Potential Funding Priority: Early Childhood Workforce

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Investment Scope as of 9/29/26

Introduction

General Description

This proposed funding priority focuses on grants to support early childhood workforce programs.

A thriving workforce with clear, accessible career paths and supportive working conditions is widely recognized as foundational to an effective system of early care and education.

This investment would strengthen Buncombe County's early childhood workforce at every stage of the continuum from recruitment and pre-service preparation through credential attainment to professional development, support, and retention.

The intended impacts would be to increase the supply, preparation, stability, and effectiveness of early childhood educators while reducing workforce-related strain on early childhood programs.

This is proposed as a continuation priority. Workforce development has been a priority within Buncombe County's Early Childhood Education and Development Fund since its establishment in Fiscal Year 2020.

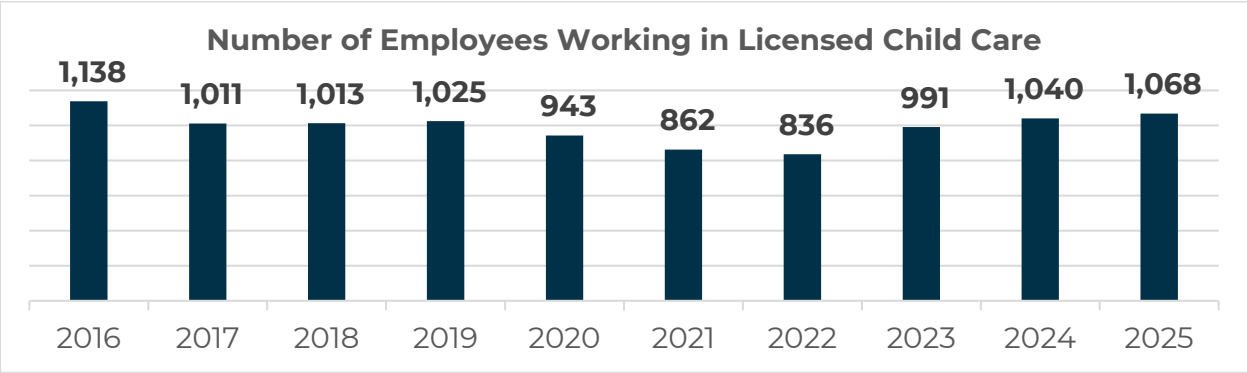
Early educators are commonly referred to as the "workforce behind the workforce" because the professionals deliver reliable child care, enabling parents and caregivers to remain employed across all industries.

A shortage of qualified early educators leads child care centers to limit the availability of child care service that they can provide to the community. Low compensation in the field is linked with recruitment challenges and extraordinarily high teacher turnover rates, threatening to minimize the impact of substantial investments in professional development in the absence of compensation supports and other retention efforts.

In addition, the quality of adult-child interactions and the professional knowledge of teachers are arguably the most critical dimensions of high-quality early childhood programs, making workforce training essential and well-advised.

Current Conditions

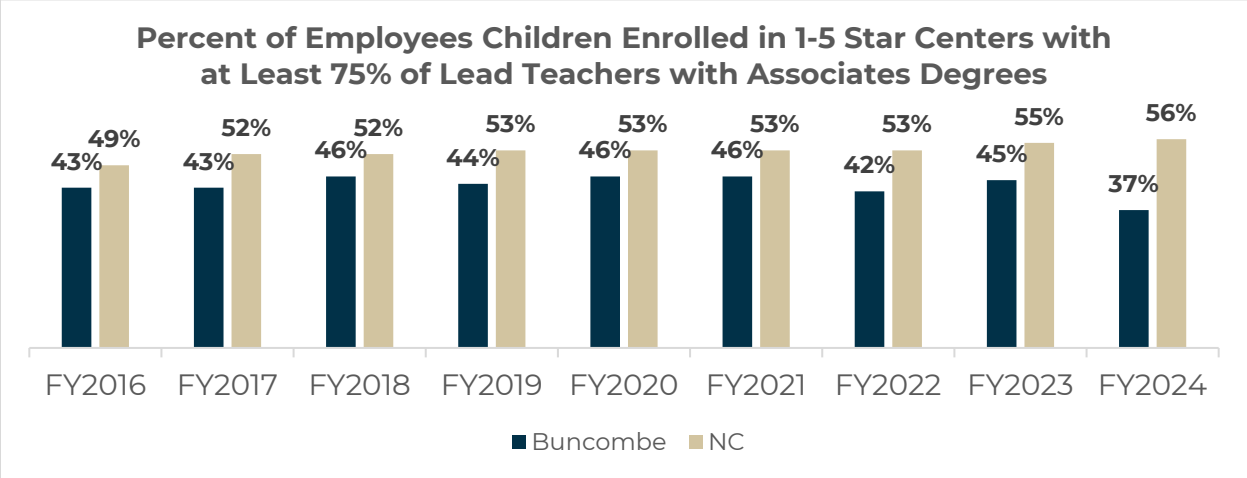
STAFFING: The number of employees working in licensed child care in Buncombe County declined 2020-2022, likely as a result of impacts associated with the COVID-19 pandemic but has rebounded to levels on par with 2016.



Source: NC Division of Child Development and Early Education Monthly Statistical Reports, August 2025 (Note: Includes all children ages 0-12 enrolled in licensed care)

EDUCATION: A 2023 North Carolina Child Care Workforce Study published by the Child Care Services Association found that, "Nearly all directors and most center teaching staff had taken at least one college level course in the early childhood education field. A smaller but still significant percentage, 76% of directors and 51% of the teaching staff, had taken six or more courses in early childhood education." (See Appendix: Supporting Information)

North Carolina Division of Child Development and Early Education (DCDEE) has tracked and reported data about ECE workforce education levels, and Buncombe is lagging behind the state average.



Source: North Carolina Partnership for Children Early Childhood Profile. (FY 24-25 data is still not available as of June 2026).

More information is needed to understand the gap between Buncombe County and the rest of NC, but these data suggest that postsecondary education and degree attainment are important to include in an ECE workforce investment strategy.

EXPERIENCE: The Workforce Study also reported information about the ECE workforce's length of time in the child care field: "Median length of experience in the

field was 5.0 years for assistant teachers, 12.0 years for teachers, 22.0 years for administrators, and 24.0 years for FCC providers." Buncombe-specific data is not provided.

COMPENSATION: The Workforce Study also confirmed that the ECE workforce is low overall, while it varies based on factors including employer type (non-profit, for-profit, public) and star-rating. Buncombe County was found to be among the highest reported in the state for teaching staff, at $17 per hour.

A review of current job postings for child care positions in Buncombe County revealed a range hourly pay from $16 to $28 with a median of $19 to $20. This compares with an hourly wage median rate of $16 to $19 for entry level food industry positions and $17 to $19 for entry level retail positions.

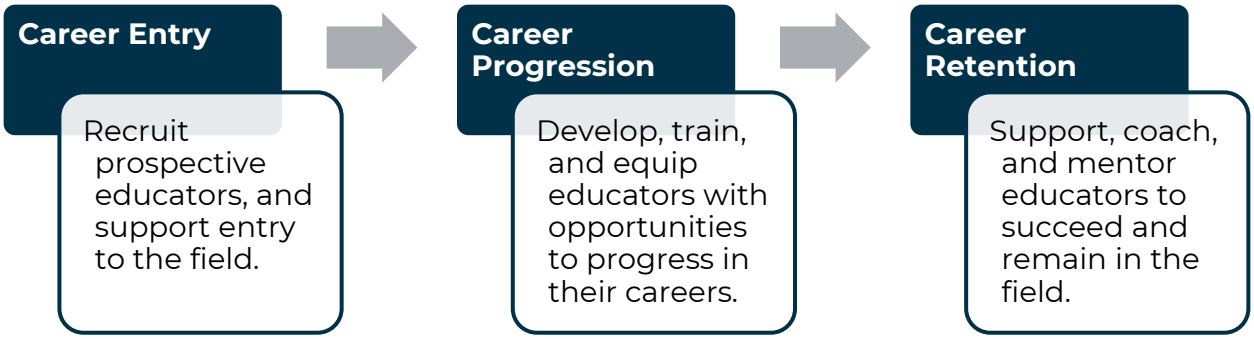
These data suggest that will be necessary to look beyond salary in targeting workforce support solutions.

RETENTION IN THE FIELD: The Workforce Study found that 23% of the teaching staff planned to leave the field in the next three years, and 18% of directors planned to leave the field in the next three years.

Program Design

Strategic Framework

Grants for workforce programs would provide support across the career continuum.



Service Delivery Model

Under this funding priority, community-based organizations would apply for grants from Buncombe County to deliver workforce services.

Applicants would be fully responsible for designing proposed workforce programs, and grants would be awarded on a competitive basis.

Selected organizations awarded funding contracts would be fully responsible for delivering services and reporting back to the County on use of funds and results of their projects.

Services

Funded projects would support interconnected components of the early childhood workforce pipeline through the delivery of services, including but not limited to:

Recruitment and Pre-Service Preparation

- Career learning and exposure at the high school level.
- Recruitment and outreach to prospective early educators.
- Pre-service training addressing entry requirements (health, safety, CPR, and first aid)
- Pre-service training addressing additional knowledge areas (e.g. child development and behavior, early childhood systems, maltreatment).
- Experiential learning opportunities, such as classroom observations.

Postsecondary Education and Career Pathways

- Support with attainment of the NC Early Childhood Education Credential or equivalency.
- Advising students on certificate and degree programs.
- Development of clear career pathways into the early childhood workforce.
- Provision of curriculum and student support.

Internships, Fellowships and Apprenticeships

- Career instruction and work-based learning.
- Field placements that provide hands-on experience.
- Supervision and assistance, such as coaching, mentoring and peer connection.
- Wraparound supports necessary to sustain program participation and completion.

Continuing Education

- Updates on licensing requirements, standards, and regulatory changes.
- Workshops and classes on topics such as child development, classroom management, and early learning best practices.
- Professional conferences and webinars focused on early childhood education.

Coaching & Mentoring

- Structured mentoring programs and teacher support systems.
- Practice-based coaching, observation, feedback, goal-setting, and follow-up.
- Classroom-level technical assistance on child care quality topics such as program assessment, classroom and instructional quality.

- Supporting teachers on evidence-based practices such as building nurturing and responsive relationships, building high-quality supportive environments, targeted social-emotional supports, and intensive intervention.

Financial Aid & Barrier Reduction

- Scholarships, financial aid, tuition assistance, stipends and incentives.
- No-cost access to materials such as textbooks, technology, or professional development resources.
- Paid release time to attend training, coaching sessions or complete coursework without losing wages.
- Barrier-reduction supports such as interpretation/translation, transportation, child care, and food.

Support for Directors & Administrators

- Support with attainment of the NC Early Childhood Education Administration Credential or equivalency.
- Training, coaching and technical assistance on topics including strategic planning, leadership, management, human resources, licensing, permitting, accreditation.

Evaluation & Data Collection

Intended Outcomes

The workforce investment is intended to:

- Increase the number of qualified individuals entering the early childhood workforce.
- Increase completion of workforce preparation and credentialing activities.
- Strengthen pathways from high school and postsecondary education into early childhood employment.
- Increase participation in apprenticeships and structured professional development.
- Increase access to coaching and other supports that strengthen educator practice.
- Increase opportunities for career advancement.
- Improve educator retention and length of service.
- Improve classroom stability and reduce staffing-related disruptions.
- Strengthen the overall capacity and stability of Buncombe County's early childhood workforce.

System-Level Measures

The initiative should directly contribute to communitywide measures, including:

- Number of educators working in licensed early childhood settings.*
- Percent of children enrolled in licensed child care that have at least 75% of lead teachers with an associates degree.*

- Educator education levels.**
- Educator length of service in career.**
- Educator retention and turnover rates within Buncombe County child cares.**

These investments should also indirectly contribute to additional system-level measures, including:

- Number of child care providers licensed for children ages 0-5.*
- Number of licensed child care slots for children ages 0-5.*
- Number of 4 & 5-star rated licensed child care slots for children ages 0-5.*
- Number of children ages 0-5 enrolled in licensed child care.*
- Number of children ages 0-5 enrolled in 4&5-star rated licensed child care.*
- Percent of total child population ages 0-5 enrolled in licensed care.*
- Range and median compensation for early educators. **
- Child care affordability.**

Access to consistent, reliable, county-level data sources is critical to establishing metrics that can be monitored longitudinally. However, at this time these sources do not exist.

Items marked by * indicate that this data was previously available from DCDEE, through public-facing statistical reports. However, this data is not currently available because the recently published monthly statistical report was from January 2026.

DCDEE stopped publishing monthly statistical reports in alignment with the implementation of a data-suppression policy. The policy requires making of any reported count below 10. As a result, when a licensed child care center reports numbers fewer than 10 for a particular data set, the reported value would appear as “suppressed.”

DCDEE is publishing a NC Early Care and Learning Dashboard with some of the data previously available through statistical reports. While this data is viewable in an aggregate form at the county-level, it doesn’t have the level of detail needed. For example, enrollment is not broken out by age or star rating.

This data interruption affects our capacity to assess trends, monitor service levels, and make data-informed decisions. To address this challenge, Buncombe County staff have formally requested access to aggregate countywide data that would allow us to evaluate overall patterns without compromising individual program confidentiality. At this time, we are still awaiting that information.

Items marked with ** indicate that there is not a consistent data source available. This data is occasionally collected through surveys and studies. If Buncombe County Early Childhood Committee opts to fund Workforce as a priority, staff recommends also investing a portion of funds toward data collection to address these gaps.

Program-Level Measures

Depending on the funded activity, grantees would be required to report on measures such as:

- Number of program participants served.
- Number of program completions.
- Number of program participants attaining desired program results (e.g. certificates, degrees, measurable skills, new knowledge, increased confidence, increased connections & support).
- Number of prospective early educators hired.
- Number of early childhood professionals promoted.
- Number of early childhood professionals retained.

Funding

Recommended Funding Preference

Systemwide Impact: Prioritize programs that create workforce outcomes benefiting the broader Buncombe County early childhood system. These investments should provide direct impacts that are not limited to any specific child care provider(s).

Secondary Priority

Provider Impact: If grants are open to programs serving only specific child provider(s), these should be considered through a separate process and not compete for funds with system-wide programs. These investments may include programs that can be replicated, scaled, shared, or otherwise indirectly contribute to workforce capacity beyond one organization.

Data and Evaluation

As a result of lack of existing data to monitor and evaluate impact, staff recommends investing a portion of funds toward data and evaluation. Funding options include a $100,000 annual placeholder.

Funding Options

Workforce investments could entail an investment range of $886,051 to $1,886,461:

Systemwide Impact Recommended Funding Preference	**Provider Impact** Secondary Priority
$886,051 to $1,132,406	$469,917 to $754,055

Estimates based on FY2027 funding request amounts (low end of range) and award amounts (high end of range) for workforce-related projects, plus a 2% escalation.

Amounts could be scaled based on available budget. (See Appendix: Current Workforce Investment Landscape)

Cost Considerations

Competitive compensation for early educators is critical to a thriving workforce, but ongoing funding for educator salaries is not included within this funding priority.

While workforce program-related costs such as stipends and paid learning opportunities could be eligible under this funding priority, child care center operational costs such as salaries and benefits would be excluded.

Implementation

Funding Process

Buncombe County resolution #19-11-05 requires that:

- Grant funding shall be awarded through a published, well-defined, accountable process, to include conflict of interest procedures.
- Specific eligibility criteria shall be defined for all grant processes. Projects must meet a public purpose and fall within County authority to fund per NC General Statutes, and all expenses must be allowable within grant criteria.
- Grant awards shall be administered via performance contracts, to include a scope of work that defines services, deliverables and reporting measures.
- Contracts shall be monitored and evaluated by the contracting department throughout the year.
- Approval of renewal grant funding requests shall be contingent on meeting performance criteria.

Funding would be open to all organization types, including public agencies, nonprofits, churches and private businesses, provided that they operate in Buncombe County with service to Buncombe County and are good standing with the North Carolina Secretary of State.

A notice of funding would be published with adequate time for applicants to submit an application by the deadline through the County's grant application software.

Required elements of the application would include information such as:

- Project plan (activities, timelines, milestones, deliverables)
- Project approach (methods, strategies, philosophy)
- Population served
- Proposed results
- Proposed budget

Application review and recommendation of awards would be the responsibility of the Early Childhood Committee, utilizing a standardized, points-based scoring system to review grants.

The Board of Commissioners are responsible for adopting an annual budget, which would include consideration of the recommended grant awards.

County staff would manage all processes in the grant lifecycle: application; review; award; contracting; monitoring; and closeout.

Funding for data evaluation would be handled as a separate contract, awarded in line with Buncombe County's procurement policy and procedures.

Multi-Year Award Options

During the engagement phase of this focused investment project, community partners consistently expressed preference for multi-year awards in order to provide stability and enhance impact. Partners communicated a preference for award terms of at least 2 years with a preference for 3-year awards.

Staggered	**Aligned**
By staggering the award terms, each year there would be a portion of the workforce funding to award. One way to accomplish this would be to phase in as follows. • FY2028: 1/3 of awards are 1-year 1/3 of awards are 2-year 1/3 of awards are 3-year • FY2029 & beyond: All future awards are 3 years, with 1/3 of awards expiring each year	Another option is to award 100% of workforce grants every 3 years, with all grants expiring and re-applying at the same time. This would look like: • FY2028: all awards are 3-year • FY2029: no awards • FY2030: no awards • FY2031: all awards are 3-year • etc.

Investment Considerations

Community and Committee Support

Workforce demonstrated substantial support in the committee and community-partner engagement process.

The workforce priority ranked #3 out of 18 priorities in the committee survey, with 77% support, 23% neutral, and 0% opposition. In the community partner survey, 81%

of respondents supported the priority, with 25 of 31 respondents expressing support and only one opposed.

Engagement feedback identified workforce recruitment, retention and professional development as critical needs. Respondents also described staffing shortages, inexperienced staff, lack of teacher support, burnout and turnover as significant sources of system strain.

Risks / Challenges

Potential risks include:

- If Provider Impact workforce grants are not included in the funding priority, child care providers that have historically received Buncombe County grants would no longer be eligible to apply, which could lead to budget strain for those organizations.
- If multi-year grants are not adopted, some workforce programs may have difficulty demonstrating impact because strategies often require multi-year investment to yield meaningful outcomes. It would also be difficult for workforce programs to employ the personnel needed to deliver them without multi-year funding stability.
- Funding multiple workforce programs without a shared strategy could result in a collection of projects rather than a coordinated workforce system.
- Multiple organizations may provide overlapping recruitment, training, coaching, or technical assistance services.
- Organizations receiving funding may have varying capacity for data collection, coordination, and evaluation.

The committee can mitigate these risks by:

- Funding both Systemwide Impact and Provider Impact grants.
- Making multi-year grant awards.
- Establishing common outcomes and reporting requirements.
- Prioritizing coordination among funded organizations.
- Reviewing aggregate workforce outcomes across the initiative rather than evaluating programs only in isolation.

Appendixes

Current Workforce Investment Landscape

Workforce-related FY2027 grants demonstrate potential investments across the proposed framework:

Early Childhood Workforce Award	Impact Level	FY2027 Request Amount	FY2027 Award Amount
AB Technical Community College – Blazing Trails: recruitment, outreach, advising, and retention following EDU 119.	Systemwide Impact	$ 120,052	$ 72,031
Buncombe County Schools – Learning Labs: four high-school-based preschool labs, paid learning opportunities, and readiness assessment.	Systemwide Impact	$ 331,420	$ 248,565
Buncombe Partnership for Children – WDP: paid pre-service training, substitute placements, EDU 119 cohort, alumni coaching, and barrier reduction.	Systemwide Impact	$ 163,092	$ 163,092
Buncombe Partnership for Children – CCR: countywide professional development, coaching, technical assistance, resource/referral, and system reporting.	Systemwide Impact	$ 153,000	$ 153,000
Eliada Homes – Child Development Apprentice Program: apprenticeship, paid on-the-job hours, structured mentorship, and wage-progression pathways.	Provider Impact	$ 94,180	$ 70,635

Evolve Early Learning – Teacher Apprenticeship Stabilization & Parent Coaching: apprenticeship support, protected study time, mentorship, and parent coaching.	Provider Impact	$ 200,000	$ 120,000
FIRSTwnc – SUNSHINE Extension: Pyramid Model behavioral/social-emotional technical assistance and coaching.	Systemwide Impact	$ 178,600	$ 133,950
Verner Center for Early Learning – CLASS Observations: classroom observations and identification of educators for practice-based coaching.	Provider Impact	$ 360,090	$ 270,068
Montessori Learning Community of Asheville - Strengthening the Early Childhood Workforce Through Transition and Connection: learning and instruction.	Provider Impact	$ 85,000	$0
Safe Childcare Partnerships – Emergency Safety Training for Childcare Workforce: CPR and first aid training.	Systemwide Impact	$ 66,000	$0
	Total FY2027	$ 1,751,433 requested	$ 1,231,141 granted

Investment Impacts, FY2020-FY2026

Some workforce programs have received recurring annual grants from Buncombe County's Early Childhood Fund, allowing for multi-year impact review.

BUNCOMBE PARTNERSHIP FOR CHILDREN, Workforce Development Program	**FY20**	**FY21**	**FY22**	**FY23**	**FY24**	**FY25**	**FY26**	**TOTAL**
Number of "level 1" participants enrolled in the program and completed the initial training	24	12	39	29	42	32	32	210

Number of "level 2" participants eligible for/offered employment as substitute teachers	23	6	18	23	35	32	17	154
Number of "level 3" participants completed EDU119 with a grade of C or better	16	0	10	11	5	13	18	73
Number of program alumni participating in coaching and/or professional development	0	0	17	34	44	47	30	172
Number of program participants and/or alumni receiving offers of full time employment with Buncombe County ECE programs	8	5	11	26	40	37	20	147

AB TECH, Early Childhood Collegiate Support Program	**FY23**	**FY24**	**FY25**	**FY26**	**Total**
Unduplicated Enrollment		128	143	142	413
EDU-119 Completions	45	67	62	51	225
Credential Completions		19	20	49	88

Wage Comparisons

Data pulled from Indeed Buncombe County employment listings on 9/16/2026.

CHILD CARE

Position	***Min*** *(bottom of posted range)*	***Max*** *(top of posted range)*
Substitute Teacher	$16	$18
Assistant Teacher	$19.50	$20.50
Teacher	$19.75	$24.10
Support Staff	$19	$20
Teacher	$17.00	$24.00
Teacher	$23.56	$28.06
Teacher	$19	$22
Lead Teacher	$17	$18
Preschool Teacher	$16	$18
Assistant Teacher	$18	$22
PreK Support Guide	$19.25	$20
Preschool Teacher	$16	$17

MIN *(bottom of posted range)*	**$16**	**$17**
MEDIAN	**$19**	**$20**
MAX *(top of posted range)*	**$24**	**$28**

FOOD INDUSTRY

Position	***Min*** *(bottom of posted range)*	***Max*** *(top of posted range)*
House Positions	$14	$18
Barista	$14	$15
Delivery Driver	$15	$20
Team Member	$14	$18
Crew Member	$13	$18
Line Cook	$17	$17
Thai Cusine Cook	$15	$20
Line Cook	$20	$23
Line Cook	$17	$20
Deli Associate	$16	$17
Line Cook	$21	$21
Wok Cook	$22	$24
MIN *(bottom of posted range)*	**$13**	**$15**
MEDIAN	**$16**	**$19**
MAX *(top of posted range)*	**$22**	**$24**

RETAIL

Position	***Min*** *(bottom of posted range)*	***Max*** *(top of posted range)*
Cashier	$17	$22
Sales Assoc	$19	$24
Retail Fulfillment	$19	$19
Scanning Coordinator	$15	$18
Retail Merchandising	$19	$19
Retail Stocker	$17	$19
Retail Stocking	$18	$22
Retail Coordinator	$16	$17
Cashier	$17	$25
Thrift Store Associate	$16	$18
Sales Associate	$23	$23
Toy Store Sales Assoc	$16	$18
MIN *(bottom of posted range)*	**$15**	**$17**
MEDIAN	**$17**	**$19**
MAX *(top of posted range)*	**$23**	**$25**

Supporting Information

- **Building and Sustaining the Child Care and Early Education Workforce: Knowledge Review Series**
  US Dept of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children & Families
- **Buncombe County Early Care & Education Workforce Reports**
  Local data on workforce pipeline, educator retention, and system-level outcomes. Including The State of Child Care in Buncombe County.
  Buncombe Partnership for Children
- **CLASS – Observation and Assessment in Early Childhood**
  Research on the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS®) as a tool for measuring teacher-child interactions and improving outcomes.
  Palomar College Pressbooks
- **Designing a Stronger Early Childhood Workforce Pipeline**
  Colorado's statewide approach to aligning access, pathways, and investment across education systems. Buell Foundation Report, July 2026
- **High-Quality Early Care and Education**
  A Summary of the Evidence Child Care and Early Education Policy and Research Analysis
  Children's Learning and Development Benefits from High-Quality Early Care and Education: A Summary of the Evidence
- **Ideas and Evidence: Investing in the Early Care and Education Workforce**
  Ideas and Evidence 2021
- **NCSL Childcare Policy Work Group – FINAL Report 2026 (v2)**
  Childcare at a Crossroads: A State Legislative Framework for Strengthening Childcare Systems
- **North Carolina Child Care Workforce Study**
  2023 Statewide survey and qualitative research on workforce conditions, recruitment, retention, and compensation.
  Early Years, Inc.
- **Pyramid Model Consortium**
  Training modules, reliability training, and implementation resources.
  Pyramid Model Consortium
- **Staff Recruitment and Retention | HeadStart.gov**
  Examples of state systems and policies supporting recruitment and retention, plus strategies for data collection on staff turnover.
  HeadStart.gov, 2026
- **Workforce Designs – NAEYC Policy blueprint for state early childhood professional development systems.**
  NAEYC