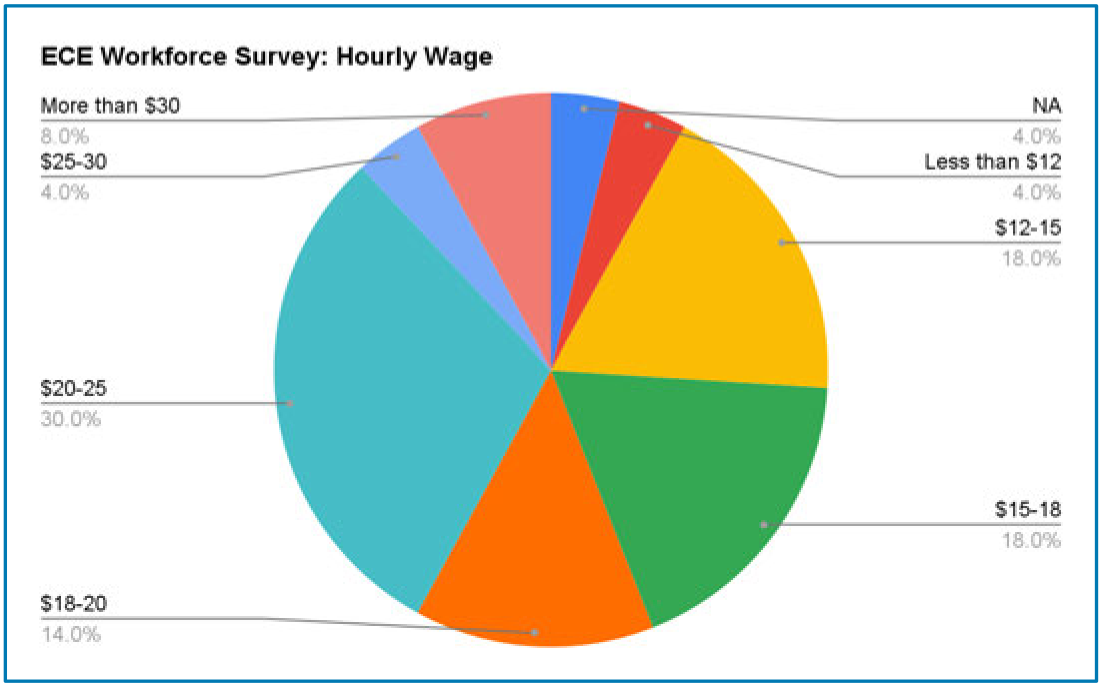
In terms of years of service, 26% (n=13) of survey respondents reported being in the field for 10 or more years, 20% (n=10) 7-9 years, 14% (n=7) 4-6 years, 22% (n=11) 1-3 years, and 18% (n=9) reported less than a year.

Survey Sample Demographics by Gender/Age/Race

98% of survey participants identified as Female, 2% as Male. 32% (n=16) reported their age as between 25-34 years, 30% (n=15) between 35-44 years, 28% (n=14) between 45-54 years, and 10% (n=5) between 19-24 years. Additionally, 98% of survey respondents identified as White or Caucasian (n=49), and 2% (n=1) identified as Portuguese/Puerto Rican, Thai, Black/African American, and Caucasian.

Survey Sample Compensation

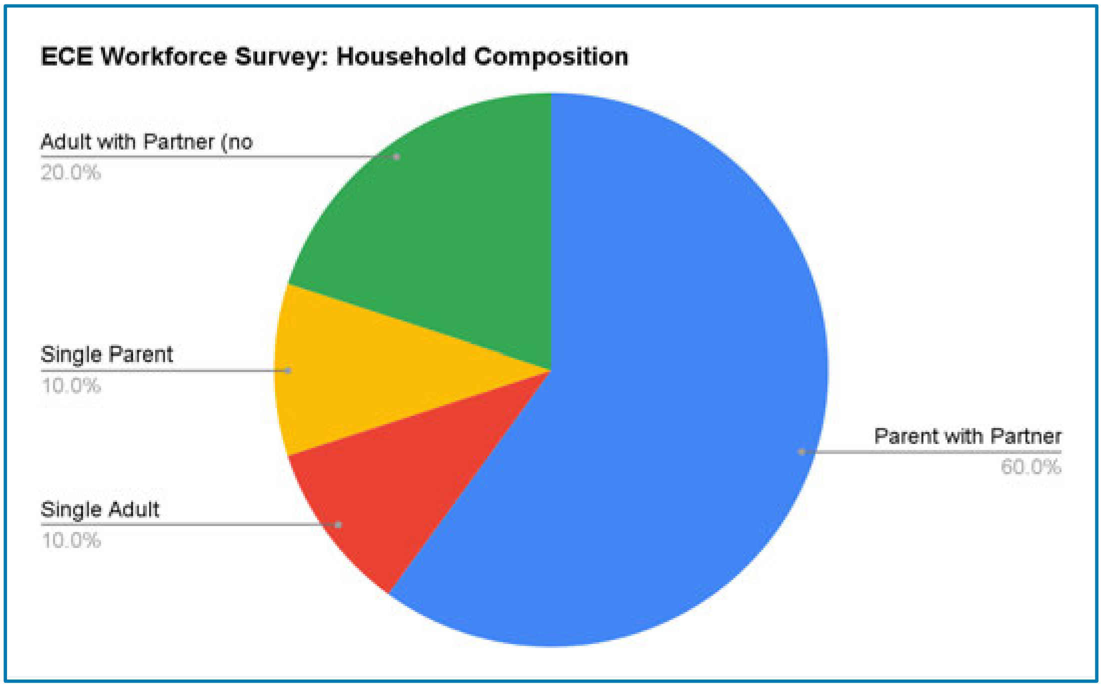
Sixty percent (n=30) of the ECE Workforce survey respondents reported varying hourly wages, and forty percent (n=20) of respondents reported receiving an annual salary. We calculated their hourly wage by dividing the salary by 2080 hours (the annual hours worked, assuming 8 hours per day, 40 hours per week, and 52 weeks per year).



When respondents were combined, 4% (n=2) reported NA, 4% (n=2) reported earning less than $12 per hour, 18% (n=9) reported earning $12-15, 18% (n=9) earned $15-18, 14% (n=7) earned $18-20, 30% (n=15) earned $20-25, 4% (n=2) earned between $25-30, and 8% (n=4) earned more than $30 per hour. The most frequently reported hourly rate was "$20-25," while the least frequently reported rates were "NA," "Less than $12," and "$25-30," hour.

Survey Sample Household Composition/Size

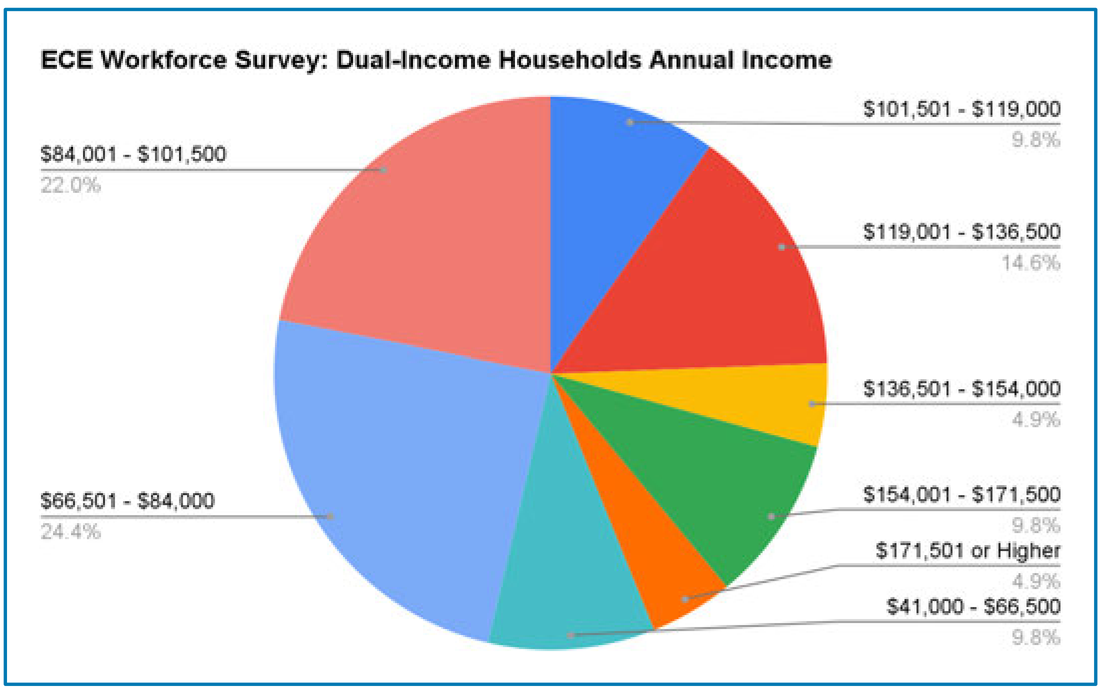
In terms of household composition, 60% (n=30) of survey respondents reported Parent with Partner, 20% (n=10) reported Adult with Partner (no children), 10% (n=5) reported Single Parent, and 10% (n=5) reported Single Adult. This means 11 of the 50 respondents reported having no children. Regarding household size for the 39 respondents who reported having children, 32% (n=16) reported having two children, 30% (n=15) reported having three children, 20% (n=10) reported having four children, 6% (n=3) reported having one child, another 6% (n=3) reported having six children, and 5% (n=1) reported having five children.



Survey Sample Household Income Type

82% (n=41) of the survey respondents described their household as dual-income, 16% (n=8) as single-income, and 2% (n=1) as triple-income.

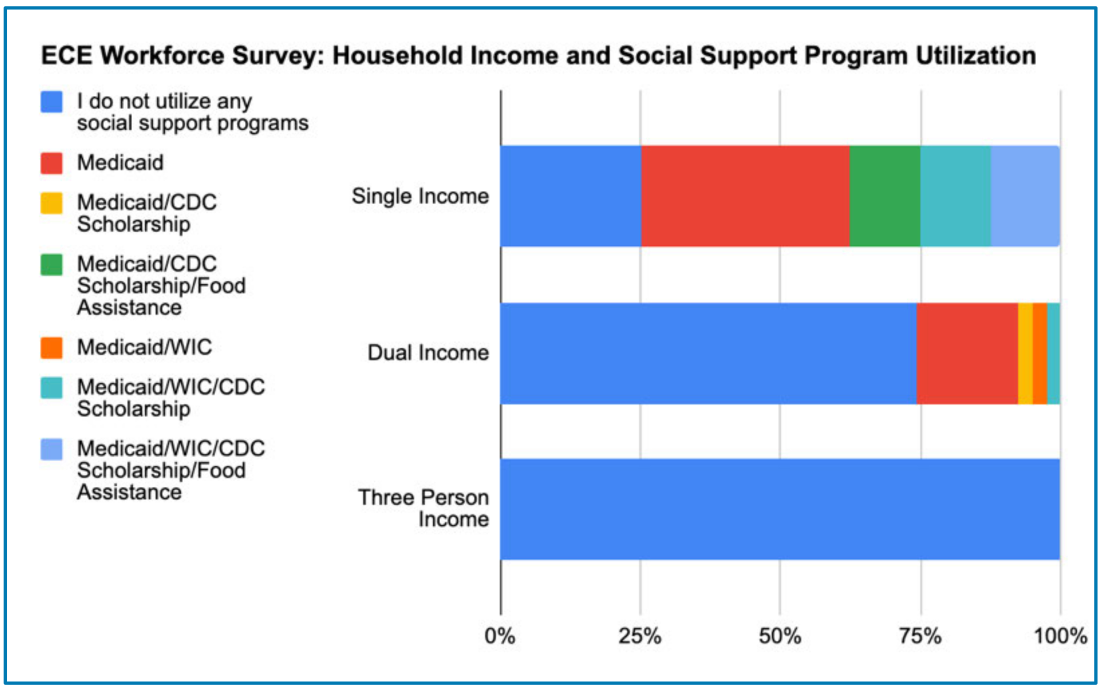
Of the dual-income households, 24.4% (n=10) of the survey respondents reported an annual income between $66,501 and $84,000, 22% (n=9) reported an income between $84,001 and $101,500, and 14.6% (n=6) reported an income between $119,001 and $136,500. Another 9.8% (n=4) of the survey respondents reported an annual income of $41,000 to $66,500, resulting in over half of the dual-income households earning less than $101,500.



When we examined household income and social support program utilization more closely, considering all 50 survey respondents, we found that 2% (n=1) of respondents identified themselves as a "Three Person Income" household who reported "I do not utilize any social support programs." 82% (n=41) identified themselves as "Dual Income" households who reported some usage of social support programs, including "Medicaid," "CDC Scholarship," and "WIC." 16% (n=8) of respondents identified as "Single Income" households who reported the most usage of social support programs, including "Medicaid," "CDC Scholarship," "WIC," and "Food Assistance."

Survey Sample Location

Of the 50 survey respondents, 42% (n=21) reported living in Emmet County, 30% (n=15) in Charlevoix County, 10% (n=5) in Otsego County, 6% (n=3) in Cheboygan County, and 12% (n=6) reported living in other counties. All respondents living in Emmet County also reported working there, and the same applies to those in Otsego County. Respondents living in Charlevoix and Cheboygan Counties worked in Charlevoix, Cheboygan, and Emmet Counties. Participants from other counties also traveled for employment.

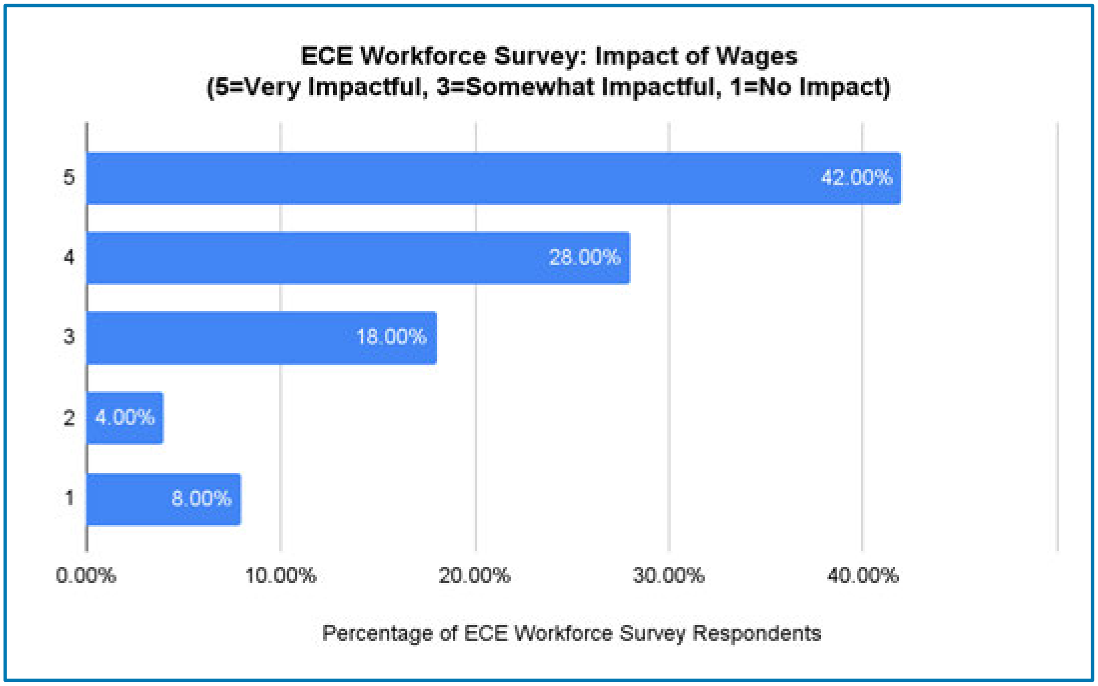


Research Answers

When asked what initially attracted them to the current position, ECE Workforce survey respondents reported "Location," "Summers Off," and "Salary" as their top three factors, then also included:

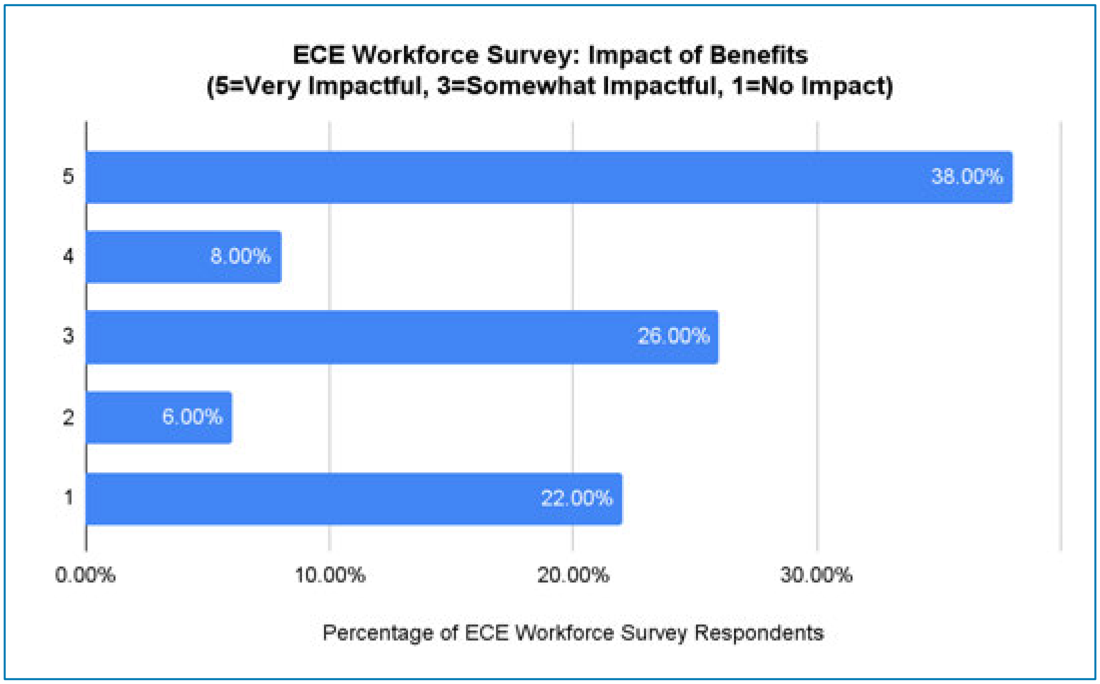
- "The opportunity to be in charge of a program was exciting."
- "I love working with kids."
- "Same schedule as my children."
- "Wanting to work with kids and families."
- "I love our philosophy, our program, and how we serve the community by offering affordable rates."

- “Team member perks, cost of childcare, and holidays off.”
- “The opportunity to have my own classroom as well as the small teacher-to-student ratio.”
- “A team-oriented environment is important.”
- “Boss is very easy to work for.”
- “The people working at the program.”
- “Personal purpose of creating safe & nurturing classrooms for my students and their families!”



When asked specifically about the impact of salary on their decision to stay in their current position, responses from ECE workforce survey participants varied. Forty-two percent (n=21) of respondents rated salary as 5- “Very Impactful." Twenty-eight percent (n=14) rated it 4, 18% (n=9) rated it 3, 4% (n=2) rated it 2, and 8% (n=4) rated it 1- “No Impact At All.” The average rating was 3.92. When asked about the impact of benefits on their decision to remain in their current role, 38% (n=19) perceived benefits as 5- “Very Impactful.” Eight percent (n=4) rated it 4, 26% (n=13) rated it 3, 6% (n=3) rated it 2, and 22% (n=11) rated it 1- “No Impact At All.” The average rating was 3.34.

Survey participants were then asked to select the benefits they receive in their current positions. The top three benefits reported were “Professional Development,” “Paid Time Off,” and “Paid Sick Days,” reported by 72% (n=36), 64% (n=32), and 64% (n=32), respectively. Only 40% (n=20) reported receiving Health Insurance, and 22% (n=11) reported no benefits at all. Participants identified the most important benefits as “Health Insurance,” “Paid Time Off,” “Paid Sick Days,” and “Child Care Benefit.”



Aside from salary and benefits, survey respondents identified other factors that impact their decision to stay in their current position. Among the most cited factors were "The Children," "Co-Workers," "The Hours," and "The Families," at 88% (n=44), 75% (n=38),

72% (n=36), and 66% (n=33), respectively. Survey respondents also shared additional thoughts about why they stay in their current position:

- "I have crafted the program and have a great deal of pride in the community we have built and the program that we offer."
- "I have a great working relationship with my co-workers and the board of directors."
- "I love our leadership locally and would love to see more support from higher administration/public school body."
- "The idea of learning a new job can be scary, but not impossible."
- "Respect with support from administration, current pay is not enough for living costs. The ONLY reason I can afford working in ECE is my spouse's additional income to our household."
- "I really believe and stand behind our teaching philosophy here."

When asked what factors would impact their decision to leave their current position, survey respondents reported "Higher Pay," "Paid Time Off," and "Benefits-Health Care" as the top three. Some additional thoughts survey respondents shared about factors that might impact their decision to leave their current position included:

- "I would say a change in leadership or co-workers or a rise in stress might make me leave my position."
- "During school hours are nice, but more benefits would be helpful, mainly retirement."
- "Retirement options would be a big factor for me."
- "I enjoy what I do; however, it would be nice to be paid more!!"

Findings

Attraction to the Field

Salary and benefits were two factors that ELC applicants, ELC new hires, and ECE workforce survey respondents identified as impactful in their decision to apply for positions; however, many others were also reported.

For ELC applicants, the factors “Organization (NCMC),” “Location,” and “Reggio Emilia” were the most important in their decision to seek employment at the ELC.

For the ELC New Hires, “Reggio Emilia,” “Organization (NCMC),” and “Location” were the most important factors with this group. Additionally, one new hire also reported “Other, “which was further explained as “I have always loved working with kids, and after taking a few years in a different field, it made me realize that being with kids is where I should be.”

From the ECE Workforce,

- “I have worked in this field and age group for over 20 years, and I find it rewarding, fun, meaningful, and a way to use my talent and passion in a way that contributes to my community.”
- “I truly enjoy working with the children and families. I'm fortunate that the pay is supplemental to our family income and we're not fully dependent on it.”
- “Connecting with families and offering them guidance and support.”
- “I feel that working in childcare is truly where I am meant to be.”
- “I have loved working with children my whole life.”
- “I love children.”
- “While a pay increase would be a huge help, I truly do it for the love of the students.”
- “Working with kids is fun! Knowing that my job is to help kids achieve their full potential and to help them feel happier and better about themselves, brings a huge smile to my face.”
- “It is rewarding to see the growth in children. It is also rewarding to be a supportive system for families.”
- “I enjoy the opportunity of being with kids!!”
- “I am a retired teacher and do not need benefits etc... I love teaching and this was a way for me to stay connected to the profession and children.”
- It's a calling. I don't view it as something that I could easily walk away from. If I left my current position, I would be looking for another education opportunity.”
- “I love to see the progress the students make.”
- “I love working with kids. I love the relationships, the hardships, and everything in between. Days can be hard, but it’s rewarding. Plus, building the bond with parents.”

It is worth noting that the ELC job postings offered compensation significantly higher than the regional average for early childhood educators. The Lead Teacher position offered $54,000–$58,000 annually, and the Associate Teacher position offered $42,000–$49,000, both with full benefit packages that start on the first day of employment. These benefits include employer-paid health, dental, and vision insurance; retirement plan options with employer matching; paid time off; tuition reimbursement; and other workplace supports.

These features are largely uncommon in early childhood education roles in the region, making the ELC positions highly attractive and intended to influence applicant priorities.

Retention in the Field

Despite current compensation rates for ECE professionals, which hover around $15 per hour, and the most extended benefits being “Professional Development,” “Paid Time Off,” and “Paid Sick Days,” many ECE workforce professionals remain in their current positions.

Wages and benefits greatly influence their decision to stay, with 42% (n=21) of survey respondents describing salaries as “Very Impactful,” and 28% (n=14) saying “Impactful.” Benefits were similarly influential, with 38% (n=19) indicating “Very Impactful,” and 8% (n=4) reporting “Impactful.”

Other factors affecting ECE workforce professionals’ decisions to stay include “The Children,” “Co-Workers,” “The Hours,” and “The Families.”

Movement in the Field

Several factors may influence an early childhood education (ECE) workforce professional's decision to leave their current job and seek a new one. The factors identified in their surveys included: “Higher Pay,” “Paid Time Off,” and “Benefits-Health Care."

The findings across recruitment, retention, and movement show that although compensation and benefits are important, they are not the only factors shaping early childhood educators’ career choices. Many professionals are drawn to and stay in the field because of their passion for children, the joy of meaningful relationships, and the sense of purpose their work provides.

However, low pay and limited benefits continue to be barriers to entering or remaining in the profession, especially for those who depend on this income to support their families. As reflected in both applicant and workforce responses, salary and benefits can either reinforce a decision to stay or become the main reasons to seek other employment. To promote workforce stability, addressing compensation must go hand in hand with efforts to maintain the intrinsic rewards of early childhood education, such as relationships, mission-driven work, and supportive environments.

Implications

The findings in this report reveal a complex reality: early childhood educators make career decisions based not only on pay and benefits, but also on a deep sense of purpose, relational bonds, and the need for personal and professional balance. This highlights an urgent need for strategies that recognize educators as whole individuals, valuing their well-being, contributions, and aspirations.

Supporting **the whole person** means more than offering a paycheck. It requires creating environments that offer flexible schedules, paid time off, access to mental health support, professional development, and a culture of appreciation. These elements collectively sustain educators in a field where intrinsic motivation often drives entry and longevity.

We must also recognize that **family and household structures** greatly influence how compensation is experienced. Many educators depend on a partner's income or benefits to keep ECE a feasible career choice, but not everyone does. Single parents, multigenerational families, and educators without external financial support face more significant trade-offs. Support systems need to be adaptable to this diversity.

Perhaps most importantly, **workplace culture** proved to be a significant influence. Educators consistently mentioned coworkers, leadership, and a sense of belonging as key reasons they stay in their positions. This highlights the need for retention strategies to extend beyond wages, focusing on relational infrastructure, leadership development, and team cohesion.

Finally, to develop policies that are responsive and equitable, we need better, more in-depth data. Standardizing wage calculations, gathering more qualitative insights, and creating space for worker voices, through tools like focus groups, will all be essential to enhancing policy, funding, and understanding across the field.

Recommendations

Considering these findings, we recommend the following action steps to strengthen attraction, retention, and long-term sustainability in the early childhood workforce:

Advance Living Wage Compensation

Utilize tools such as the True Cost of Care model to advocate for compensation structures that accurately reflect the full cost of delivering high-quality care, including the stability of the workforce. These models can guide program-level decisions and influence funding advocacy at the local and state levels.

Invest in Culture and Leadership

Strengthen retention by equipping leaders with skills to foster trust, collaboration, and professional growth. Leadership training, mentorship programs, and intentional culture-building can have a lasting impact on morale and commitment.

Expand Access to Meaningful Benefits

Benefits such as health insurance, retirement plans, and child care assistance are essential. Where direct provision is challenging, explore creative solutions such as shared services agreements, regional benefit pools, or state-supported packages for small programs.

Design for Equity and Inclusion

Develop compensation and benefits systems that consider family composition, income level, and geographic location. Understanding and addressing the barriers faced by single-parent households or those in rural areas can lead to more inclusive workforce solutions.

Strengthen Data Collection and Feedback Loops

Future studies should collect more accurate compensation data, incorporate qualitative questions about financial well-being, and evaluate awareness and utilization of public benefits. Offering paid focus groups can provide richer insights and recognize the value of worker time and expertise.

Build and Leverage Cross-Sector Partnerships

Collaborate with higher education, public agencies, employers, and philanthropic organizations to support wraparound systems for the workforce. These partnerships can expand access to training, child care for providers' own families, and long-term career pathways.

Limitations

While this report offers valuable insights into factors affecting attraction, retention, and mobility within the early childhood workforce, several limitations should be acknowledged.

Sample Size and Representativeness

The ELC applicant and new hire survey responses were from a very small group (3 and 4 respondents, respectively), which limits the applicability of the findings. Although the ECE Workforce survey had a larger participation (n=50), respondents primarily represented a specific region in northern Michigan and a predominantly white, female demographic, thereby limiting the diversity of perspectives.

Gaps in Wage/Salary Data

While the report tried to standardize annual salary responses into hourly equivalents, differences in reported hours, pay structures, and unclear total annual hours worked may have skewed wage comparisons. Future data collection should include standardized calculations of compensation based on reported annual hours worked to improve accuracy and facilitate comparison.

Limited Household Economic Context

Although the survey asked about household income, household size, and social service use, it lacked detail on economic pressures. We did not assess whether current wages support cost-of-living, savings, or quality-of-life benchmarks. Nor did we explore multi-generational households or dual-income dynamics that could influence how respondents view salary and benefits.

Lack of Turnover Rate Data

While the survey explored factors related to movement in and out of the field, it did not gather direct data on actual turnover rates among programs or individuals. Turnover is a critical indicator of workforce instability and has well-documented impacts on child outcomes, program continuity, and operating costs. Without it, we are limited in our ability to quantify the direct effects of compensation and benefits on workforce sustainability. Future research should gather turnover data (e.g., average tenure, exit rates, reasons for leaving) across program types and funding sources to fully assess workforce dynamics.

Binary Framing of Impact Questions

Most questions about compensation and benefits rely on quantitative Likert scales. While useful, they don't uncover the deeper "why" behind respondents' rankings. A more detailed qualitative approach—especially around trade-offs, economic stress, or emotional aspects of work—would offer a richer understanding of what compensation truly means to workers.

Time-Point Snapshot

The survey captured responses at a single moment. It cannot reflect seasonal factors, perception changes over time, or shifting economic pressures (e.g., inflation, local housing market). Tracking over time would offer deeper insight into changing priorities and retention choices.

Next Steps

The findings in this report raise important questions that merit further investigation, especially concerning the connection between compensation, benefits, personal circumstances, and perceptions of value within the ECE workforce. To expand on the insights presented here, future research and data collection should aim to deepen our understanding in these areas:

Household Composition and Entry Points into the Field
Future surveys should examine household income and caregiving responsibilities at the time individuals enter the field. Understanding how many educators simultaneously parent young children and how child care needs influence their career decisions could provide key insights for recruitment efforts.

Standardized Compensation Calculations
To improve wage comparisons across roles and regions, future surveys should include questions that facilitate standardized wage calculations (such as hours worked per week/year, pay frequency, gross and net pay, and contract terms). This will enable more accurate compensation data and better comparison between salaried and hourly workers.

Qualitative Insights into Economic Well-being
Adding qualitative questions alongside wage data can create a fuller picture of financial security. For example:
- Do you earn enough to cover basic living expenses?
- Can you save for the future?
- Do your wages allow you to pursue personal interests or long-term goals?

Understanding Public Support Utilization and Eligibility
Rephrasing questions about social support programs—starting with awareness, then eligibility, and finally utilization—may reveal clearer insights into the barriers or gaps in accessing public resources such as the CDC Child Care Scholarship or WIC.

Expanding Definitions of Household Structures
Future data collection should recognize the diversity of family and living arrangements, including multi-generational households and shared income setups (for example, educators cohabitating or co-parenting). These dynamics significantly impact how compensation is perceived and prioritized.

Examining the Role of Partner Income and Benefits
Gaining a better understanding of dual-income households—particularly what benefits or financial support partners provide—could shed light on why some educators focus less on salary or benefits. This information could help design more targeted benefits.

Track Turnover Metrics Across Programs

Future efforts should gather longitudinal data on workforce turnover, including average tenure, reasons for leaving, and exit trends by role, funding stream, and program type. This would enable a clearer link between compensation levels, benefits access, and workforce stability, particularly useful for cost modeling and public investment advocacy.

Inviting Educator Voice Through Focus Groups

Offering paid, voluntary focus groups would enable a more in-depth exploration of motivations, challenges, and aspirations. These sessions could deepen the understanding of the workforce and generate ideas for future compensation models, benefits, and policy innovations.

Conclusion

This report confirms what many in the early childhood field have long understood: while wages and benefits are crucial, they are part of a larger network of motivators that influence decisions to enter, stay, or leave the profession. Educators value relationships with children and families, alignment with program philosophy, and how well the work fits into their lives. However, many face financial pressures leading to tough choices.

The data reflects a workforce driven by values, committed professionally, yet vulnerable to economic challenges. To strengthen the early childhood system, solutions must be both structural and relational: increasing wages and benefits, fostering inclusive cultures, offering flexibility, and respecting professionalism. This report emphasizes the urgent need for comprehensive, community-informed strategies to support those who care for and educate our youngest learners.