

Federal government launches first-of-its-kind center for early childhood workforce ^[1]

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Excerpts

While the national labor force has long since rebounded from the pandemic, the child care sector has lagged behind, experiencing a slow recovery that continues to this day.

In the three years since the arrival of COVID-19, families have struggled to find high-quality, affordable child care for their children. Child care providers have been hard-pressed to find qualified workers to fill their open positions, often because retail and service industry employers have emerged as better-paying competitors. And the early childhood educators who remain in the field have done so despite low wages, rising inflation and high-stress working conditions.

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Since 2020, HHS has been monitoring data from the field, including data that showed a strained workforce.

“It felt like the right time for the federal government to have an explicit focus on this — and one that is cross cutting,” Hamm tells EdSurge.

Earlier this month, ACF announced the launch of the **National Early Care and Education Workforce Center** ^[3] — the ECE Workforce Center, for short — to support research and technical assistance for states, communities, territories and tribal nations. With a \$30 million investment over five years, the center aims to improve conditions for the early care and education workforce, making it a more attractive field to enter, remain and advance in.

The two main goals of the center are increasing compensation, including wages and benefits, and building a diverse, qualified pipeline of future educators.

These two objectives are equally important and inextricably linked, says Elena Montoya, a senior research and policy associate at the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (CSCCE) at the University of California, Berkeley.

“They go hand in hand,” says Montoya. “In order to recruit and retain educators, you have to address compensation. It’s hard to untangle them.”

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ACF has tapped Child Trends, a nonprofit research organization focused on children and families, to lead the ECE Workforce Center, in partnership with a number of organizations committed to improving early childhood education, including BUILD Initiative; the CSCCE at Berkeley; ZERO TO THREE; the University of Delaware; and the University of Massachusetts Boston.

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All three women note that the national ECE Workforce Center will take an equity-focused, strengths-based approach to the work ahead. Lloyd says the equity lens refers to recognizing the fact that the early childhood workforce is overwhelmingly made up of women and disproportionately women of color and immigrants. For the strengths-based element, she says it means showing up with a “can-do” attitude.

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Direct input from early childhood educators is also part of the approach. The center is developing an “early educator leadership board,” which will provide a channel for educators to give feedback on the center’s activities. And a fellowship program for policy and research will

also incorporate educator voice. Both are efforts to ensure the center’s work “remains educator centric,” Montoya explains.

With \$30 million of funding and five years’ time, it’s unlikely the new center will find a cure for all that ails the field. But by learning from states, communities, territories and tribes, and looking at ways to restructure budgets and redirect funding, those involved expect to see incremental but meaningful outcomes.

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“It’s really thrilling that HHS is investing in the center, because it means leadership is recognizing the impossible conditions of early educators,” she says. “The fact that the center was proposed and exists is exciting.”

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Region: United States ^[4]

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