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The Views of State Early Childhood Education Agency Staff on Their Work and Their Vision for Young Children: *Informing a Legacy for Young Children by 2030*



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Abstract

CEELO convened a series of focus groups and conducted a national survey of state early childhood education agency staff, in partnership with the [National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education](#). Data for this report was collected from May through September 2018 in focus groups and a national survey of state early childhood education agency (ECE) staff. The report describes what we learned about state ECE agency staff. State ECE agency staff are typically white, women, 40 or older, highly educated, and have spent a number of years in the field of ECE. Although many were relatively new to their positions, predicted turnover within the next five years is high. This suggests we need to put more emphasis on succession planning and growing the field of future state early childhood policy leaders.

The report further describes the complexity of state ECE agency staff work, and identifies a number of factors that would enable them to better accomplish their work, including strong leadership, support around political and leadership transitions, and professional development supports to build their own skills and knowledge. State early childhood education agency staff indicated that social-emotional and mental health supports for young children and a well-qualified, well-compensated workforce were among their top policy priorities. Improving access to quality programs was the number one statistic that state early childhood education agency staff would like to see change by 2030.

The goal of the [Early Childhood Legacy 2030 project](#) is to elevate the perspectives and experiences of state early childhood education agency staff and others who have influenced early education policy. This rich set of data has enormous potential as CEELO and its partners amplify the voices of state early childhood education agency staff doing crucial work across the country. These findings provide a solid foundation for future research inquiries, important guidance for current and future policymakers and capacity-building supports for those who work on behalf of our youngest children and their families.

Introduction

The Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcome's (CEELO) [Early Childhood Legacy 2030](#) project is a comprehensive, multimedia effort to capture the voices and experiences of those charged with implementing state early education policy and those who have influenced early education policy, the pioneers of our field. The project is intended to identify the pressing policy issues that could make a significant difference in child outcomes and explore solutions from diverse viewpoints among leaders who have shaped the early childhood education field (ECE) from its early history to the present.

Why is this project needed now? Too many children still lack access to high-quality early learning experiences, resulting in inequitable opportunities to succeed in school and life. State early childhood education agency staff are responsible for implementing policies and collaborating with other stakeholders to meet the needs of all young children in their states. Yet no one has adequately documented the voice, experience and perspective of these individuals so that challenges and constraints of implementing state ECE policy can inform a continuous improvement process in state agencies.

In order to systematically gather information, CEELo contracted with the Policy Equity Group, a Washington, D.C. consulting firm, to convene a series of focus groups and conduct a national survey of state early childhood education agency staff, in partnership with the [National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education](#). This was the first time a survey and focus groups were conducted specifically to learn more about the characteristics of state early childhood education agency staff, how they work most effectively, and what matters most to them in achieving goals for children, birth through third grade.

NAECS-SDE is the national organization for state education staff members with major responsibilities in the field of early childhood education, from infancy through the primary grades.

Methodology

Data for this report was collected from May through September 2018 in focus groups and a national survey of state early childhood education agency staff. For the purposes of this project, we included individuals working in state agencies, primarily state education agencies or state early childhood agencies, with responsibility for programs serving children birth through third grade.

Focus Groups

The goal of conducting the focus groups was to better understand both policy and implementation issues faced by state early childhood education agency staff through an interactive discussion with their peers. The focus group explored the following areas:

- **Policy issues:** What are the most pressing policies or issues that need to be addressed to positively impact child outcomes, including challenges associated with serving children with disabilities or dual language learners?
- **Organizational context:** What opportunities do state early childhood education agency staff have to influence early childhood policies and what contextual factors affect the implementation of early care and education (ECE) policies?
- **Personal professional capacity:** What knowledge and skills do specialists need to be successful in their work and what types of supports would help strengthen their professional capacity?
- **Defining a vision for early childhood:** What is required to create an early childhood system that effectively supports the development and learning of all children by 2030?

Five focus groups were held during May and June 2018. A total of 56 individuals from 29 states and Washington, D.C. participated in the focus groups (**Appendix A** for a list of participating states). Each session lasted approximately 1.5 hours and was recorded for the purposes of transcription.

National Survey

Based on themes that emerged from the focus groups, a survey was developed to gather additional information and examine whether findings from the focus group could be generalized to a broader sample of early childhood state specialists. The final survey was organized into the following sections:

- **Background information:** demographics and background characteristics of state early childhood education agency staff and information about their roles, programs, and agencies.
- **Vision for the early childhood system:** state early childhood education agency staff's vision to inform policy decisions for children birth through third grade over the coming decade (2020–2030).
- **Policy priorities:** perspectives on key policy priorities identified in the focus groups including system coordination, equity, early childhood workforce, and financing.

- **Professional context and supports:** contextual factors that affect the work of state early childhood education agency staff and the professional supports they desire.

The survey was sent via email to 558 state early childhood education agency staff in all 50 states; Washington, D.C.; and eight U.S. territories² during August and September 2018. A total of 153 respondents participated in the survey from 44 states; Washington, D.C., and Guam. In some states we had multiple respondents, and we had no responses from state specialists in Alaska, Florida, New Hampshire, New Mexico, North Dakota, and Tennessee. This represents a response rate of 27.4% of the initial 558 invitees. See **Appendix B** for information on the number of states invited and the number responding to the national survey and the final national survey.

Limitations of the Study. This was the first national survey of this scope and purpose of those working in state agencies on early childhood education programs. We wrestled with the correct nomenclature to define the study sample- state early childhood specialists as typically defined by the NAECS-SDE were primarily State Pre-K administrators but as state education agencies expanded their scope to birth to third grade, and others reorganized or created new agencies implementing early childhood education, “early childhood specialist” or “state early childhood administrator” titles seemed less relevant. We have decided to use the term “state early childhood education agency staff.”

The sample is not representative of all state early childhood education agency staff, as we had a relatively low response rate. We also had a wide range of responses from individual states, and no response from six states. It should be noted that participants in both the focus group and survey are self-selecting groups. As such, it is likely that participants are individuals who may share characteristics, such as particularly strong opinions about certain issues, compared to those who did not to participate.

Findings

This brief shares findings from our effort to illuminate who state early childhood education agency staff are, what challenges they face and where they believe early childhood education policy should be headed in the next decade. Findings

² The invitee contact list was compiled from multiple sources including the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists (NAECS) member list, the State Education Agency Directory, the NIEER Preschool Yearbook briefing contact list, and various meeting participant lists (e.g., CCSSO Family Engagement Network Meeting, Promoting High-Quality Pre-Kindergarten Meeting, CELO Roundtable Meeting).

reported include responses from participants in the focus groups and from the 153 respondents to the national survey. We report below a summary of the findings to the following questions:

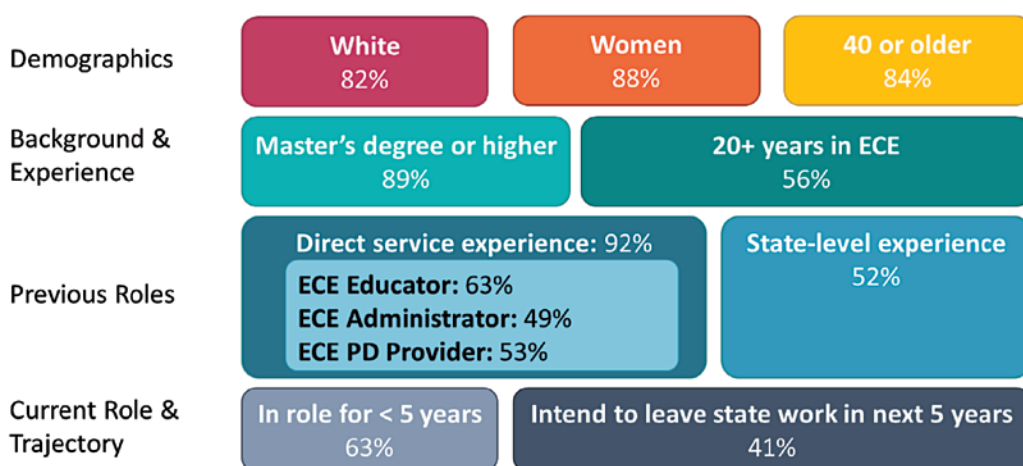
- Who are state early childhood education agency staff
- How do state early childhood education agency staff work
- What matters most to state early childhood education agency staff
- What is their vision for early childhood education by 2030

Who Are State Early Childhood Education Agency Staff

The majority of survey respondents identified as white (82%) women (88.2%) over age 40 (83.5%), with advanced degrees (56% masters; nearly 21% doctorate; 11% professional (e.g. LCSW or JD). Most have more than 10 years experience in the early childhood education (ECE) field—more than half reported more than 20 years in the field. However, they averaged just 3.6 years in their current position. Most survey respondents came to their current roles with a background as a state-level administrator (51%) or ECE advocate (43.3%); and many reported experience as an educator in ECE settings (62.7%) and elementary settings (41.8%), as well as ECE administrators (48.4%), and ECE professional development providers (52.9%).

Figure 1 provides a summary of the demographics, background and experience, previous role and career trajectory of respondents to the national survey.

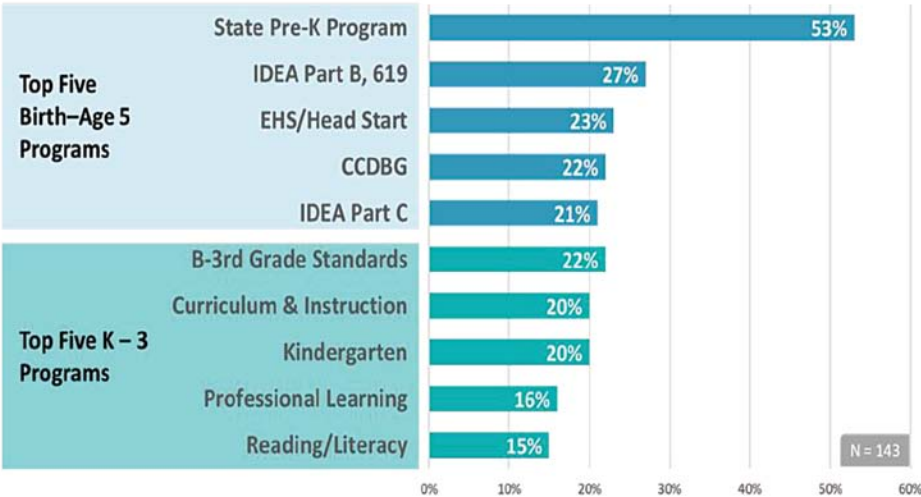
Figure 1: Demographics, Experience, and Career Trajectories of Respondents



Authority of Respondents. We had a fairly even split among respondents on positions held in the state agency—24% were the **senior person** in charge of agency’s early childhood programs; 36.7% **direct or manage** one or more early childhood programs and report to the senior person; 33.3% identified as a **staff member or consultant** helping administer one or more early childhood programs. The title of “consultant” is typically a state position - but either the state nomenclature for this role or is a contractual position (typically year to year rather than permanent state government position).

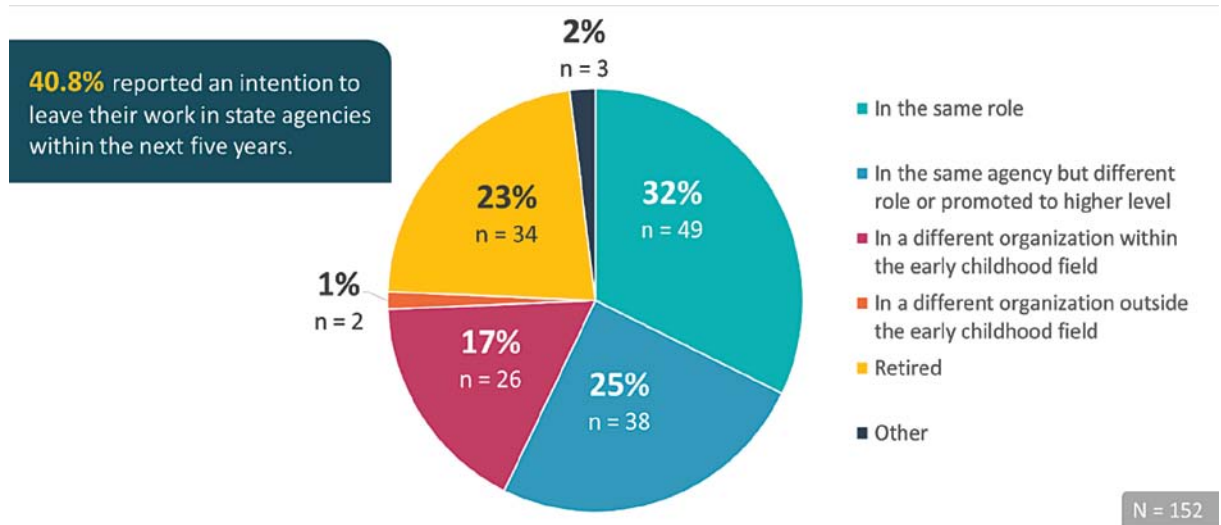
Position of Respondents. The majority of survey respondents at the time of the survey worked in early education positions serving children birth to age 5, or birth through third grade. **Figure 2** indicates that more than half of those working in birth to five (B-5) (53%) work in state pre-K programs within departments of education. Others reported their offices are housed within a department of education and human services, health and human services department, the governor’s offices and workforce-related agencies.

Figure 2: Programs Administered by Respondents



Career Plans of Respondents. **Figure 3** below notes that – more than 40%– when asked “where do you see yourself in five years”, shared an expectation to leave state agency work within five years; and about 25% had aspirations for promotion within their agency. This information is important for understanding how to build capacity and leadership at the state level to effectively implement policy, though more information is needed on how to retain state early childhood education agency staff.

Figure 3: Where Do Respondents See Themselves in Five Years?



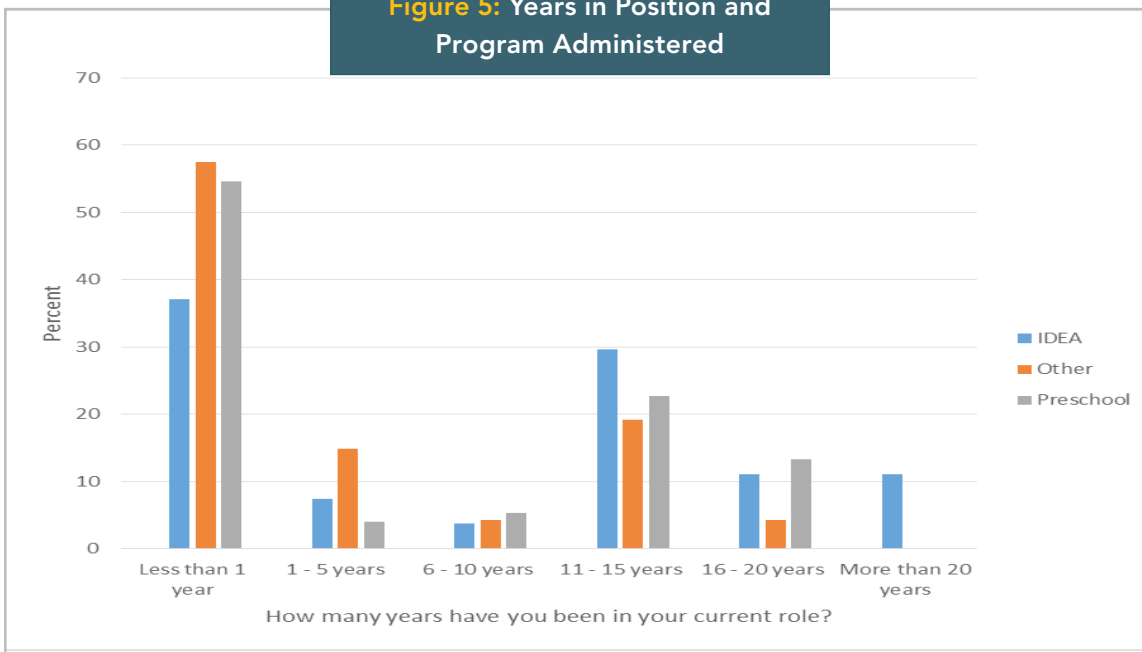
We looked to see if respondent's role or program administered impacted their longevity in the agency and their career plans.

Years in Current Position. In fact many state early education staff are relatively new to their positions though they may have been in the ECE field for awhile. **Figure 4** indicates that about 65% of directors/managers have been in their position less than one year; and **Figure 5**, notes more than 50% of respondents administering PreK programs or other early childhood programs have been in their position for less than one year (see Figure 2 for types of other programs).

Figure 4: Years in Current Position and Role



Figure 5: Years in Position and Program Administered



Career Plans in Next Five Years. Looking again by position to how state ECE agency staff responded to the question, “where do you see yourself in five years”, **Figure 6** finds that almost 30% of those in senior positions plan to retire, and about 20% plan to leave the state agency (or their current organization). **Figure 7** indicates more than 30% of PreK Administrators intend to retire, which might be expected given the average age of respondents. However, it is difficult to say if this is “typical” for state agency staff or to understand how this figure compares to other fields.

Figure 6: Career Plans by Position

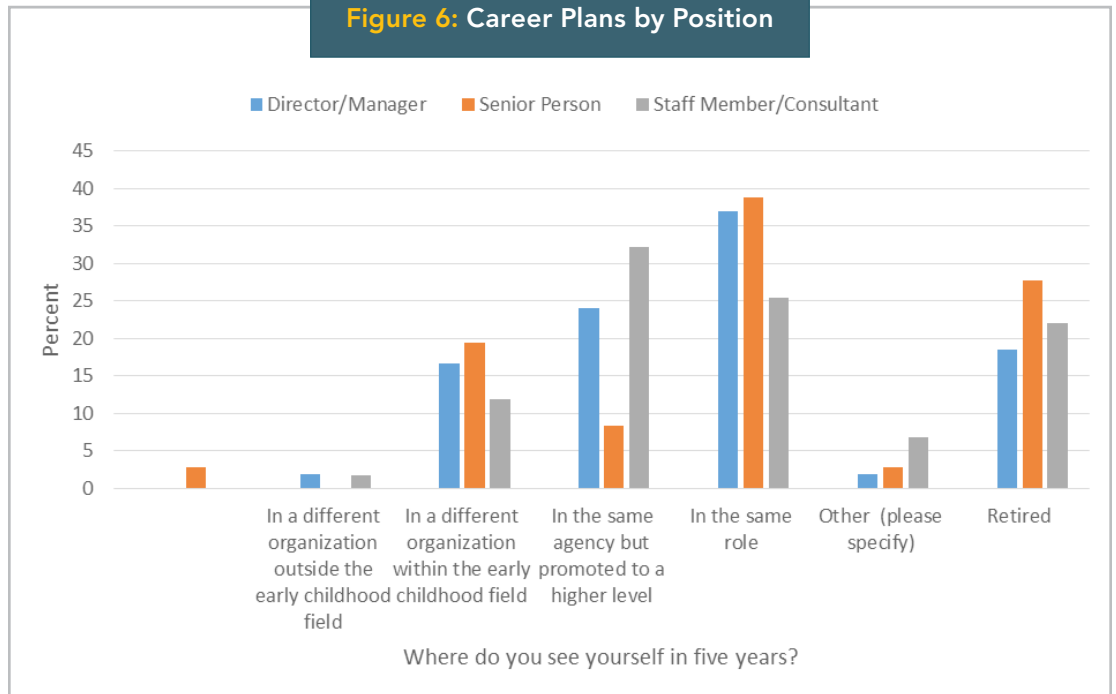
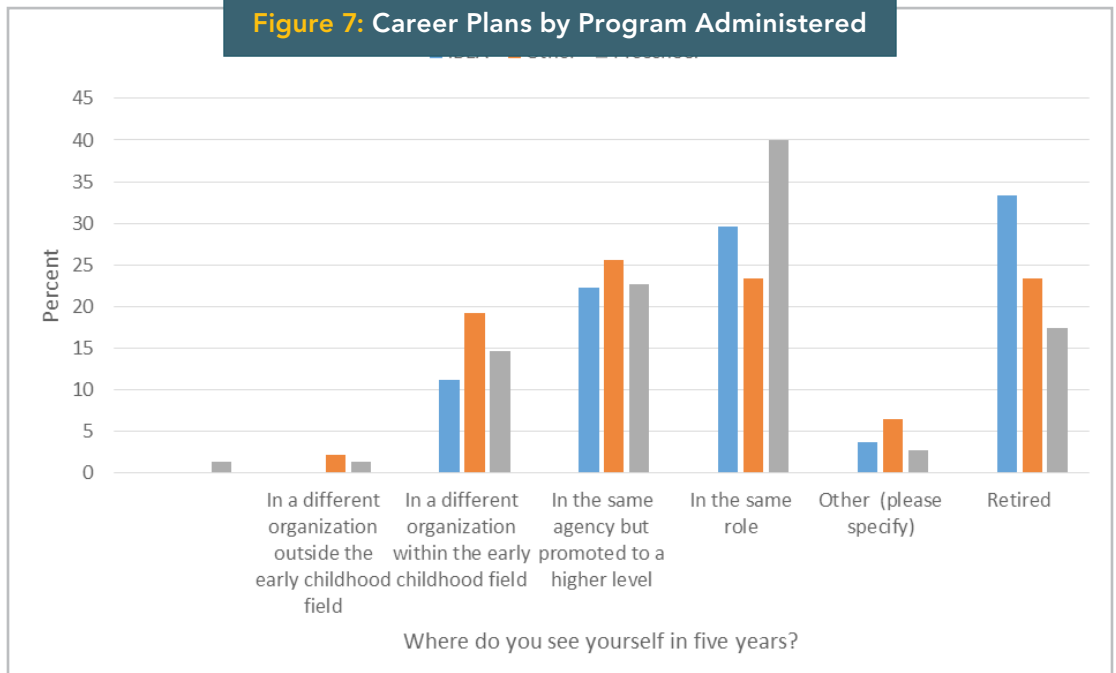


Figure 7: Career Plans by Program Administered



How Do State Early Childhood Education Agency Staff Work

One goal of Legacy 2030 is to better understand the profession of “state early childhood education agency staff,” along with the challenges they confront, to determine what technical assistance and supports are needed to be effective. Through the focus group and survey questions we explored assets state specialists bring to their work and the types of supports they believe would help strengthen their professional capacity; in addition, we asked respondents about some contextual factors affecting their ability to implement early childhood policy well.

Personal Professional Capacity

What They Bring. ECE staff in state agencies report a wealth of experience in the field, particularly in direct service settings. The assets they bring to their work include:

- Prior work in the field, classroom experience, and content knowledge of ECE;
- Current connections and relationships at the community-level (e.g., with districts, practitioners, and other stakeholders); and
- Advocacy and communication skills.

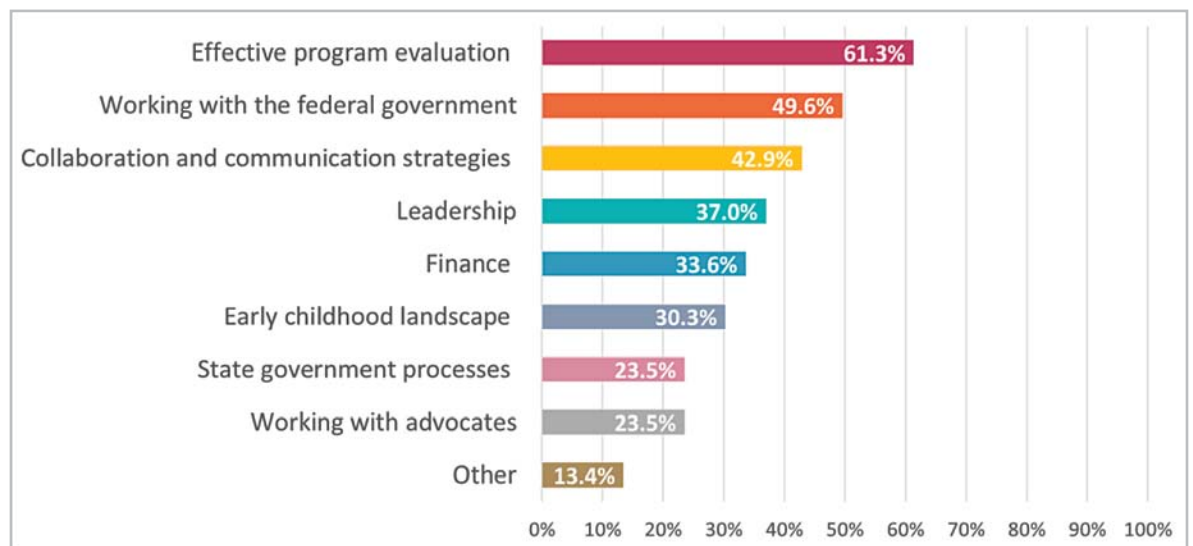
However, respondents also reported that although ECE content knowledge was instrumental to their work, they felt underprepared in other areas such as understanding the nuances of politics, knowledge about the workings of government (e.g., processes, timelines, chains of command, internal rules), and leadership and management skills.

“One of the things I wasn’t prepared for—either in teacher education programs or any of the professional development I had—was personnel management, leadership, and conflict resolution. We’re usually hired for our content expertise and yet developing us as leaders is not addressed.”

- Focus Group participant

What they Need. Based on areas of need expressed by focus group participants, a survey question was developed that asked, “In which areas would you be most interested in receiving professional development or capacity-building support?” Respondents were given a list of options and were asked to select as many as they felt were relevant. As presented in **Figure 8**, survey participants were most interested in professional development in effective program evaluation, working with the federal government, and collaboration and communication strategies. Responses in the “Other” category included implementation science, integrated data systems, evidence-based practices, and cross-sector integration.

Figure 8: Areas of Professional Development Desired by Survey Respondents



Note: Percentages calculated as a function of the 119 respondents who answered this question. Respondents could select as many areas as they wished.

ECE state agency staff also identified types of supports they believed would be helpful in their work including:

- Access to leadership cohorts and mentor support programs
- Exposure to other state perspectives and practices (e.g., early childhood specialist state “exchange program visits”)
- Training in specific areas (personnel management, leadership, conflict resolution, procurement, contracts)
- Resources that could help states navigate political transitions
- Resource bank for state government staff to stay abreast of latest developments in the field
- Guidance on technical assistance (TA) centers available (e.g., who they are and what they do) and regional hubs for TA

Impact of Organizational Context on Their Work

Focus group participants discussed many contextual factors that influence implementation of ECE policies and initiatives in their state, as well as their personal ability to effectively do their work. These contextual factors include characteristics of those in leadership positions, transitions in leadership and political environment, their degree of access to policy makers, and levels of stakeholder engagement across various groups. In the survey, we asked a series of questions to learn more about how organizational context impacts the effectiveness of ECE state agency staff.

Leadership and Transitions

Focus group participants discussed many traits they believe are essential in strong leaders. These characteristics broadly fell into four categories:

- **“Big picture” visionary:** understands all parts of the system and how they work together; has a clear vision and plan that goes beyond their personal tenure.
- **Champion of ECE:** has a deep understanding of the importance ECE; the unique features of the ECE system; and the needs of young children, their families, and those who serve them.
- **Strong interpersonal skills:** is a passionate, charismatic communicator who can articulate a vision for ECE to all audiences; has strong team-building skills and ability to dismantle silos; and is well-connected and savvy about navigating the political context.
- **Humility and curiosity:** has a strong desire to learn from and listen to others; values the expertise of their staff; and fosters a “customer-service” approach to interacting with those on-the-ground (e.g., schools, teachers, administrators, parents) rather than a top-down, regulatory stance.

“...[W]e’re the implementers, we’re the “doer’s. .. I think that ... our voice needs to just be a little bit louder in... framing policy, in framing practice.”

- Focus Group participant

Focus group participants also discussed the difficulty of navigating changes in the broader political context of leadership. These shifts have important implications for state early childhood education agency staff as they often feel like they have to “start all over,” spend valuable time re-establishing the importance and nuances of ECE to new leadership, and navigate new protocols and priorities. Many focus group participants expressed frustration at the consequences of these transitions and a strong desire for support and strategies

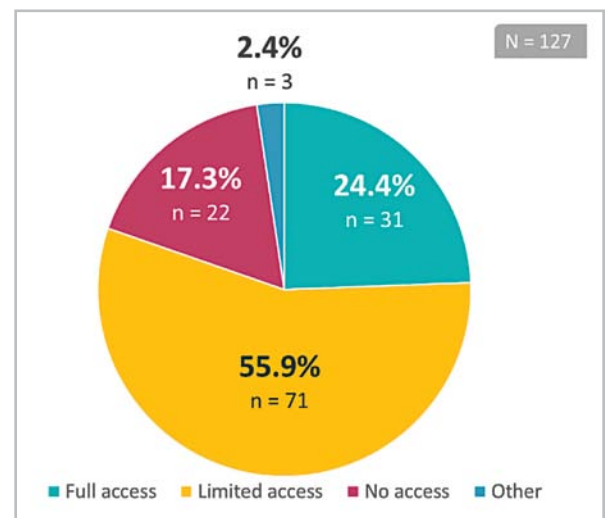
to assist them in managing these frequent periods of change and upheaval. Some participants offered strategies they have found effective such as having an “elevator pitch” and consistent messaging and talking points ready to explain their work when turnover happens.

Access to Policymakers

During the focus groups, it became clear that the degree of access state early childhood education agency staff had to policymakers (e.g., legislators) varied widely by state. Three clear models emerged from focus group participants’ descriptions, ranging from “**Full access**”– respondents have developed relationships and they can meet with legislators, testify before committees, and respond to questions from legislative staff, but may need permission to do so; “**Limited access**” – respondents can communicate with legislators and their staff but only through, or accompanied by, a supervisor or legislative liaison; and “**No access**”– respondents are not allowed to talk to legislators or their staff under any circumstances.

In order to explore these patterns within a larger sample, a survey question was developed asking participating staff to describe their access to the individuals who make policies the specialists administer in their state or territory.

Figure 9: Access to Policymakers reflects survey responses to the question regarding access to the individuals who make policies that state early childhood education agency staff administer.



Stakeholder Engagement

During the focus groups, participants discussed the role of various stakeholder groups in their work (e.g., staff from other state agencies, advocates, practitioners). To better understand how different stakeholder groups are engaged, a survey item was developed asking state staff to indicate their agency’s level of stakeholder engagement with various groups, according to the following categories:

- **No engagement**
- **Follow or monitor:** e.g., media scans, Internet searches, dialogue with them
- **Inform:** e.g., reporting, media campaigns, briefings, listservs, blogs, direct meetings
- **Consult:** e.g., soliciting information, requesting explicit feedback or input on a project or strategy
- **Collaborate:** e.g., partnering on a joint project to achieve specific objectives.³

We found the *strongest levels of collaboration* were reported with other state agencies, advisory panels (e.g., interagency coordinating councils, early learning councils, special education advisory), state-level associations (e.g., advocacy organizations, state AEYC, Head Start Association, etc.), and local education agencies. *Lower levels of engagement* were reported across stakeholder groups such as the governor’s office, legislators, and the philanthropic community. This is consistent with survey results indicating limited levels of access to policy makers (e.g., legislators, governors).

What Matters Most to State Early Childhood Education Agency Staff

One of the primary goals of the Legacy 2030 project is to elevate the voice and experience of state early childhood education agency staff as they are charged with the day-to-day job of implementing state policy. We sought to understand, from their perch in a state agency, what they saw as the most pressing policies or issues that need to be addressed to positively enhance child outcomes.

Survey respondents were asked to rank a list of 11 birth to third grade policy initiatives from highest to lowest priority for funding. See **Figure 7**.

³ Adapted from: UNICEF (2014). *Engaging stakeholders on children’s rights: A tool for companies*. Geneva, Switzerland: United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF).

Figure 10: Ranking of Policies Specialists Would Most Like to See Funded

Overall rank	Policy Priorities
1	Social-emotional & behavioral/ mental health supports
2	Teacher compensation & financial relief
3	Professional development for ECE program staff
4	Increase pre-K funding to expand access
5	Family engagement initiatives
6	Supports for children with disabilities
7	Curriculum and implementation supports
8	ECE higher education reform
9	Increase child care subsidy reimbursement rates
10	Data systems
11	Supports for children who are DLLs/English learners

N = 131

Each of the top three policy priorities focused on direct supports for children and ECE program staff:

1. social-emotional behavioral health supports,
2. teacher compensation and financial relief, and
3. professional development for ECE program staff.

The lowest-rated funding priorities were supports for dual language learners/ English learners and data systems. It's not clear why. One reviewer of this paper suggested that lower ranking of dual language learners as a funding priority reflected a "strength-based" view of children learning English in the early education years, while others might suggest this mirrors the paucity of state-funded preschool policy addressing dual language learners.⁴ On the low ranking of data systems, many states may feel progress has already been made through recent efforts such as Race to the Top grants. Alternatively, as one focus group participant noted, "There's that quote—'We're drowning in data but starving for information.' We have all this information and data but it's not being pulled together in a way we can help drive program decisions."

4 Nores, M., Friedman, A., & Frede, E. (2018). "Opportunities and Policies for Young Dual Language Learners", *Preschool Policy Facts*, National Institute for Early Education Research. http://nieer.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Policy-facts-DLLs_July2018.pdf

Digging Deeper: Do Priorities Change Based on Role or Program Administered

Reflecting on the national survey results, we wondered if ranking of policy priorities as noted in Figure 10 differed depending on the type of program respondents administer and their role in the agency. We sought to examine if a significant relationship existed between the program type respondents administer, their role within their agencies, and ranking they assigned to the 11 policy priorities, along with seven priorities for coordination. We collapsed “program type” into three categories:

- Preschool (state pre-K),
- IDEA (any program related to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act), and
- Other (any early childhood program that wasn’t related to a state pre-K program or IDEA program).

For “role” we identified three categories:

- Senior Person – respondents indicated they were senior persons in charge of the agency’s early childhood programs;
- Director/Manager – respondents indicated they direct or manage one or more early childhood program and report to a senior person; and
- Staff Member/Consultant – respondents indicated they are staff members or consultants helping administer one or more early childhood programs.

Summary of Analyses

We ran statistical tests (analysis of variance ANOVA) to determine if responses varied significantly by type of program survey respondents administered and their roles within the agencies. In all analyses, we tested for an interaction of program type and role. Our results indicated that for some issues, responses did vary depending on type of program and role.

Do policy priorities differ based on role in agency?

We found that the following policy priorities have significant differences according to role:

- Family engagement initiatives,
- Social-emotional behavioral/mental health supports

When asked to rank family engagement initiatives, the respondents who are Directors/Managers (M=6.5, SD = 2.4) ranked this policy significantly lower than Staff Members/Consultants (M=5.1, SD=2.6). For the social-emotional behavioral/mental health supports policy, Directors/Managers (M=5.3, SD=2.6) ranked this policy significantly lower than Staff Members/Consultants (M=3.9, SD=2.3).

Figure 11 and 12 indicate that Staff Members/Consultants believe these two policies have a higher priority than Directors/Managers.

Figure 11

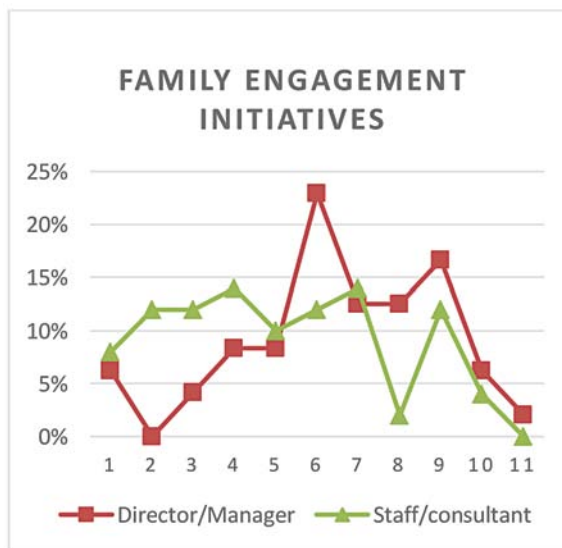
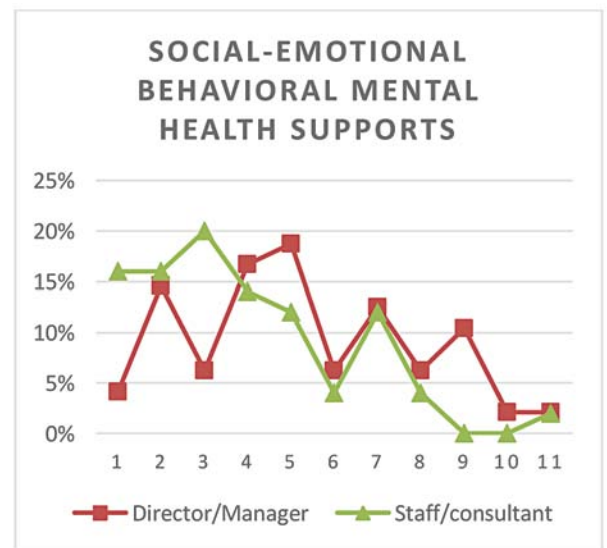


Figure 12



Note: the X axis indicates the 11 policy priorities as noted in Figure 10

Do policy priorities differ based on program administered?

We found the following policy priorities have significantly different rankings according to the program administered by the respondent: Family engagement initiatives, Social-emotional behavioral/mental health supports, Supports for children with disabilities, and Teacher compensation and financial relief.

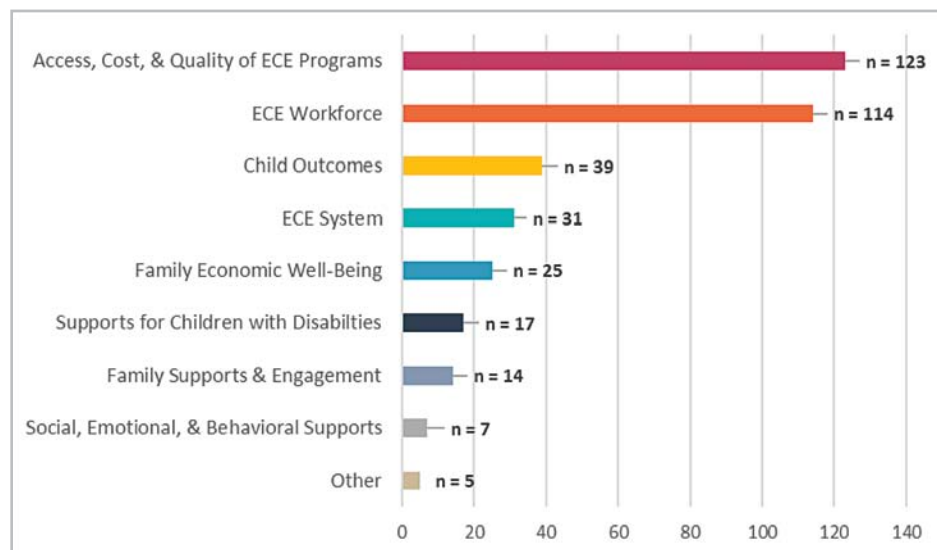
- **Family engagement initiatives** were ranked *significantly lower* by respondents in Preschool programs (M=6.5, SD=2.4) than by those administering Other early childhood programs (M=5.2, SD=3.0).
- **Social-emotional behavioral/mental health** supports policy were ranked *significantly higher* by those administering IDEA programs (M=3.4, SD=2.1) than by respondents administering Preschool programs (M=5.0, SD=2.3).
- **Supports for children with disabilities** were ranked *significantly higher* by those administering IDEA programs (M=3.6, SD=2.9) than by those administering Preschool program (M=6.9, SD=2.4) and Other early childhood programs (M=6.5, SD=2.8).
- **Teacher compensation and financial relief policy** were ranked *significantly higher* by respondents administering Preschool programs (M=4.3, SD=3.2) than by those administering IDEA programs (M=6.5, SD=3.0).

Results indicate that policies related to *social-emotional behavioral/mental health supports* and *supports for children with disabilities* are ranked significantly higher by respondents who administer IDEA programs than by respondents who administer Preschool programs. But when it comes to ranking *teacher compensation and financial relief*, respondents who administer Preschool programs rank this policy significantly higher than do respondents administering IDEA programs. Lastly, in regard to the *family engagement initiatives*, respondents administering Preschool programs rank this policy lower than do respondents administering Other early childhood programs.

Vision for Early Childhood Education By 2030

We asked survey respondents to describe their vision for the field in open-ended responses about *what three statistics they would most like to see change by 2030*. They also were asked what needs to happen from a policy perspective to realize these changes. Responses were coded into seven categories, presented in **Figure 13**. At least one statistic was provided by 138 respondents. Some responses addressed more than one category, so were counted for multiple categories (e.g., *“Increased state funding to support access to high-quality child care”* was counted for the Access, Cost, & Quality of ECE Programs category as well as the ECE System category since it addressed system-level funding).

Figure 13: Statistic They Would Most Like to See Change by 2030



The top four statistics state early childhood education agency staff would like to see change by 2030 are discussed in more detail below.

1. Access to high-quality programs – This was the top response for 123 respondents, with many specifically naming “access to high-quality programs.” Some individuals mentioned increasing access and quality for specific populations, such as infants and toddlers, 4-year-olds, children in poverty, or children with disabilities, underscoring the ongoing debate about how best to allocate limited resources. At the same time, respondents identified creating greater awareness of the importance of high-quality ECE among policy makers, parents and the general public as a prerequisite for addressing this priority.

When state ECE agency staff discussed funding as a part of their 2030 vision, they called for:

The vertical alignment with the K–12 system because there’s that island of preschool that is really separated from the K–12 environment even in buildings [where] preschool is just down the hall.

- Focus Group participant

- Public-private partnerships providing bridge funding for innovative projects;
- Consistent, coordinated, sustainable funding housed within one agency;
- Equity in funding across education (birth to age 8 and pre-K to 12; rural and urban areas, small and large districts); and
- Adequate funding to build state capacity to offer support leading to higher quality programs.

Other respondents called for changes in funding including increased local, state, and federal funding levels; more flexibility around blending and braiding funds; allocating more subsidized slots to high-quality programs; and devoting funding to slots for children rather than ECE systems-building work. Respondents also recommended greater system coordination and including pre-K in the K–12 system (e.g., pre-K included in state funding formulas, requiring LEAs to provide ECE services either in-house or through a mixed delivery model). Respondents also acknowledged these efforts would require a greater awareness of the importance of, and defining features of, high-quality ECE among policy makers, parents, and the general public.

2. Strengthening the ECE workforce – Identified by 123 of 138 survey respondents, strengthening the early childhood education workforce was the 2nd statistic specialists would like to see change. Within this category, responses address the **compensation** of ECE professionals ($n = 70$), **education and qualifications** ($n = 21$), **professional development** ($n = 11$), **turnover** ($n = 6$), and other topics ($n = 6$) such as increasing ECE content knowledge among K–12 leadership. Some responses addressed increasing supports for a specific faction of the ECE workforce (e.g., child care professionals, infant and toddler teachers, pre-K teachers, early interventionists), whereas other responses explicitly emphasized improving conditions for all members of the ECE workforce.

Potential avenues of policy change include:

- Providing incentives to programs (e.g., tiered reimbursements to programs for employing highly qualified staff, high retention rates, and other quality improvements) or individuals (e.g., tax credits, financial aid/grants for pursuing higher education, and incentives for joining the field).
- Improving the quality of teacher preparation and training through higher education reform, offering more relationship-based, job-embedded professional development (e.g., coaching, mentoring), and providing alternate learning pathways such as distance learning and credit-for-experience programs.
- Changes in regulations, such as increasing licensing or other state standards around education and professional development requirements, establishing pay scales that would ensure parity across ECE settings and the K–12 system, or broadening certification requirements.

Without compensation parity, T.E.A.C.H. and other efforts to increase educational attainment within the field can have unintended consequences such as driving more qualified teachers out of child care programs into other ECE settings or K–12 jobs with higher salaries.

- Focus Group participant

State ECE agency staff acknowledged that underlying many of these changes is a need for increased local, state, and federal funding. Recommendations for funding mechanisms included increased subsidy rates, embedding ECE in the K–12 system and funding formula, and providing business development supports for private child care programs. It was also noted that building public and political will around the importance of the ECE and professionalizing the field will be critical to fund these efforts and recruit new members to the ECE workforce.

3. Improving Child Outcomes—The areas of child outcomes that were identified included **general school readiness** or **later academic success**; specific domains such as **social–emotional well-being, literacy achievement, and health; school attendance; suspension and expulsion, post-secondary success**; and **decreasing the achievement gap**. Interestingly, while promoting the well-being and learning potential is one of the primary goals of any ECE system, relatively fewer responses ($n = 39$) addressed this area directly. The greater emphasis on high-quality, accessible, affordable care and the workforce may speak to other implicit goals of ECE systems (e.g., providing child care as a workforce support to families, professionalizing the field and improving the well-being of the ECE workforce) and/or state early childhood education agency staff strong beliefs that increased high-quality care and a stronger workforce are quintessential levers to achieving better child outcomes.

To support improved child outcomes, many respondents recommended policy changes:

- Providing supports to families (e.g., increased access to supports such as the supplemental nutrition assistance program SNAP, developmental screening, and parent education) and
- Providing supports to ECE programs (e.g., professional development, early childhood mental health consultants, smaller class sizes, more social–emotional and behavioral supports, increased funding).

4. Strengthening the Early Childhood System. A total of 31 responses addressed changes respondents would like to see at the system level. A common theme across the multiple roles and perspectives represented in the focus groups—infant/toddler, pre-K, P–3, special education, dual-language learners [DLLs], assessment—was the importance of system coordination. A survey question was developed asking respondents to prioritize a list of coordination areas from most to least pressing. Survey respondents suggested the following:

- About half of these responses ($n = 15$) addressed **funding**, including general funding increases (e.g., “*Increased funding for ECE*”), funding to specifically support quality, funding increases for specific programs (e.g., special education, mental health supports, child care, parent supports), and types of funding (e.g., funding from districts, philanthropic funding).
- Other responses ($n = 8$) called for system improvements related to **data** (e.g., improved access to data systems, greater reliability and validity of state quality rating and improvement systems).
- Remaining responses addressed **coordination** among various system components (e.g., ECE and K–12) with some overlap of increased coordination of funding (e.g., blending/braiding funding streams) and data (e.g., cross-agency data sharing).

In terms of solutions to achieve these changes at the system level, state ECE agency staff called for engaging champions to build public will on the importance of ECE, greater alignment between the ECE and K–12 systems (including data sharing agreements), TA and professional development for state and local staff (including sharing examples of best practices), and increased funding for coordination and data initiatives.

What is Needed to Improve Outcomes for Young Children

In the focus groups, state early childhood education agency staff identified coordination, workforce, and financing as the most pressing issues they face in improving outcomes for young children. We probed deeper on these topics in the national survey. We asked state early childhood education agency staff to prioritize or suggest specific strategies to address these three areas.

Improve ECE System Coordination

A common theme across multiple roles and perspectives represented in the focus groups (e.g., infant/toddler, pre-K, P–3, special education, dual-language learners [DLLs], assessment, etc.) was the importance of system coordination. Survey participants were asked to prioritize a potential coordination strategy from most, to least, pressing, see Figure 14.

Figure 14: Strategies to Improve Coordination of the Early Childhood System

Overall rank	Priorities for Coordination
1	Collaboration, communication, and cross-sector work across agencies/departments
2	Efficient systems for blending/ braiding/layering of program funding
3	Teacher qualification requirements and compensation parity across settings
4	Consistent regulations, law, rules, and standards across programs
5	Vertical alignment (birth-3rd grade) of learning & development standards, curricula/ teaching practices, and child assessment
6	Data coordination/sharing across state-level entities
7	Consistent eligibility criteria for families across programs

N = 115

Program Administered Matters When Ranking Priorities for Coordination

The following priorities for coordination also differed significantly according to respondents' program type:

You've got to have partnerships with the folks in purchasing, or human resources, or exceptional student services. You've got to know other people in order to get your job done. And so I think being able to develop partnerships and rely on other people to support you to get done what you need to do, it's impossible in state bureaucracy to accomplish things without that.

- Focus Group participant

- **Figure 15** indicates **"Efficient systems for blending/braiding/layering of funding"** was ranked *significantly higher* by those administering IDEA programs (M=2.3, SD=1.2) than by respondents administering Preschool programs (M=3.8, SD=1.8) and those administering Other early childhood programs (M=3.7, SD=2.2).
- **Figure 16** indicates **"Teacher qualification requirements & compensation parity across settings"** was ranked *significantly higher* by respondents administering Preschool programs (M=3.5, SD=2.1) than by respondents administering IDEA programs (M=5.0, SD=1.8).

Figure 15

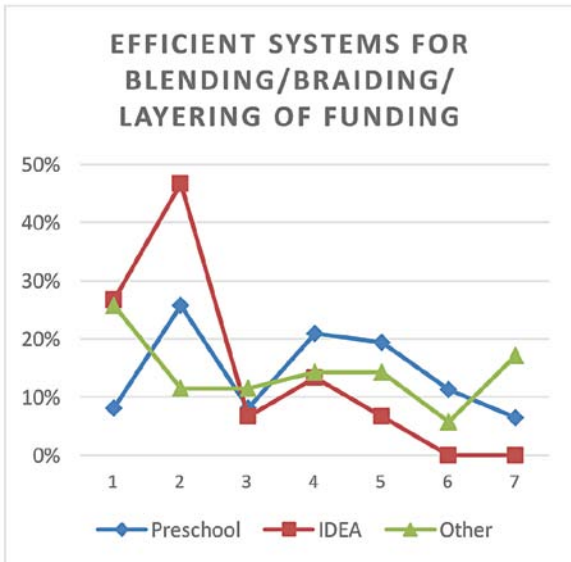
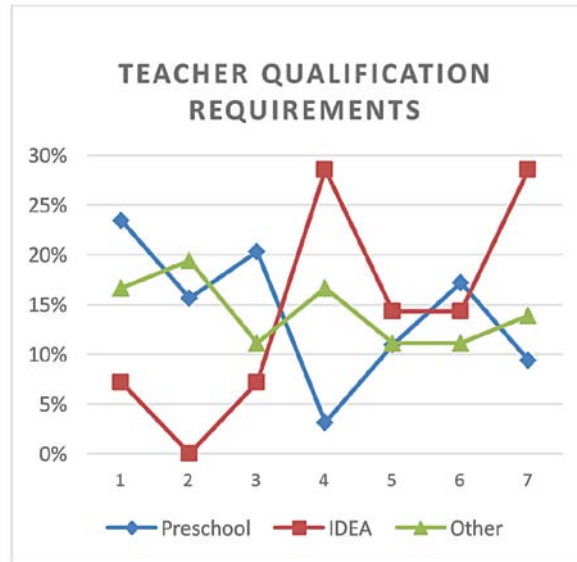


Figure 16



The x axis indicates the 7 strategies of coordination noted in Figure 14

Another significant program-related interaction was found for the policy priority of *collaboration, communication, & cross-sector work across agencies/ departments*, indicating the relationship between mean rank for this priority and role is dependent on what program respondents administer. For example:

- Director/Managers who work in IDEA programs *rank collaboration higher* than Director/Managers who work in Preschool or Other early childhood programs,
- Staff Members/Consultants who work in IDEA programs *rank collaboration lower* than Staff Members/Consultants who work in Preschool or Other early childhood programs.

Enhance the ECE Workforce

Respondents were asked to describe an innovative approach to *enhancing the quality of the ECE workforce* that they have seen or would like to see. The top four strategies suggested were:

➤ **Higher Education Reform –**

Respondents suggested approaches to “transform” higher education in order to better prepare teachers for their work in ECE, rather than playing “catch up” with on-the-job professional development. ECE staff in state agencies emphasized the need for financial assistance for those seeking degrees in ECE (e.g., support to pay for tuition, fees, books, etc.) provided through scholarships, loan forgiveness, or programs such as the T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood® program. In addition to financial assistance, respondents called for cohort models, academic and financial aid counseling, apprenticeship models, and class schedules and locations that accommodate those with full-time jobs.

I think it needs to start in higher ed, that we need to start preparing teachers and not just focus on training. I don't think that teachers coming into the workforce are as prepared for the type of children and families that they're going to be serving. So I think, instead of playing “catch up” with training...work with higher ed to prepare our teachers better.

- Focus Group participant

- ### ➤ **On-going Professional Learning** - Most states do not have either staff capacity or funding to provide as much support as they would like in terms of in-house professional development, TA, and coaching to programs. Educating program leaders (e.g., through “early learning academies”) was seen as an effective way to build capacity at the local level. Survey respondents also called for more cross-sector, collaborative training efforts inclusive of birth to 5 and K–3 program staff. Many respondents also called for an increase in relationship-based professional development approaches (e.g., coaching, mentoring, reflective supervision, professional learning communities), reflecting research suggesting such approaches are more effective than the traditional model of single-session trainings or workshops.⁵ State early childhood education

⁵ Weber, R. & Trauten, M. (2008). *A review of the literature in the child care and early education profession: Effective investments*. Corvallis, OR: Oregon Child Care Research Partnership.; Zaslow, M., Tout, K., Halle, T., Vick Whittaker, J., & Lavelle, B. (2010). ***Toward the identification of features of effective professional development for early childhood educators***. Washington, D.C.: US. Department of Education. Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development, Policy and Program Studies Service.

agency staff also called for more evidence-based practices and use of implementation science to support scaling and sustainability.

➤ **Compensation and Financial Relief –**

Compensation (including benefits as well as wages) is important in attracting and retaining a highly skilled workforce, both across ECE settings and with the K–12 sector. Without compensation parity, participants noted that T.E.A.C.H. and other efforts to increase educational attainment within the field can have unintended consequences such as driving more qualified teachers out of child care programs into other ECE settings or K–12 jobs with higher salaries.

➤ **Qualification Requirements, Career Pathways, and Recruitment–**

As noted previously, survey participants ranked establishing common qualifications and compensation standards for teachers as the third most important priority in the area of system coordination. Some respondents noted the general importance of having consistent, high standards across all settings, while others provided specific recommendations (e.g., associate degree or equivalent in early childhood/child development; Pre-K Teaching Certification Praxis for those teaching children ages 2 to 5; following

NIEER benchmark guidelines).

However, other respondents and some focus group participants observed that raising qualifications can have unintended consequences such as teacher shortages and increases in emergency certifications, given the limited applicant pool.

Innovative Solutions to Compensation Parity

- Common wage scales across settings according to education and experience;
- Adequate and aligned funding streams to support teacher compensation;
- Scholarship programs such as WAGE\$ and T.E.A.C.H tied to quality rating and improvement systems;
- Tax credits for ECE professionals tied to education, ongoing professional development, and experience;
- Innovative staffing structures so school districts can hire licensed pre-K teachers with equivalent pay and benefits to K–12 teachers and place them in community-based settings where they serve as master teachers, model best practices, and offer coaching to child care staff.

Also better pay for paraprofessionals because they're the ones doing the hard work...and [paraprofessionals] ... can go work at Burger King and make the same amount they can for doing what they do with kids. And that's a huge problem.

- Focus Group participant

Increase Public Investments in ECE System

Given that ECE systems are historically underfunded and rely on a patchwork of funding streams, it was not surprising this was a key topic of discussion

Funding Concerns and Strategies

State ECE agency staff expressed concern regarding the recent infusion of federal funding into state early childhood programs. While states were required to develop sustainability plans for when federal funding ended, many did not, due to political or other fiscal issues in their state. Regarding the federal Race to the Top grant, one focus group participant said “...[Y]ou can taste the work that should be done, but then the money goes away and you can’t continue the work.”

in focus groups. Participants expressed concern that even though there have been recent infusions of funding into state early childhood programs from the federal level (e.g., Race to the Top–Early Learning Challenge and Preschool Development Grants), the time-limited nature and rigid requirements of these programs have implications for program sustainability and consistency. Overall, participants highlighted that fragmentation of funding and program regulations in early childhood fails to foster a systems-approach that can be sustained long-term amid political turnover.

When focus group participants spoke about successes in the area of funding, there was a strong focus on innovation and flexibility at the state level. For example, offering flexibility in state grants, blending and braiding funding, and legislation allowing state preschool funding to follow the child (even across state lines if necessary). When participants discussed funding as a part of their 2030 vision, they called for:

- Public-private partnerships provided bridge funding for innovative projects;
- Consistent, coordinated, sustainable funding housed within one agency;
- Equity in funding across education (birth to age 8 and pre-K to 12; rural and urban areas, small and large districts); and
- Adequate funding to build state capacity to offer support, leading to higher quality programs.

Based on the importance of funding and challenges highlighted in the focus groups, a survey item was developed to address participants’ perceptions of promising funding strategies. Survey respondents were asked to rank a list of strategies from most to least promising. These strategies were based on a set of promising strategies identified in the National Academies of Sciences report,

*Transforming the Financing of Early Care and Education.*⁶ Figure 17 identifies the top seven strategies suggested by state early childhood education agency staff. Blending, braiding, and layering of funding was ranked as the top strategy, which is consistent with the survey rankings on coordination issues where this strategy was ranked as the second most important early childhood systems coordination issue.

Figure 17: Promising Funding Strategies

Overall rank	Policy Priorities
1	Blending/braiding/layering (e.g., EHS-CC Partnerships)
2	Earmarks or set-asides for targeted populations (e.g., infants/toddlers, at-risk children)
3	Local or state tax initiatives (e.g., property, sales, or tobacco taxes; taxing districts)
4	Shared services models
5	Refundable tax credits to subsidize programs or providers working in those programs
6	Revenues from lottery or gaming activities to support improvements in quality and access
7	Social impact bonds/pay for success models

N = 107

Discussion: Implications of the Findings

The focus group and national survey findings represent an historic effort to capture the perspectives of state early childhood education agency staff across the country. These are individuals who bear responsibility for implementing state policy, and wisely stewarding state and local funds to local entities and others to achieve the goals of the state for young children, in particular early childhood education. But to date we have understood very little about whom they are, what capacities they have, and what they think is important to achieve goals for young children. They are essentially an untapped resource in state policy discussions!

What do we know about state early childhood education agency staff? State early childhood education agency staff are typically white, women, 40 or older, highly educated, and have spent a number of years in the field of ECE. Although many were relatively new to their positions, predicted turnover within the next five years is high. This suggests we need to put more emphasis on succession planning and growing the field of future state early childhood policy leaders.

⁶ National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. 2018. *Transforming the Financing of Early Care and Education*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/24984>.

As can be noted from the professional development needs, state early childhood education agency staff have a highly complex job that requires skill in multiple areas including child development and pedagogy, financing, collaboration and system change. State early childhood education agency staff identified a number of factors that would enable them to better accomplish their work, including strong leadership, support around political and leadership transitions, and professional development supports to build their own skills and knowledge. State early childhood education staff have few opportunities for their own professional development, with notable exceptions offered by the Council of Chief State School Officer’s Early Childhood Education State Collaborative on Standards and Assessment, the CEELO/NAECS-SDE Annual Meeting, and the CEELO State Leadership Academy.

What do state early childhood staff think are the most important policy priorities? State early childhood education agency staff indicated that social-emotional and mental health supports for young children and a well-qualified, well-compensated workforce were among their top policy priorities. These findings reflect growing concerns prompted by growing numbers of young children experiencing high rates of trauma from the opioid crisis and by workforce issues, given that more than half of the respondents administer pre-k programs where many staff experience inadequate compensation for the complexity of their work.

The top four statistics respondents would like to see change by 2030 are — increasing access to quality, strengthening the workforce, improving child outcomes, and strengthening the early childhood system. These four goals could serve to unite the early childhood field in a common vision for legislators, funders and other stakeholders.

A common thread through the findings was a tension between providing more universal supports (i.e., that would apply to all children, families, or ECE professionals), or more targeted approaches that would benefit subsets of these populations (e.g., preschool-aged children, the child care sector). Perhaps these responses reflect a desire for greater collaboration, coordination, and communication across agencies, sectors, funding streams, and ECE and K–12 systems.

Conclusion

More than 18 new governors outlined policies to improve early learning in their state of the state addresses, and state legislators across the country are debating proposals to increase funding for prek and/or full- day kindergarten, reorganizing departments of early learning to be more efficient, and increasing funding for coaching of the workforce.⁷ Whether these proposals result in improved opportunities for children, will depend on the competencies⁸ and the leadership⁹ of state agency ECE staff to develop policy and implementation processes to support effective programs.

This rich set of data has enormous potential as CEELO and its partners lift up the voices of state early childhood education agency staff doing crucial work across the country. These findings provide a solid foundation for future research inquiries, and important guidance to current and future policymakers and capacity-building supports for those who work on behalf of our youngest children and their families.

7 Lowenberg, D. (February 15, 2019). New Governors Support Could Bolster Early Learning in 2019, Five Questions to Ask on Child Care, Prek, and Kindergarten Proposals. <https://www.ewa.org/blog-educated-reporter/new-governors-support-could-bolster-early-learning-2019>

8 Connors-Tadros, L., Grafwallner, R., Martella, J. & Schultz, T. (June 2018). Defining Highly Effective Offices of Early Learning in State Education Agencies and Early Learning Agencies: A CEELO Vision Paper. http://ceelo.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Highly_Effective_SOEL_June_2018.pdf

9 Connors-Tadros, L., Grafwallner, R., Martella, J. & Schultz, T. (June 2018). Defining Highly Effective Offices of Early Learning in State Education Agencies and Early Learning Agencies: A CEELO Vision Paper. http://ceelo.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Highly_Effective_SOEL_June_2018.pdf

Appendix A: Focus Group Date, Location, and Participants

Focus Group	Date	Location	Number of Participants	Participating States
1	5/31/18	St. Paul, MN	9	New Mexico, Minnesota, Colorado, New York, Oklahoma
2	6/6/18	Austin, TX	12	Georgia, Mississippi, Florida, Maine, Arizona, New Jersey, Louisiana, Indiana, Maryland, Alabama
3	6/6/18	Austin, TX	11	Iowa, Illinois, Michigan, Hawaii, Texas, New Jersey, Maine, Oregon, Tennessee, South Carolina, Nevada
4	6/13/18	Washington, DC	12	Kansas, Michigan, Maine, Wisconsin, Illinois, Colorado
5	6/19/18	Washington, DC	11	Georgia, Massachusetts, Maryland, DC, Alabama, California, Pennsylvania, Michigan

Appendix B: National Survey State Invitees and Number of Respondents

State	# Invited	# Responded
Michigan	26	15
Colorado	18	7
Iowa	11	7
Maryland	11	7
Illinois	14	6
Oregon	18	6
Connecticut	16	5
Kansas	12	5
Louisiana	14	5
Minnesota	12	5
Montana	10	5
Nebraska	10	5
Oklahoma	11	4
Pennsylvania	12	4
South Carolina	9	4
Virginia	12	4
Georgia	15	3
Guam	5	3
Maine	10	3
Massachusetts	11	3
Mississippi	12	3
Nevada	9	3
New York	13	3
Rhode Island	8	3
Utah	8	3
Vermont	8	3
Washington, DC	10	3
Wyoming	8	3
Arizona	11	2

State	# Invited	# Responded
California	13	2
Hawaii	11	2
West Virginia	7	2
Alabama	15	1
Arkansas	11	1
Delaware	6	1
Idaho	5	1
Indiana	8	1
Kentucky	6	1
Missouri	9	1
New Jersey	10	1
North Carolina	15	1
Ohio	9	1
South Dakota	5	1
Texas	5	1
Washington	17	1
Wisconsin	6	1
Dept. of Defense	1	1
Alaska	8	0
American Samoa	3	0
Florida	8	0
Marshall Islands	1	0
Micronesia	1	0
New Hampshire	5	0
New Mexico	8	0
North Dakota	5	0
N. Mariana Islands	2	0
Palau	1	0
Puerto Rico	2	0
Tennessee	8	0
US Virgin Islands	3	0
Totals	558	153

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