

Voices from the Field: Results from Early Learning Survey and Provider Focus Group

Effective early care and education (ECE) policy requires input from practitioners in the field, so Child360 and Early Edge California went directly to ECE providers to seek their feedback. In fall 2018, we surveyed Los Angeles-based ECE providers about needed workforce supports and about common challenges faced by programs. After reviewing and synthesizing this data, we held a focus group with a cadre of providers in early 2019 that enabled us to further explore issues that were addressed in the survey. Key findings from the survey and focus group indicate that providers need:

1. Higher reimbursement rates to increase staff salaries and reduce turnover
2. Tuition stipends to help staff further their education
3. Quality support coaching
4. Funding for trainings offered at flexible times
5. Higher education coursework that more effectively prepares current and aspiring ECE professionals for the classroom
6. Training and support for working with dual language learners and their families

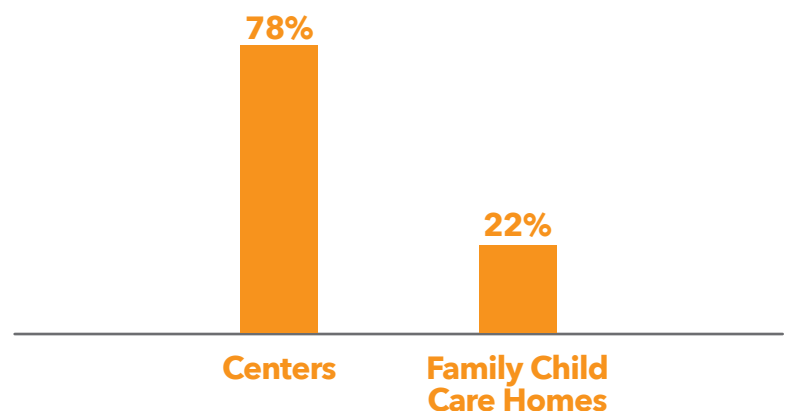
Introduction

In fall 2018, Child360 and Early Edge California created an online survey designed to elicit feedback about needed workforce supports and program challenges. The survey was administered to Child360’s Los Angeles-based network of providers, which includes school districts, community-based organizations, community college early learning centers and family child care homes. In total, 480 site or agency directors received a link to our survey, and **135 respondents** completed the survey for a response rate of 28 percent. More than three quarters of respondents were center-based providers, with the balance being family child care homes. In addition, nearly all sites (95 percent) reported serving preschoolers; more than half (57 percent) reported serving toddlers, and well over a third (38 percent) reported serving infants.

Survey respondents were asked to:

- Identify what professional support they and/or their staff received that had proven most helpful over the past year
- Indicate what would most assist them/their staff in furthering their education
- Assess their staff’s overall knowledge of dual language learner (DLL) strategies
- Identify the most significant challenge facing their programs

Survey Respondents by Type of Site

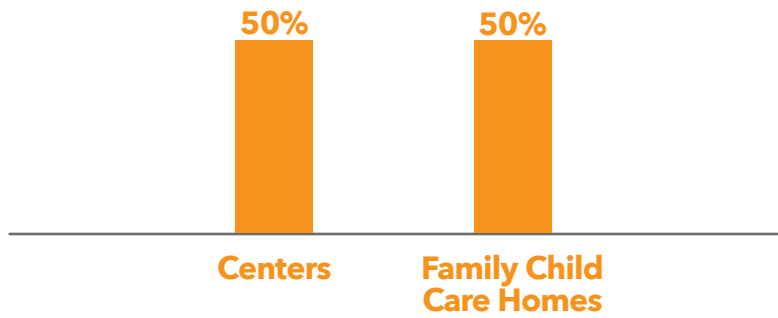


After analyzing the results of the survey, we held a focus group in early 2019 with directors of **four center based early learning programs** and **four family child care homes**. All of these early learning providers are based in Los Angeles County and most receive some form of state funding. These providers were asked to share their thoughts on the main issues that were addressed in survey responses. Specifically, they were asked to discuss:

- The merits of coaching and tuition stipends
- Barriers to staff recruitment and retention
- How to make training more accessible to ECE professionals
- Strategies and challenges in working with dual language learner children and their families

Findings from our online survey and focus group are discussed in the sections below.

Focus Group Respondents by Type of Site



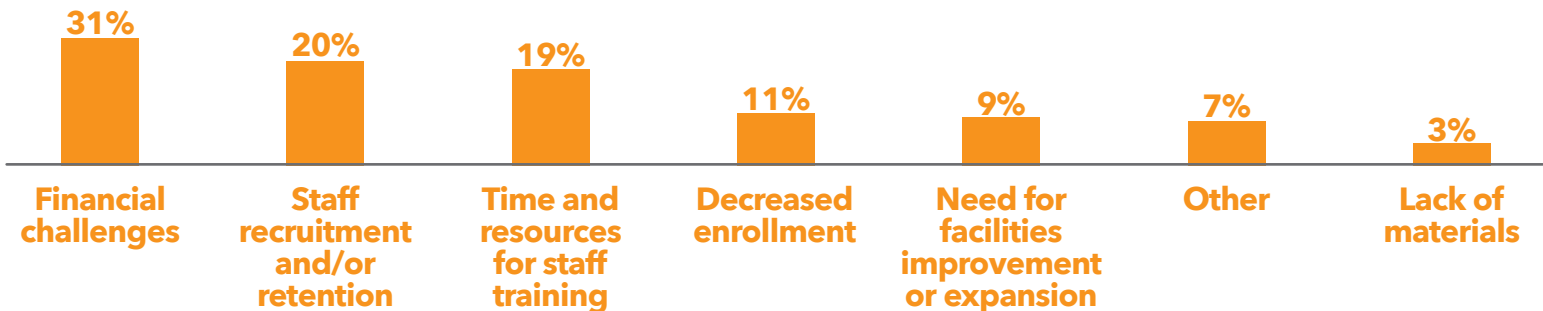
Needs of the ECE Workforce

We know that well trained and supported educators are integral to high quality ECE programs. Consequently, we used our online survey and focus group to ask providers what professional supports have been helpful to them, and what resources or opportunities are still needed to ensure that they are fairly compensated and prepared to meet the needs of a diverse child population.

Increased Compensation and Employee Benefits for Early Educators

When asked to identify the biggest challenge they are facing in operating their programs, **31 percent** of survey respondents selected **financial challenges**. In addition, **20 percent** selected **staff recruitment/retention**, which is an issue connected to the financial difficulties providers are experiencing.

What is the biggest challenge you currently face in operating your program?



According to one provider in our focus group, “[w]e can’t retain good teachers because we just don’t have the funding. That’s my biggest challenge.” Providers in the focus group unanimously agreed that they have difficulty recruiting and retaining qualified teachers because they cannot offer competitive salaries. Multiple providers noted that creating an environment where staff “feel like family,” and where teachers have an opportunity to participate in decision-making, helps with retention.

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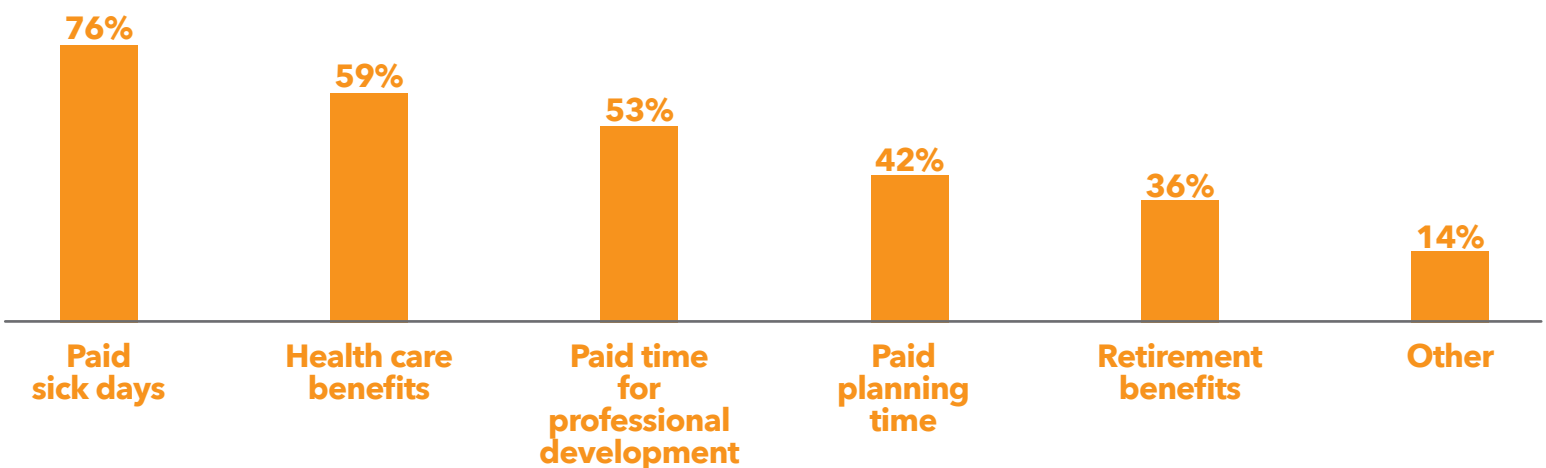
– Provider Focus Group Participant, 2019

Providers in the focus group also found a common and frustrating problem to be that teachers use tuition stipends to obtain more education and acquire degrees, and then leave their programs for positions in school districts, other ECE programs or non-ECE related jobs where the pay is higher.¹ Staff turnover can make a director’s job more taxing and negatively impact employee morale. It can also mean that investments made in staff training and professional development have a shorter payoff for the program. In addition, high turnover rates among ECE teaching staff have been linked to adverse effects on children’s social-emotional, cognitive and language development.²

Finally, all providers in our focus group indicated that if they had greater financial resources, they would use them to increase staff compensation and benefits. One provider said that she is able to provide one week of paid vacation for her staff but no further benefits. Another provider explained that while she cannot pay her staff as much as she would like, the benefits she is able to provide serve as an “incentive,” particularly in a field where receiving both pay and benefits is not always the norm.

Included below is a graph that shows the benefits provided to staff by the participants in our online survey. While the majority of providers offer paid sick days, provision of other benefits is less consistent.

Percentage of programs that provide the following benefits to staff



1. Transitional Kindergarten (TK) and Expanded Transitional Kindergarten (ETK) programs within school districts are funded according to the Average Daily Attendance (ADA) funding rate, and teachers in these programs typically earn more than ECE professionals in programs that receive other forms of state funding (State Preschool, General Child Care or Alternative Payment Program funding). In addition, ECE programs that charge significant parent fees are able to pay higher teacher salaries.

2. Whitebook, M., Howes, C., & Phillips, D. (1990). Who cares? Child care teachers and the quality of care in America. Final Report, National Child Care Staffing Study. Washington, DC: Center for the Child Care Workforce. Retrieved from: <http://www.irl.berkeley.edu/csce/wp-content/uploads/2010/07/Who-Cares-full-report.pdf>

Tuition stipends

When asked what would most help providers and their staff to further their education, over half of survey respondents selected tuition assistance or stipends.

When we asked providers in the focus group how they anticipated their staff would utilize tuition stipends, they said it would depend on the level of education already achieved, but that stipends could be used to earn Child Development Permits, as well as Associate of Arts (AA), bachelors (BA), and graduate degrees. They also shared multiple reasons why it is valuable for ECE professionals to increase their education, even if an individual already has years of experience in the classroom. One provider stated that additional education gave her “more credibility” as a professional, kept her current with educational trends and increased the “validity” of her program. Another provider described additional education as “empowering,” while another provider asserted that program quality improves when ECE professionals acquire more education. Multiple providers indicated that current and aspiring ECE professionals should become familiar with early learning theories and tools and have opportunities to put them into practice.

What would most help you and/or your staff to further their education?



Increased Awareness about the Responsibilities of the ECE Profession and Improved Higher Education Coursework

When discussing the challenge of teacher recruitment, providers in our focus group stated that many applicants for ECE teaching positions lack critical knowledge about child development, as well as a strong grasp of what the profession entails. Providers explained that many applicants have not taken child development classes and are unfamiliar with early learning assessments. One provider also noted that some aspiring ECE professionals seem surprised that routine tasks such as changing diapers and cleaning eating surfaces are part of the job.

In addition, providers indicated that early learning preparation programs at institutions of higher education do not consistently include coursework on several topics that are critical for working in today's ECE environments. For example, one provider shared that her masters program in Early Childhood Primary Education did not provide instruction on early learning tools, such as the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), that are used regularly to track and improve ECE program quality. In addition, multiple providers shared that their preservice training and coursework did not include instruction on working with dual language learners (DLLs) and their families, despite the large DLL population in California.

Quality Support Coaching

When asked what professional support they/their staff had received in the last year that was most helpful, **72 percent** of survey respondents selected **coaching**. In addition, focus group participants unanimously agreed that coaching constituted a helpful support. Providers touted multiple benefits of coaching, such as receiving training and assistance in utilizing assessment tools, staying abreast of new and effective curricula, and seeing improvements in program quality. Providers also described coaches as a “second pair of eyes and ears,” who offer ideas for tackling challenges, provide needed mentorship, and answer questions from teachers and directors. Providers emphasized that having a coach who communicates regularly and stays with the provider over an extended period of time is critical for the relationship to work effectively.

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Flexible Training Opportunities

When asked to identify the biggest challenge they face in operating their programs, **19 percent** of survey respondents selected **time and resources for staff training**. In order to better understand this survey response, we asked providers in our focus group if their staff faced any challenges in accessing training opportunities. One provider explained that if she and/or her staff attend a training held during the week, she must close her program while the training is taking place since she is not able to cover the cost of substitutes. Multiple providers also noted that their limited funding can restrict the number of staff who are able to attend trainings.

Providers in our focus group suggested that holding trainings on Saturdays and increasing funding for these opportunities would help increase training access and attendance. Providers also expressed interest in online trainings, citing the flexibility of these courses, though one provider noted that she likes the in person conversations and responses that take place in non-virtual settings.

Supporting Dual Language Learners and Partnering with Families from Multiple Linguistic and Cultural Backgrounds

In California, nearly sixty percent of children ages five and younger are living in a home where a language other than English is spoken.³ These children, who are learning two or more languages at the same time, or are learning a second language while continuing to develop their first (or home) language, are known as Dual Language Learners (DLLs).⁴ On average, children who are DLLs enter kindergarten behind their peers, particularly in the areas of language, literacy and math.⁵ Given California’s large DLL population, we wanted to know how providers are being prepared to serve this specific population and what challenges, if any, they are having in working with DLL children and their families.

3. “Dual Language Learners (DLLs).” Accessed April 26, 2019, <https://earlyedgecalifornia.org/ece-priorities/dual-language-learners/>.

4. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Education (2016). Policy Statement on Supporting The Development of Children Who are Dual Language Learners in Early Childhood Programs. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from: https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/ece/dll_policy_statement_final.pdf.

5. Ibid.

Knowledge of Strategies to Support DLL Children and Their Families

The need for additional instruction and resources for providers who are working with DLLs was reflected both in our focus group, and in responses to our online survey. When asked to describe the overall knowledge of their staff in DLL strategies, only **27 percent of survey respondents** reported that their staff had “fairly significant knowledge” of these strategies, and **47 percent** reported that their staff had “some knowledge of DLL strategies.”

When asked about the challenges they experience in working with the DLL population, one of the key issues providers raised was that of language diversity in the classroom. According to one provider, “[w]e have a very diverse population. We have Spanish, Armenian, Polish, Japanese [and] Chinese. We’ve had children that come in and they cannot speak [English], and I have no idea how to communicate with them. How do we support their language while they are still learning English?” Providers also noted that it can be difficult to communicate with parents when they do not share a common language, but highlighted several creative ways that they address this issue. One provider said that she asks parents to write down key words in their native language so she can communicate with them about their child’s ECE needs, while another said she uses basic sign language. Multiple providers expressed an interest in having multilingual staff who could provide translation in order to be able to communicate more effectively with DLL children and their families.

Providers also highlighted the challenge of helping some parents of DLL children see the value of using both English and a child’s native language in the classroom. One provider explained that some of her Spanish speaking parents want her to speak to their children only in English, prompting her to explain the importance of helping the child maintain his/her home language while also learning English. Research indicates that having strong home language skills helps to build – and transfers to – strong English language skills.⁶ In addition, research shows that bilingual children demonstrate more advanced executive function than their monolingual peers, in areas such as cognitive control, problem solving, working memory, ability to focus on pertinent information, and applying known concepts to new information.⁷

Partnering with Families from Multiple Cultural Backgrounds

Multiple providers noted that they had attended trainings on working with children and families from a variety of cultural backgrounds, but said the trainings presented a “one size fits all” view of various cultures instead of a more nuanced perspective. Providers seemed to agree that taking the time to get to know individual families was more helpful in learning about their backgrounds, cultures and expectations for their children’s experience in the program. In addition, providers shared that parent cafes,⁸ as well as multicultural events where parents bring food from their home countries, have proven to be effective ways to help parents connect with one another and ensure that their cultures (and cultural differences) are expressed and appreciated.

How would you describe the overall knowledge of your staff in DLL strategies?



6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. Caring Conversations Cafés are models of structured and reflective group dialogue, created by ZERO TO THREE and the Minnesota Department of Human Services. The cafés promote reflective and meaningful conversations that build parent leadership and collaboration between parents and providers. Each conversation is facilitated using the Strengthening Families Protective Factors identified by the Center for the Study of Social Policy. The cafés offer parents a chance to meet and connect with one another, to discuss the challenges and successes of parenting, and to share resources and ideas. Parent leaders help to plan and facilitate the cafés, and they benefit by building relationships with other parents and developing their leadership skills.

Recommendations

The results of our provider survey and focus group indicate a need for the following investments to better support the ECE workforce and improve program quality:

1. Higher reimbursement rates for state subsidized early care and education programs to increase staff compensation and employee benefits and address existing recruitment and retention challenges.
2. Additional funding for tuition assistance and stipends for ECE providers and staff to further their education and increase their professional qualifications.
3. Development of higher education coursework that better prepares ECE students and professionals to work with DLL children and their families, and to utilize assessment tools such as the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), that are used regularly to track and improve program quality. Coursework on assessment tools could include hands on learning opportunities for students to work with the tools in early learning classrooms.
4. Additional funding for high quality training on supporting DLLs and their families, which could include strategies for supporting home and English language development and research on the benefits of bilingualism.
5. Additional funding for quality support coaching. In 2016, only 18 percent of center-based programs and 4 percent of family child care homes in Los Angeles County were participating in the county's Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS),⁹ which *includes quality support coaching*.
6. Funding for online and Saturday trainings for ECE providers and staff, and for substitutes when trainings are offered during the week.
7. More information provided in secondary schools, job training centers, trade schools, and education and child development departments at institutions of higher education, about the responsibilities and qualifications that are required of ECE professionals.



Funded by First 5 LA, a leading public grantmaking and child advocacy organization, and managed in partnership with community partners.

9. Los Angeles County Child Care Planning Committee, Los Angeles County Office for the Advancement of Early Care and Education, and First 5 LA (2017). The State of Early Care and Education in Los Angeles County, Los Angeles County Child Care Planning Committee 2017 Needs Assessment. Executive Summary. Retrieved from: https://www.first5la.org/postfiles/files/ECE%20Needs%20Assessment_Executive%20Brief_v4.pdf