

TITLE

SYNOPSIS

Early childhood educators are faced with the common career challenge of low compensation and costly higher education. That's why providing them incentives to pursue higher education and stay in the early education system is critical in order to build a strong workforce. Over the last 30 years, North Carolina has emerged as a national leader in early childhood education, due in part to its efforts to develop a highly supported infant-toddler teacher workforce. Using a research-driven, evidence-based approach to inform policy decisions and program investments, the state has continually improved its early childhood workforce system—addressing the challenges of teacher turnover and wage disparities, improving existing programs based on extensive data collection, and bringing successful programs to scale statewide.

OPTIONAL PULL QUOTE

By prioritizing the quality of the infant and toddler teacher workforce, North Carolina has produced more highly equipped infant-toddler teachers to serve more children across the state. Investments have raised retention rates in child care centers and fostered learning environments that meet both state standards and young children's developmental needs.

THE PURPOSE

H2: The Purpose

For infants and toddlers, the period from birth to three years old is critical for cognitive, social, and emotional development—it sets the foundation for all future learning, behavior, and health. During this important developmental time for young children, high-quality early childhood education is essential, and the success of educational programs depends on a prepared, educated workforce equipped to address the specific needs of infants and toddlers. This has proven to be true in North Carolina, a state that's leading the way in early childhood workforce programs.

North Carolina's strategic process of conducting, evaluating, and implementing research has been instrumental in identifying gaps in child care and assessing the quality and access to workforce development, paving the way for informed policy with measurable results across the state.

In North Carolina, early childhood workforce data from a 1989 study demonstrated that child care compensation and access to higher education were barriers to improving the quality and availability of care for the state's youngest learners. Over the past three decades, informed by comprehensive workforce research, North Carolina has implemented policies and developed programs that prioritize infants and toddlers by expanding the high-quality infant and toddler workforce and offering workers incentives to stay in the state's early childhood system.

Since 1990, the Teacher Education and Compensation Helps (T.E.A.C.H.) Early Childhood scholarship program has offered scholarships for two- and four-year degrees for teachers pursuing early childhood education. Originally developed with private funds, the initial model showed promising outcomes, and the state opted to take it to scale with public funding through the Quality Set Aside within the Child Care Development Block Grant (CCDBG). The program now offers a cost-effective pathway to early childhood teacher development and provides a growing number of infant and toddler teachers—and prospective teachers—with more affordable access to degrees.

Increasing access to and incentives toward affordable high-quality early childhood degrees is one prong in the state’s expansive approach to strengthening the early childhood workforce in North Carolina. The other prong focuses on the existing workforce with the Child Care WAGE\$ program and the subsequent Infant Toddler AWARD\$ program. These salary supplement programs support infant-toddler teachers with two- and four-year early childhood education degrees.

The first program, Child Care WAGE\$, was funded with Smart Start state dollars on a county-by-county basis, and then, due to its success, it was expanded to become the AWARD\$ program, which is now funded through the Infant Toddler Set Aside within the CCDBG. AWARD\$ provides more equitable compensation for infant and toddler teachers and acts as an incentive to counter rising rates of teacher turnover at a time in a child’s development when retention is key for forming nurturing relationships and positively impacting social and emotional growth.

THE MODEL

North Carolina demonstrates that policy solutions are often most impactful when they emerge from evidence-based, statewide research. Conducting surveys and collecting data that reflect the current status of the state’s infant and toddler teacher workforce, as well as identifying existing gaps and disparities in the field, are the foundation for the state’s successful policy decisions. The state also builds innovative strategies by piloting programs at the local level that are brought to scale statewide after demonstrating successful results.

North Carolina routinely tracks workforce data and develops strategies and recommendations from extensive research, such as the 2008 and 2016 statewide studies [Who’s Caring for Our Babies?](#) This report profiles the quality of child care throughout the state and infant and toddler teachers’ access to education and ongoing professional development. Incorporating data from the Working in Early Care and Education Study, the research examines demographics, education, experience, and compensation of infant-toddler teachers and offers recommendations to improve the quality of care for the state’s young children.

Informed by the 2008 and 2016 studies, North Carolina has implemented or adjusted many policies, for example:

- Reevaluating higher education early childhood curricula to meet the unique needs of infants and toddlers
- Creating high child care subsidy rates for infant-toddler care tied the star rating system
- Expanding T.E.A.C.H. scholarships to increase access to early childhood degrees

- Supplementing compensation for those working directly with infants and toddlers
- Continuing to study the state's child care workforce to collect additional data and ensure evidence-based policies in the future

WHY IT WORKS

Access and quality are the driving influences in child care policy. By prioritizing the quality of the infant and toddler teacher workforce and securing both state and federal resources, North Carolina has produced more highly equipped infant-toddler teachers to serve more children across the state. These investments have raised retention rates in centers and fostered learning environments that meet both state standards and babies' developmental needs.

Because of the opportunities for higher education that T.E.A.C.H. provides, coupled with Child Care WAGE\$ supplements and the education standards set in the state's rated license, 50% of infant-toddler teachers in North Carolina now have a two- or four-year degree. Furthermore, the turnover rate among early childhood teachers has plummeted from 50% in many centers to 18%, a significant difference that is tied directly to retention requirements associated with the benefits of both debt-free college education and regular salary supplements.

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW

As states consider child care policies, it is critical to thoroughly evaluate the landscape of early childhood education. The data that can be compiled from directors and teachers are an essential part of a comprehensive workforce analysis. Comprehensive analysis enables policymakers to identify the greatest concerns facing their state's existing workforce and future workforce pipeline, and it should be a major source of decision-making and program development in the field.

Early childhood educators are faced with the common career challenge of low compensation and costly higher education. Providing them incentives to pursue higher education and stay in the early education system is critical in order to build a strong workforce. States must recognize the importance of diverse, qualified, and committed infant and toddler teachers who play a vital role in supporting the healthy development of our youngest children. As these incentives become available, it is important to set higher standards for the educational requirements of the infant-toddler teaching workforce.

Investments in teachers will not only help sustain a high-quality system as retention rates rise and the number of teachers with higher education degrees grows; it will help set infants and toddlers on a path for success in school and life by nurturing social, emotional, and cognitive development at an earlier and immensely formative point in their lives.

ADDITIONAL READING

- Who's Caring for Our Babies?: <https://www.childcareservices.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/IT-State-Report-final-7-27-2017.pdf>
- Working in Early Care and Education in North Carolina (2015 Workforce Study): <https://www.childcareservices.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/2015-Workforce-Report-FNL.pdf>

- T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood Annual Report: https://www.childcareservices.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/TEACHAnnualReport17_18-DCDEE.pdf
- T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood Scholarship Program North Carolina: <https://www.childcareservices.org/teach-nc/>
- Infant-Toddler Educator AWARDS: <https://www.childcareservices.org/awards/>
- The Child Care WAGES Project: <https://www.childcareservices.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/WAGEEIFY18.pdf>

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