

MAPPING THE LANDSCAPE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD CREDENTIAL PROGRAMS IN IDAHO



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EMPOWERING THE SOCIALLY CONSCIOUS



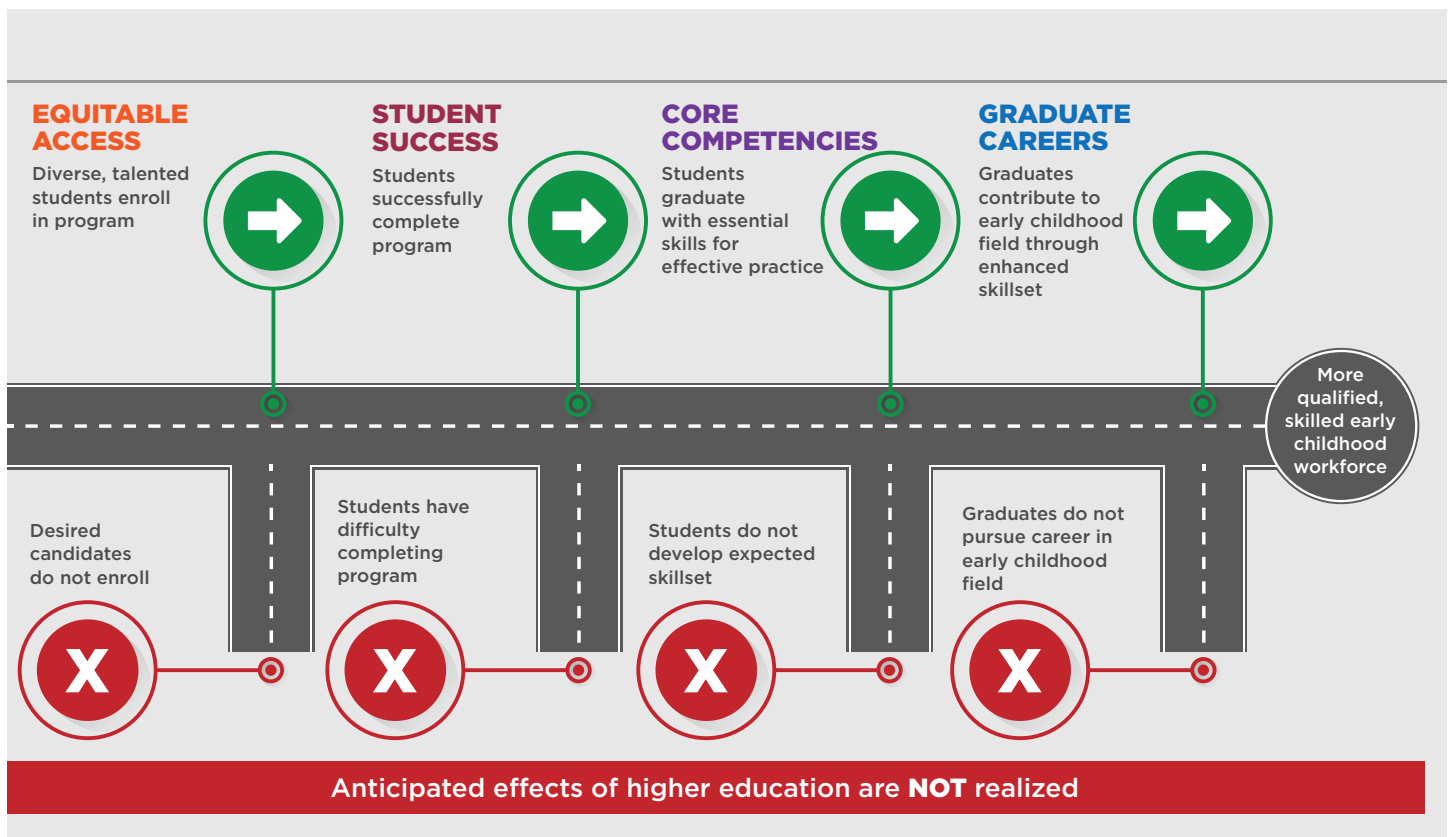
INTRODUCTION

Institutions of Higher Education (IHE) play a foundational role in fostering the core competencies of early childhood professionals to support child learning, development, and well-being. However, the effectiveness of a higher education system in raising quality across early childhood programs rests on the system's success in attracting, retaining, and supporting students who can meaningfully contribute to the state's early childhood workforce. This study describes the current landscape of Idaho's early childhood credential program offerings and uses a "gap analysis" to determine how closely system components align with best practices and the desired results of the system.

OUTCOMES FRAMEWORK & RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Figure 1 provides an "outcomes roadmap" describing the results that must be achieved for the anticipated effects of higher education to be realized. The roadmap includes key points in the process including access, program completion, competency development, and subsequent employment in the early childhood field. Along the roadmap, there are various junctures where if, at any point, results are not achieved, the overall impact on the early childhood workforce will be diluted or negated. For example, even if a higher education program is successful in recruitment, student retention, and producing highly competent graduates, if many of those graduates pursue careers in elementary settings, the desired impact on the field of early childhood will not be achieved.

Figure 1. Outcomes Roadmap



Accordingly, the study's research questions are organized around the desired results of the system:

- 1. Workforce Landscape:** What are the demographics and educational attainment rates of Idaho's early childhood workforce?
- 2. Equitable Access:** What barriers to enrollment do prospective early childhood credential seekers face and what supports are provided to promote equitable access?
- 3. Student Supports:** What barriers to academic success and program completion do students in early childhood credential programs face and how well do supports align with best practice and student needs?
- 4. Competency Development:** How well do early childhood credential programs prepare students in the areas of Idaho's early childhood core competencies, early learning guidelines, and other key topic areas?

5. Career Supports: How well do higher education programs and other systems incentivize and support the pursuit of higher education and retention in the early childhood field?

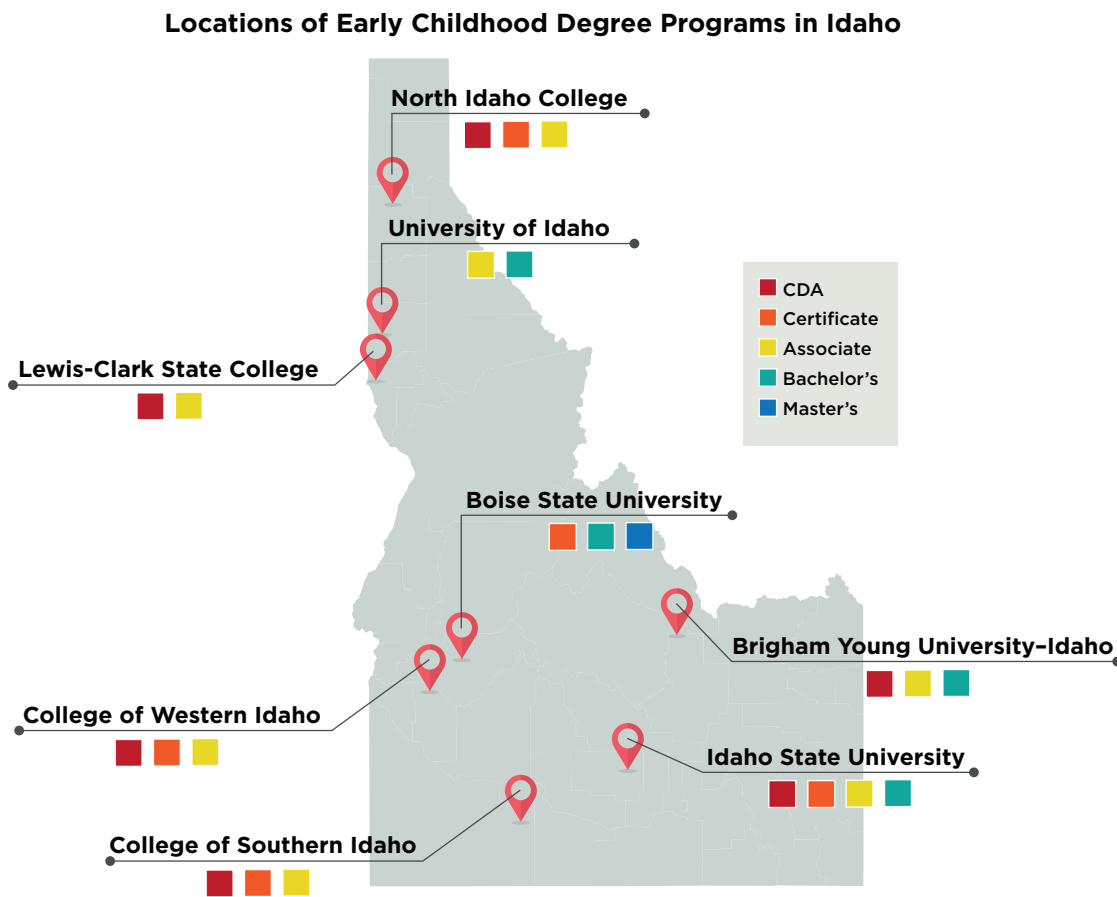
The study’s methodology, findings, and recommendations are summarized below. For more detailed descriptions of findings, please see the full version of this report.

METHODOLOGY

The study involved five areas of data collection and analysis (for more detail, please see the Technical Report):

- 1. Identification of early childhood credentialing programs.** Eight IHEs were identified within the state of Idaho that offer a total of 35 early childhood credential (i.e., certificate or degree) programs. **Figure 2** shows a map of the geographic distribution of early childhood certificate/degree programs across the state by credential type.

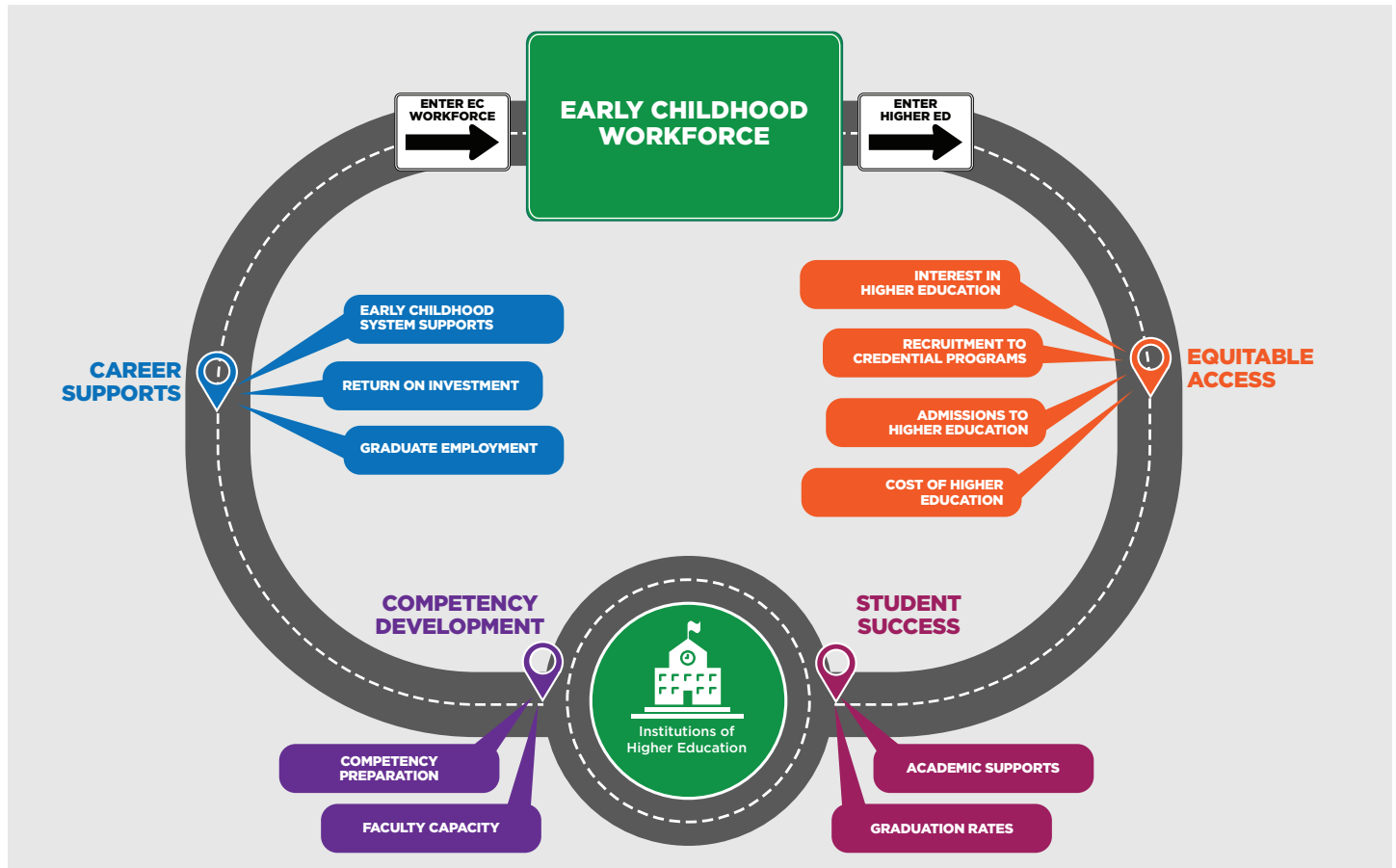
Figure 2. Map of early childhood degree/certificate programs in Idaho



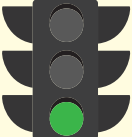





- 2. Population data.** Data from state and national sources were obtained to provide information on the child and adult populations in Idaho, the state’s early childhood workforce, and students at IHEs that offer early childhood credential programs.
- 3. Perspectives of IHE faculty and current, past, and prospective students.** Survey data was collected from IHE faculty, students, alumni, and members of the early childhood workforce. Follow-up interviews were conducted with IHE faculty.
- 4. Curriculum mapping.** The research team examined course syllabi and descriptions to determine the extent to which courses required for early childhood degree programs address Idaho’s early childhood core competencies, early learning guidelines, and other key topic areas.
- 5. Review of educational levels within the Idaho early childhood system context.** A scan was conducted identifying places in which educational qualifications are relevant to other elements of the Idaho early childhood system, such as the IdahoSTARS education pathway, scholarships, professional development awards, Steps to Quality rating levels, the *Idaho Core Competencies for Early Care and Education*, and minimum employment qualifications across sectors and roles.

Findings are presented below across the five sections shown in **Figure 3**: 1) Early Childhood Workforce Landscape, 2) Equitable Access to Higher Education, 3) Student Success, 4) Competency Development, and 5) Career Supports.

Figure 3. Roadmap showing the report’s organizational structure



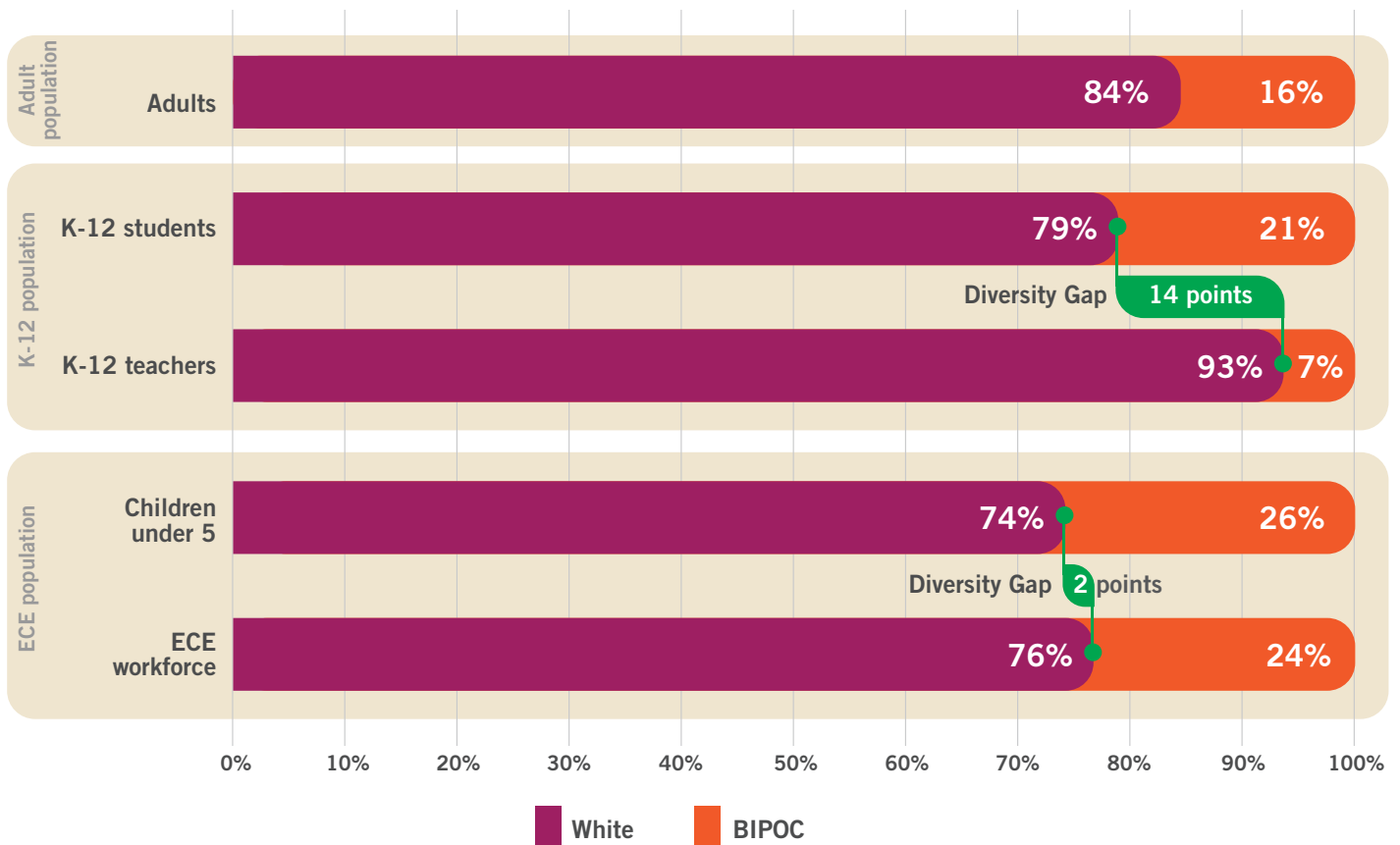
Following each section is a summary of findings along with symbols indicating the current status of each area, which are described below:

KEY AREAS	SPECIFIC FINDINGS
 <p>AREA OF STRENGTH Generally positive findings across indicators in the area.</p>	 <p>POSITIVE FINDING Indicator of positive outcomes and/or effective system-functioning</p>
 <p>AREA FOR ATTENTION Mixed findings across indicators.</p>	 <p>EVIDENCE OF INEQUITY Indication that there are opportunity gaps between groups.</p>
 <p>AREA OF CONCERN Mostly negative findings and/or evidence of inequities.</p>	 <p>NEGATIVE FINDING Indicator of negative outcomes and/or ineffective system-functioning.</p>

SECTION 1: THE LANDSCAPE OF IDAHO'S EARLY CHILDHOOD WORKFORCE

Diversity of Idaho's children and early childhood workforce. Idaho's population is growing more diverse, with children under 5 at the forefront of these shifting demographic trends. As shown in **Figure 4**, compared to Idaho's adult population, children in the state ages birth to 4 are more likely to be Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC). Idaho's early childhood workforce also has a greater concentration of people of color than the state's general adult population and closely mirrors the demographic composition of the child population: 24 percent of Idaho's early childhood workforce and 26 percent of young children identify as BIPOC. This 2-point "diversity gap" is small compared to the 14-point diversity gap seen between Idaho's K–12 educators and the children they work with. Furthermore, there are similar proportions of multilingual early childhood educators and multilingual children¹ (15 and 11 percent, respectively). Research suggests that BIPOC children often benefit from teachers who share their race, ethnicity, and language and that all children—regardless of race—experience positive outcomes from exposure to diverse educators.^{2,3}

Figure 4. Idaho's adult, child, and education workforce populations



Source: Adult and child population data from the KIDS COUNT Data Center. ECE workforce data from the RISE Professional Development Registry System. K–12 data from Boser, U. (2014). *Teacher diversity revisited: A new state-by-state analysis*. Washington, DC: Center for American Progress.

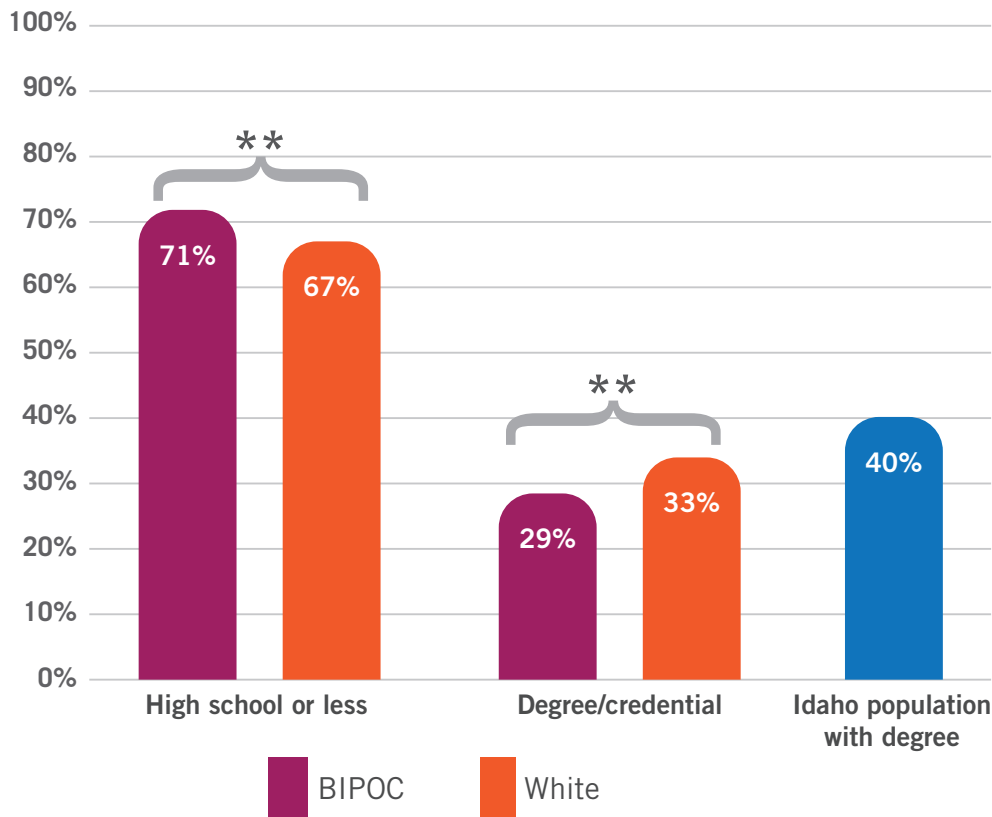
¹KIDS COUNT Data Center; this figure includes children ages 5–17. The percentage is likely higher in children younger than 5 given the changing demographic trends of the state.

²Johnson-Staub, C. (2017). *Equity starts early: Addressing racial inequities in child care and early education policy*. Washington DC: Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP).

³National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC; 2019). *Advancing equity in early childhood education: A position statement of the National Association for the Education of Young Children*. Washington, DC: NAEYC.

Educational attainment within the early childhood workforce. Despite the fact that young children, families, and the field in general can benefit tremendously from the state’s early childhood professionals of color, the preparation and development of these individuals are not supported by the state’s education systems in the same ways as their White peers. As shown in **Figure 5**, among the state’s early childhood professional development system (PDS) registrants, BIPOC professionals have been awarded credentials at significantly lower rates than their White counterparts and are more likely to have a high school degree or less. Overall rates of degree attainment within the early childhood workforce are lower than Idaho’s general population, which, in turn, is one of the lowest college education rates in the country.⁴

Figure 5. Educational attainment for PDS registrants



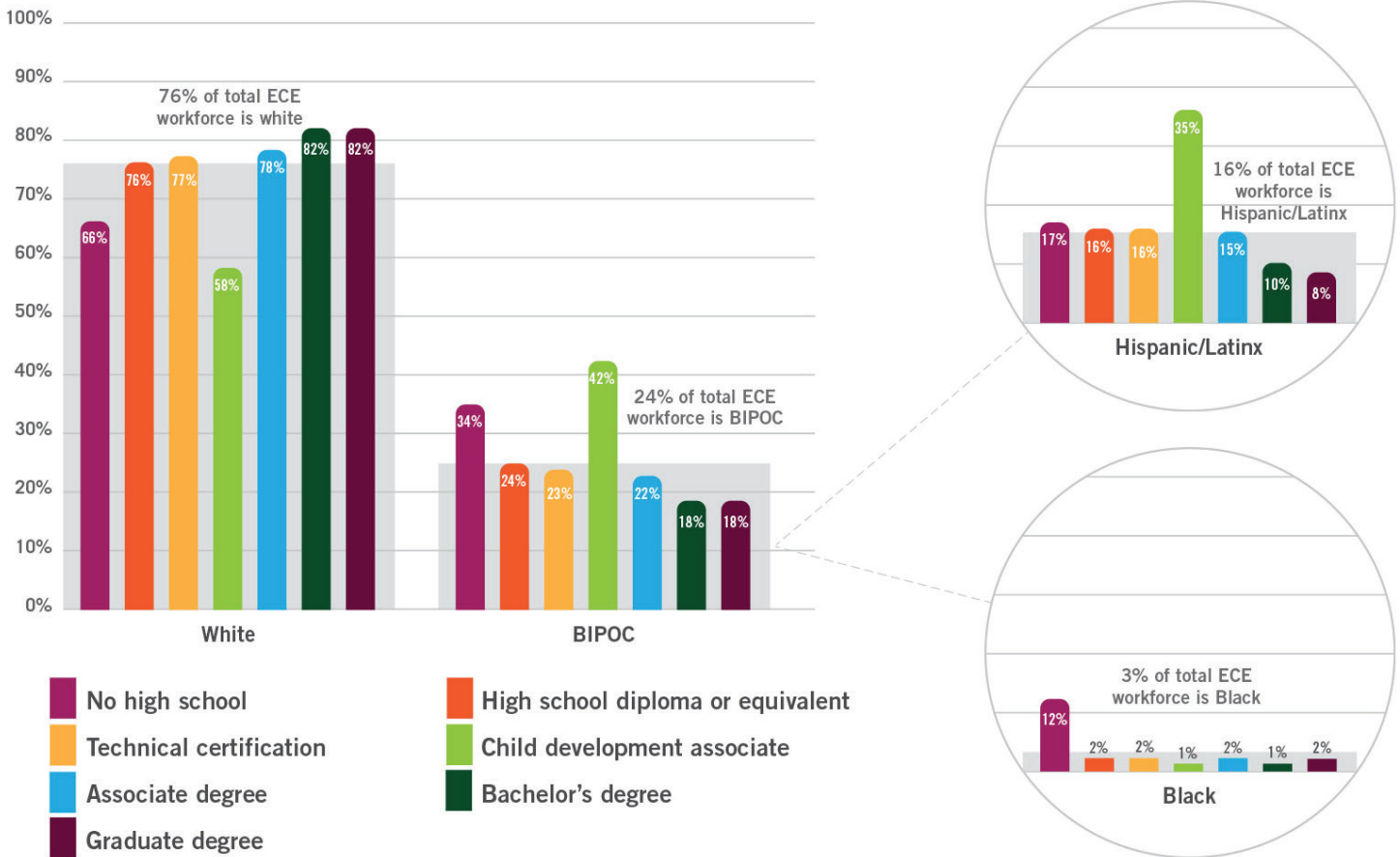
** = significant at $p < .01$

Source: RISE Professional Development System Registry (N=8,427); O’Roark, L. (2019). Bringing up the rear: Idaho ranks near bottom for educated workforce.

Within the PDS category, Black professionals are overrepresented among those without a high school diploma, Hispanic/Latinx early childhood professionals are overrepresented among Child Development Associate (CDA) credential earners, and White professionals are overrepresented among bachelor’s and graduate degree recipients (see **Figure 6**). Similar trends are seen in the demographics of those who completed early childhood credentials during the last five years (2014–2019) at the eight IHEs in Idaho included in this study. Among this population, students who are BIPOC were statistically more likely to earn a certificate or an associate degree than their White peers, whereas White students were significantly more likely to earn a bachelor’s degree. Across both populations of PDS registrants and credential recipients from Idaho early childhood programs, there is a consistent pattern that individuals who are BIPOC are overrepresented at lower levels of education.

⁴O’Roark, L. (2019). Bringing up the rear: Idaho ranks near bottom for educated workforce. Retrieved from: https://www.postregister.com/news/education/bringing-up-the-rear-idaho-ranks-near-bottom-for-educated-workforce/article_d2bf76ec-cdee-5a80-875f-32f177c066fd.html

Figure 6. Highest levels of education for Idaho PDS registrants



Note: The remaining 5 percent of the BIPOC early childhood workforce population included professionals who identified as American Indian Alaska Native (1%), Asian (1%), Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander (1%) and another race (2%). These subgroups were too small for analysis of education levels.

KEY FINDINGS: The landscape of Idaho’s early childhood workforce



DIVERSITY OF EARLY CHILDHOOD WORKFORCE

- ➔ Idaho’s early childhood workforce closely mirrors the increasingly diverse population of children under 5 in terms of BIPOC and multilingual individuals.
- ➔ All children, especially BIPOC and multilingual children, benefit from a diverse field of educators, making Idaho’s early childhood workforce an asset to the state.



WORKFORCE EDUCATION LEVELS

- ✗ Idaho’s early childhood workforce has lower rates of college attainment than the state’s general population, which has one of the lowest rates of educational attainment in the country.
- ⚠️ Credentials are granted to BIPOC early childhood professionals at lower rates than their White peers and are more likely to be at lower levels of education (e.g., CDA, technical certificate, associate degree).

SECTION 2: PROMOTING EQUITABLE ACCESS TO EARLY CHILDHOOD CREDENTIAL PROGRAMS IN IDAHO

The first step in achieving the desired results of an early childhood higher education system is ensuring that all individuals who can contribute to a stronger early childhood workforce have equitable opportunities to “get in the door” of higher education. This means attracting, enrolling, and retaining a student population that reflects the children and families served by Idaho’s early childhood system.

Interest in pursuing higher education. Nearly two-thirds of the sample of early childhood professionals surveyed in this study reported that they are interested in pursuing education beyond their current level. Those most likely to express interest in higher education were early childhood educators (i.e., center-based lead/assistant teachers, family child care providers) and individuals with certificates and CDAs rather than degrees. Although the proportion of individuals interested in pursuing additional higher education decreases across age brackets, there are still a substantial number of early childhood professionals interested in higher education who are older than “traditional” college students. Particularly notable is that 70 percent of 25- to 34-year-olds surveyed expressed interest in pursuing higher education, despite the fact that these are prime childbearing and rearing years when family responsibilities may add an extra layer of complexity to attending higher education. BIPOC individuals were just as likely as their White peers to express interest in higher education.

Recruitment to early childhood degree programs in Idaho. Overall, schools noted that their enrollment numbers have been satisfactory and fairly steady.⁵ However, IHE faculty reported difficulties in recruiting a diverse student body, which they attributed in part to geodemographic factors (e.g., low populations of Black individuals in typical school catchment areas, high Latinx concentrations in rural communities). In addition, faculty touched on the structural role of higher education in White dominant culture, which places a premium on college attainment over other pathways, and where assimilation to individualist, achievement-oriented norms is expected. Although general under-enrollment is not a concern, most schools described a “patchwork” of recruitment efforts and reported that they would like to engage in more intentional and targeted strategies—particularly to attract more historically marginalized groups—but lack the time, resources, and staff capacity to do so.

Higher education admissions policies. Prospective college students in Idaho are in a relatively unique position in terms of admissions to higher education. Through the state’s innovative Direct Admissions initiative, all public high school seniors are pre-accepted to at least six of Idaho’s public IHEs and students at or above a Board of Education-approved benchmark are admitted to two additional universities. Seven of the eight IHEs that grant early childhood credentials are included in the Direct Admissions initiative. Furthermore, most IHEs that grant early childhood credentials have open admissions policies, meaning that 100 percent of applicants with a high school degree or General Educational Development (GED) certificate are accepted without additional qualifications or performance benchmarks. These policies contribute to high acceptance rates to early childhood credential programs in Idaho, with an average rate of 88 percent of applicants admitted, which is higher than the national average acceptance rates for four-year institutions⁶ and community colleges.⁷

Despite these equity-promoting policies, opportunity gaps still exist. In Idaho, high schools graduate Black and Latinx students at lower rates than their White peers,⁸ disproportionately disenfranchising students of color from higher education. Furthermore, all bachelor’s and master’s degree programs in early childhood are housed in IHEs that do not have open admissions policies or require students to score above the benchmark for Direct Admissions, making these higher degree programs in early childhood more accessible to those whose privilege advantages them in areas such as high school grade point average (GPA) and standardized testing performance.

⁵It should be noted that universities were overrepresented in interviews and survey respondents, thus the perspective of community colleges was not fully represented.

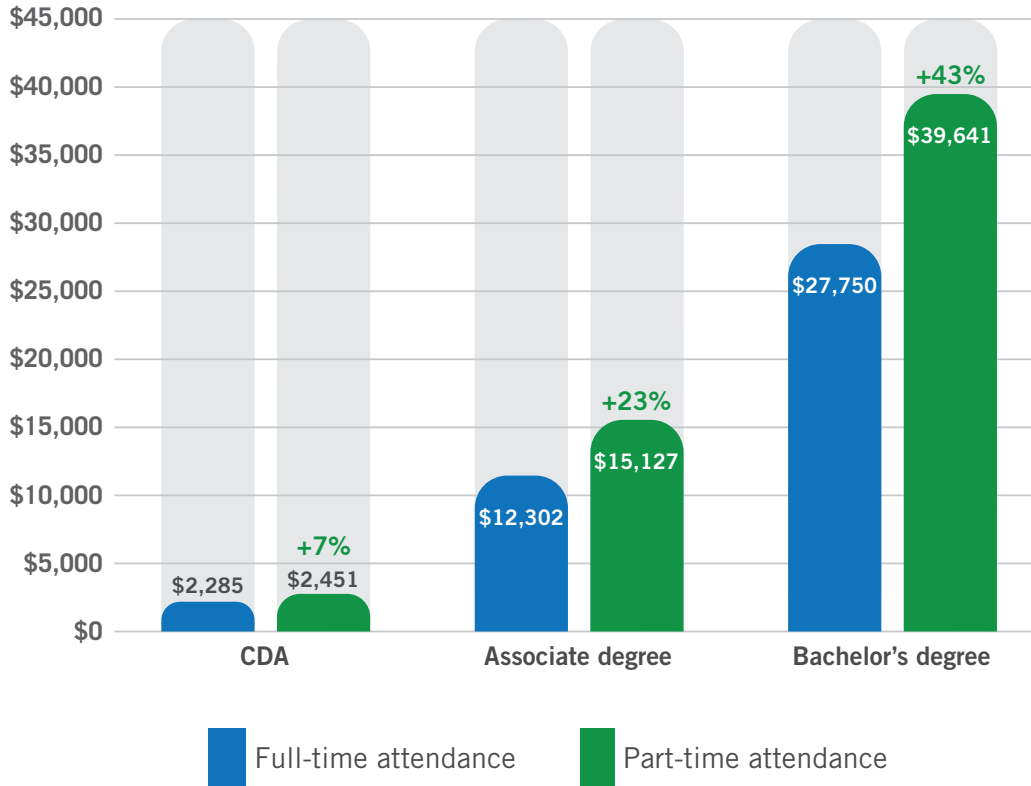
⁶U.S. News (2020). 11 colleges with the lowest acceptance rates. Retrieved from: <https://www.usnews.com/education/best-colleges/the-short-list-college/articles/colleges-with-the-lowest-acceptance-rates#:~:text=The%20average%20acceptance%20rate%20among,they%20accepted%20100%25%20of%20applicants>

⁷Community College Review (2021). Average community college acceptance rates. Retrieved from: <https://www.communitycollegereview.com/acceptance-rate-stats/national-data>

⁸National Center for Education Statistics (2020). The condition of education 2020. Retrieved from: https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/pdf/coe_coi.pdf

Costs of attending higher education. Finances were the most cited reason among early childhood professionals for not pursuing higher education and were the biggest challenge reported by current and past students. Furthermore, financial concerns were disproportionately reported among BIPOC students, suggesting an intersection of the racial wealth and education opportunity gaps. Costs of obtaining an early childhood credential in Idaho vary widely by type of degree, institution, and part- or full-time status. At the majority of IHEs offering early childhood credentials, part-time students must pay tuition on a per-credit basis, with students who are not taking full course loads paying substantially more for the overall cost of their education. As evidenced in **Figure 7**, part-time students in a bachelor’s program pay 43 percent more than full-time students. This fee structure penalizes the field’s many nontraditional students (e.g., those working full-time and/or with family responsibilities) and likely prevents many potential students from entering higher education.

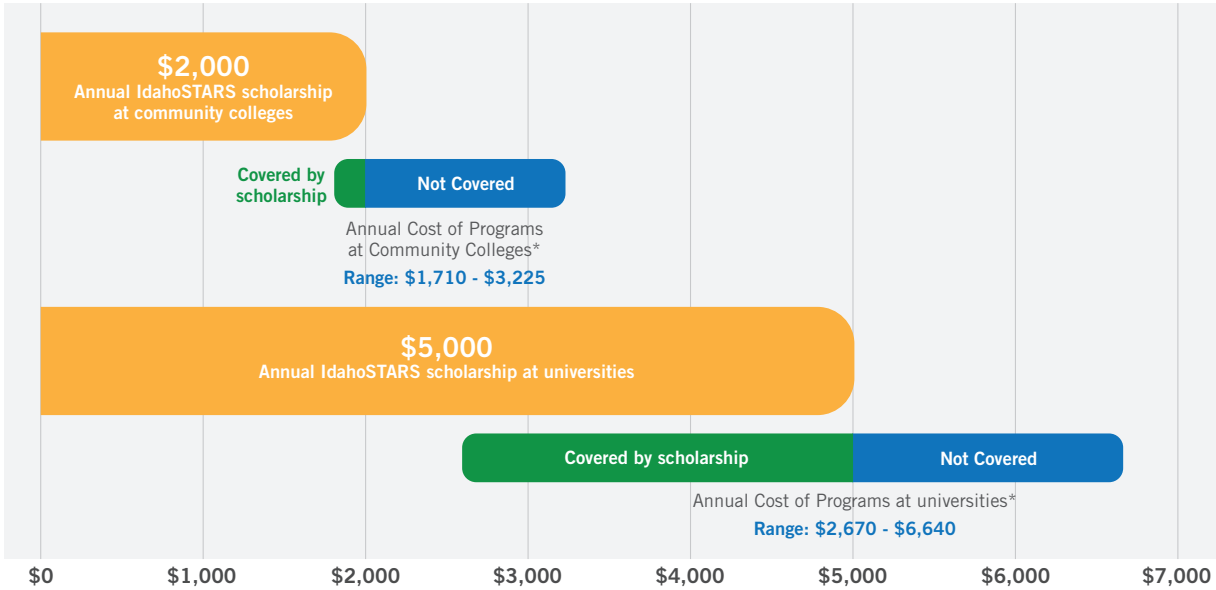
Figure 7. Overall cost of education by credential type and attendance status



Source: NCES College Navigator database; tuition schedules and credit requirements retrieved from IHE websites

IdahoSTARS academic scholarships have helped many early childhood professionals further their education, and recipients are representative of the general early childhood workforce. However, the flat-rate scholarships may go further at some institutions than others (see **Figure 8**) and the work requirements of the scholarships may make it more difficult for recipients to qualify for lower tuition rates at some schools.

Figure 8. IdahoSTARS academic scholarships and program costs



*Cost of half-time attendance

Source: NCES College Navigator database; tuition schedules and credit requirements retrieved from IHE websites. Costs are based on half-time attendance calculated on a per-credit basis.

KEY FINDINGS: Equitable Access



INTEREST IN PURSUING HIGHER EDUCATION

- ➔ Nearly two-thirds of the workforce sample that was surveyed indicated interest in pursuing education beyond their current level.
- ➔ BIPOC individuals were just as likely as their White peers to express interest in higher education.



RECRUITMENT TO CREDENTIAL PROGRAMS

- ➔ Overall, IHEs report steady enrollment at early childhood credentialing programs.
- ⚠ Programs struggle to attract a diverse population of students.
- ✘ IHE faculty lack time and resources for more planful and targeted recruitment strategies.



HIGHER EDUCATION ADMISSIONS POLICIES

- ➔ The Idaho Direct Admissions initiative and open-admissions policies at many IHEs support equitable access to early childhood credential programs.
- ⚠ Opportunity gaps still exist for those without high school degrees or who are seeking bachelor's or master's degrees.



COSTS OF ATTENDING HIGHER EDUCATION

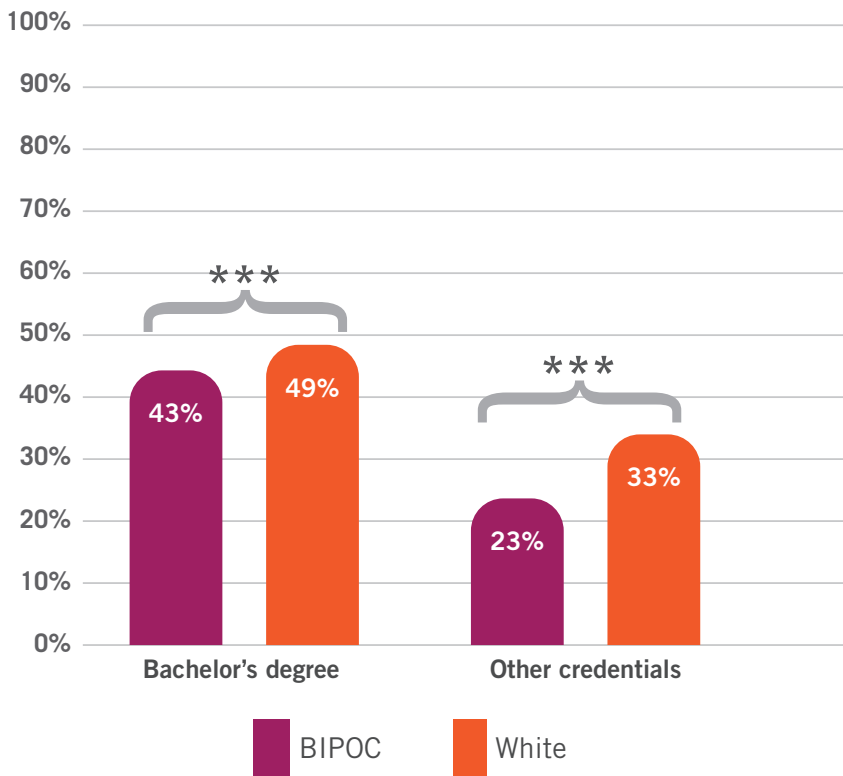
- ✘ Finances were the most cited reason for not pursuing higher education and the biggest challenge faced by students.
- ⚠ BIPOC individuals were more likely to endorse financial concerns than their White peers.
- ⚠ Costs vary widely by type of degree and institution, and part-time students pay substantially more for the overall cost of their education.
- ➔ IdahoSTARS scholarships have helped many members of the early childhood workforce advance their educational attainment and recipients are representative of the early childhood workforce.
- ⚠ IdahoSTARS scholarships may go further at some institutions than others and the work requirements of the scholarship may make it more difficult for recipients to qualify for lower tuition at some schools.

SECTION 3: SUPPORTING ACADEMIC SUCCESS AND PROGRAM COMPLETION FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD CREDENTIAL STUDENTS IN IDAHO

Recently, America's higher education problem has been characterized not as a college enrollment problem but as a graduation problem.⁹ Nationally, about a third of students who enroll in bachelor's degree programs have not earned their degree six years later (the most common metric of college graduation rates). IHEs are far less likely to graduate students from historically marginalized groups such as BIPOC, low-income, and part-time students, resulting in growing graduation rate gaps across race and income lines.¹⁰ This is particularly concerning for those seeking credentials in early childhood as these individuals tend to have one or more characteristics of non-traditional students (e.g., part-time, currently working, older than 25).

Graduation rates. At IHEs in Idaho that grant early childhood credentials, over half of all students enrolled in bachelor's degree programs and over two-thirds in other types of programs have not graduated within 150 percent of the expected time, and many never complete their programs. This represents a significant loss in educational investment at the individual and institutional levels. Institutions retain significantly fewer students of color, with starker differences between BIPOC and White students in non-bachelor's degree programs (see **Figure 9**).

Figure 9. Program completion rates at Idaho IHEs that grant early childhood credentials



*** = $p < .001$

Source: School-wide completion rates in 150% normal time from NCES IPEDS database

⁹Whitmire, R. (2019). Alarming statistics tell the story behind America's college completion crisis: Nearly a third of all college students still don't have a degree six years later. From: *The B.A. breakthrough: How ending diploma disparities can change the face of America*. Retrieved from: <https://www.the74million.org/article/alarming-statistics-tell-the-story-behind-americas-college-completion-crisis-nearly-a-third-of-all-college-student-still-dont-have-a-degree-six-years-later/>

¹⁰Ibid.



Challenges to academic success. Among survey respondents who attended an early childhood credential program in Idaho, the most commonly endorsed barriers to academic success were balancing schoolwork with other responsibilities and completing challenging coursework. Fewer individuals reported concerns about technology or their sense of belonging within their college community, though these latter issues were slightly more likely to affect BIPOC students than their White peers. Other factors contributing to academic performance included respondents' motivation to study, time management/organization, feelings of isolation in online courses, and access to resources (e.g., computer, printer, internet, place to study), suggesting the need for supports beyond remedial academic assistance, especially for students who may be juggling multiple roles or who lack access to resources.

Student supports. Compared to universities, community colleges are more likely to offer access supports such as open-admissions policies, alternative class schedules and locations, and assistance with navigating administrative processes. These differences in access supports speak to the greater proportion of non-traditional students at community colleges but may simultaneously deter non-traditional students from seeking bachelor's or master's degrees. All IHEs that confer early childhood credentials offer academic tutoring or mentoring programs, and faculty spoke positively about the range of supports at their institutions, including peer mentoring programs, academic success workshops, formal study groups, one-on-one writing assistance, and the ability to hire and train tutors for specific courses. However, survey findings indicate that there is variation in the quality and scope of supports across institutions. Results from surveys and interviews suggest that student–faculty relationships are key to student retention. Faculty reported that students are more likely to drop out during periods in which early childhood faculty have less contact with students (i.e., if early childhood coursework is completed entirely before or after students take their general education courses).

KEY FINDINGS: Student Success








GRADUATION RATES

-  At IHEs in Idaho granting ECE credentials, over half of bachelor's students and over two-thirds of students in other programs do not graduate within 150 percent of the expected time.
-  Institutions retain significantly fewer students of color, with starker differences between BIPOC and White students at non-bachelor's degree programs.



ACADEMIC CHALLENGES & SUPPORTS

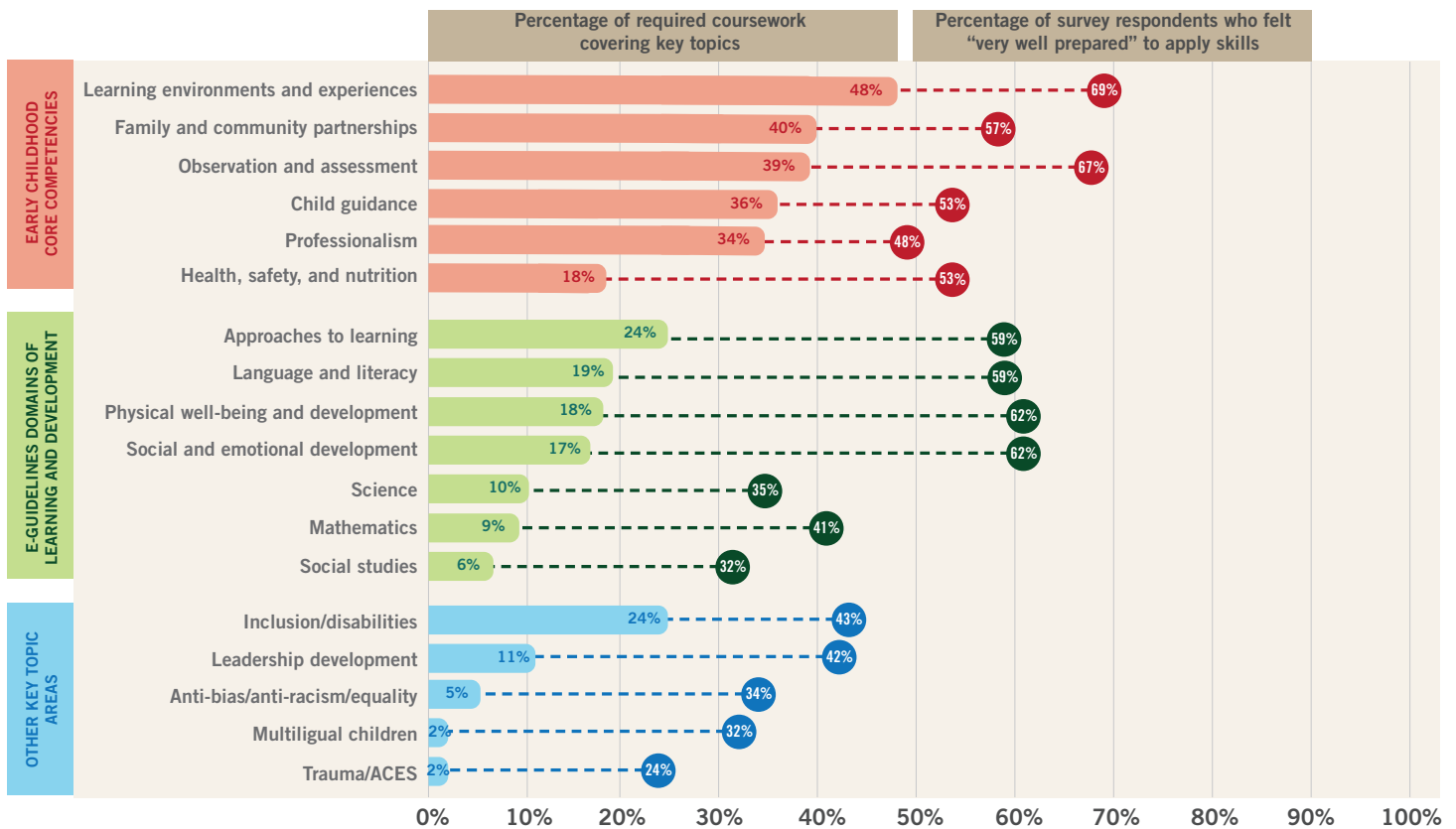
-  The most commonly endorsed challenges were balancing schoolwork with other commitments and completing challenging coursework.
-  Challenges with technology and feelings of isolation within the college community were more likely to affect BIPOC students than their White peers.
-  Compared to universities, community colleges are more likely to offer supports such as open-admissions policies, alternative class schedules and locations, and assistance with navigating administrative processes.
-  There is a range of tutoring and mentoring services available, though the scope and quality of these supports may vary by institution.
-  Faculty–student connections and advising relationships are strong sources of support and can help promote retention.

SECTION 4: DEVELOPING THE COMPETENCIES OF EARLY CHILDHOOD CREDENTIAL STUDENTS

To become effective educators, students in Idaho’s higher education systems need to develop the knowledge and skills identified in the *Idaho Core Competencies for Early Care and Education*, learn how to support children’s learning across the domains of the *Idaho Early Learning e-Guidelines*, and be well prepared to work with children and families with diverse backgrounds and needs.

Preparation for applied practice. There was wide variation across topic areas in terms of the proportion of survey respondents who felt that their degree program left them very well prepared to apply skills in practice (see **Figure 10**). Although respondents generally felt well equipped in most areas of the core competencies and early learning guidelines, fewer than half of respondents felt well prepared in the areas of professionalism, leadership and management, science, mathematics, social studies, and supporting children with diverse needs. Educators’ lack of preparation in working with children who are multilingual, who come from diverse backgrounds, and who have experienced trauma, poverty, and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) represents a critical gap in workforce competency development given the demographics and needs of Idaho’s child population.

Figure 10. Coverage of key topics across required coursework and percentage of respondents who felt “very well prepared” by their degree programs



Source: Course content was examined through syllabi and course descriptions. Data on how well prepared students are to apply skills were derived from the Student and Workforce Study (N = 196 respondents who attended early childhood credential programs in Idaho).

Topic coverage across curricula. There was a strong, significant positive relationship between the amount of exposure students receive in a topic area and how well prepared they feel to engage in applied practice in this area (see **Figure 10**). Indeed, not all competencies and areas of child development and learning receive equal “face time” over the course of a student’s studies, with particularly low levels of exposure to opportunities to learn about working with diverse populations. Some topics, such as learning environments/experiences and observation/assessment are more likely to have entire courses devoted to them. However, most topics are “interwoven” throughout courses as part of a broader context. The majority of courses in Idaho early childhood degree programs focus on broad child age spans (e.g., birth–age 8 or older) with uneven

and more limited focus on younger children, particularly infants and toddlers. Although there are benefits in exposing students to a wide swath of the developmental spectrum, students may not be adequately prepared to address the complex educational and developmental needs of very young children. Experiences differed by type of degree: Compared to bachelor's programs, associate degree programs had a greater proportion of courses focused on early childhood core competencies and e-Guidelines. This is likely because bachelor's degree programs tend to have a broader focus including elementary, special education, and/or family systems content.

Program structure and faculty characteristics. Overall, students felt that they had adequate opportunities during their credential program to engage in knowledge building, observation, applied practice, and reflection. However, nearly 25 percent of respondents felt that they did not receive enough opportunities to engage in applied practice and nearly 20 percent felt that too many of their experiences were focused on knowledge-building. Faculty in community and technical college settings are more likely to have a degree in early childhood and direct work experience with young children. Four-year programs were more likely to have BIPOC and multilingual faculty members. Resources are needed to invest in current faculty capacity as well as recruitment of future faculty members.

KEY FINDINGS: Core Competencies



PREPARATION FOR APPLIED PRACTICE



Respondents generally felt well equipped in most areas of the core competencies and early learning guidelines.



Fewer than half of respondents felt well prepared in the areas of professionalism, leadership and management, science, mathematics, social studies, and supporting children with diverse needs.



Educators' lack of preparation in working with children who are multilingual, who come from diverse backgrounds, and who have experienced trauma, poverty, and/or ACEs represents a critical gap in workforce competency development given the demographics and needs of Idaho's child population.



TOPIC COVERAGE ACROSS CURRICULA



Not all competencies and early learning guideline areas receive equal "face time" over the course of a student's studies and exposure is strongly related to how well prepared graduates feel in an area.



The majority of courses focus on broad child age spans (e.g., birth-age 8 or older) with uneven and more limited focus on younger children, particularly infants and toddlers.



Compared to bachelor's programs, associate degree programs have a greater proportion of courses focused on early childhood core competencies and early learning guidelines.



PROGRAM STRUCTURE AND FACULTY



Overall, students felt that they had adequate opportunities during their credential program to engage in knowledge building, observation, applied practice, and reflection.



Nearly 25 percent of respondents felt that they did not receive enough opportunities to engage in applied practice and nearly 20 percent felt that too many experiences were focused on knowledge building.



Faculty in community and technical college settings are more likely to have a degree and work experience in early childhood. Four-year programs were more likely to have BIPOC and multilingual faculty members.









SECTION 5: INCENTIVIZING AND SUPPORTING CREDENTIAL ATTAINMENT IN IDAHO'S EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEM

To realize the effects of early childhood credential programs, graduates must successfully enter (or remain in) Idaho's early childhood workforce so as to retain the investment made in their education and improved skillsets. This means ensuring a sufficient number of graduates are not pursuing careers in other sectors (e.g., elementary education) and/or leaving the state. Furthermore, acknowledging the wide variety of roles within the early childhood space (e.g., early childhood educators, administrators, home visitors, early intervention and special education providers), it is important that all sectors benefit from a more educated workforce and that professionals are trained in competencies that adequately prepare them for their specific roles and responsibilities within the early childhood system.

Graduate employment. Despite few early childhood-specific career support services being offered (e.g., alumni networks, ECE-specific career advising), most IHEs report that all students are employed and/or pursuing additional education after graduation. The most common jobs for Idaho's early childhood graduates include early childhood educators and special education staff as well as elementary-level educators and special education staff. Although faculty reported high job placement rates—especially within the special education and early intervention fields—15 percent of Student and Workforce Survey respondents reported that they experienced moderate or significant challenges finding a job and/or pursuing higher education after graduation. This proportion was higher among BIPOC respondents (28 percent) than White respondents (12 percent) suggesting structural barriers to employment.

Return on investment. Earning a degree in early childhood yields a lower return on investment than in other fields, and while earning this degree early in one's career is a cost-effective investment, the returns on earning a degree mid-career are negligible. Indeed, for an individual earning a bachelor's degree in early childhood mid-career, for every dollar they invest in their education, they will see only \$0.12 in return. For those seeking associate degrees, their return is actually negative, losing \$0.05 for every dollar they invest (see Figure 11). This is particularly concerning given how many non-traditional early childhood credential seekers there are in the state.

Figure 11. Return on investment across degree types and career trajectories for ECE degrees compared to other degrees in Idaho

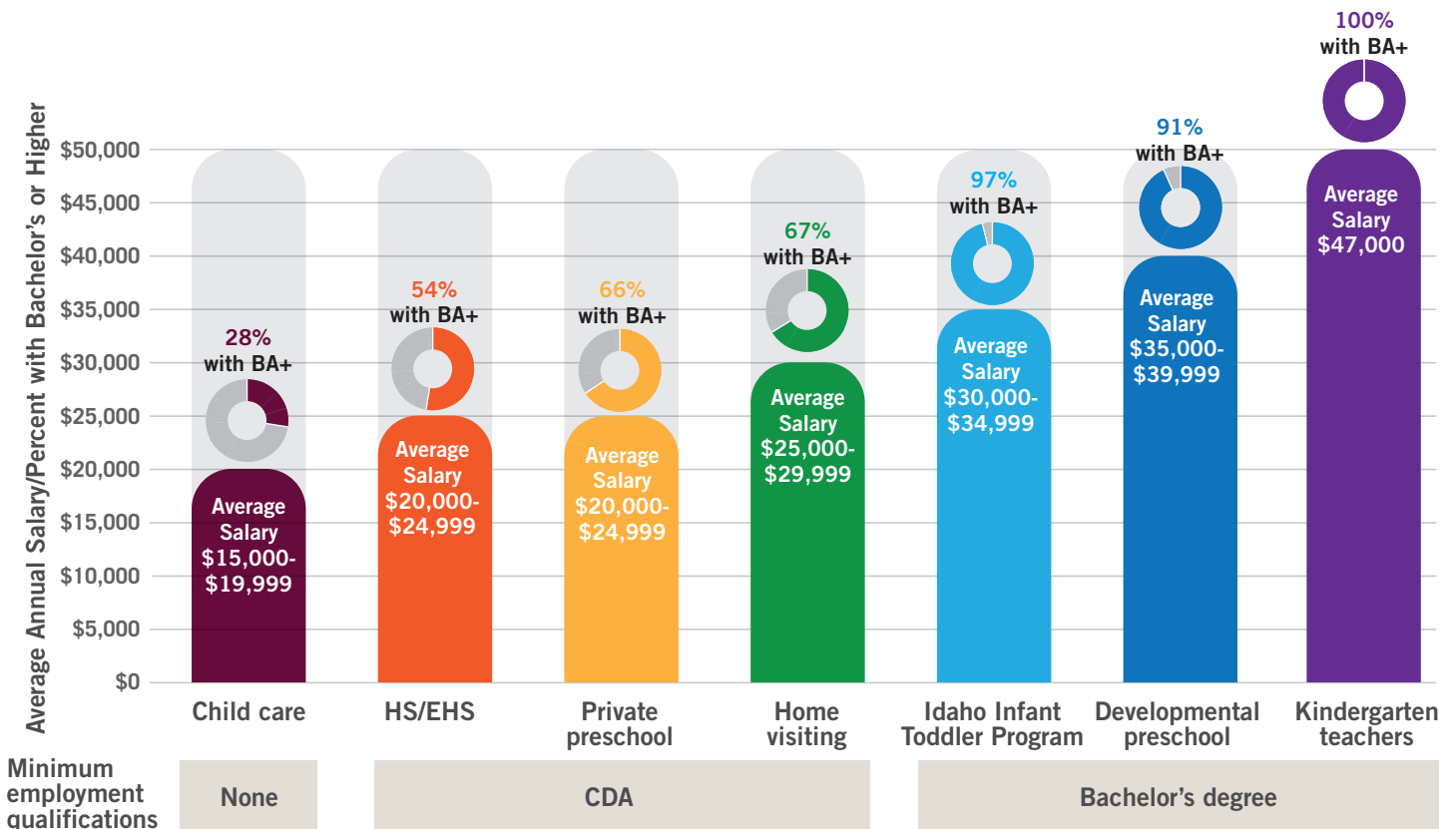
		Rate of return for every dollar invested	
		ECE degree	Statewide average for other degrees
EARLY CAREER	Bachelor's degree	 + \$1.51	 + \$3.34
	Associate degree	 + \$1.02	 + \$2.74
MID-CAREER	Bachelor's degree	 + \$0.12	 + \$0.93
	Associate degree	 - \$0.05	 + \$0.77

Cross-sector variation in degree attainment and compensation. Although the early childhood field is often juxtaposed with K–12 degree requirements and compensation levels, there is also significant variation within the early childhood field across roles and sectors. **Figure 12** presents the percentage of professionals in each sector with a bachelor’s degree or higher and average salary ranges as reported in Idaho’s 2016 early childhood workforce study. There is wide variation in the proportion of professionals within each sector who have a bachelor’s degree or higher. For example, an individual with an advanced degree is more than three times more likely to work in a Developmental Preschool or Idaho Infant Toddler setting than in child care.¹¹ This distribution of the workforce is likely due to a confluence of factors including:

- differences in degree requirements across sectors and roles;¹²
- variation in compensation across sectors, which may drive more educated individuals out of positions such as child care teachers;
- content of early childhood bachelor’s degree programs, which is geared toward elementary, special education, and family services roles;
- salaries that are universally lower in Idaho than in neighboring states, potentially leading to graduates of Idaho early childhood programs leaving the state to work.

Collectively, these factors likely contribute to a significant “degree drain” where those individuals teaching children in early childhood classrooms in Idaho—particularly in child care settings—are far less likely to have an advanced degree, especially one targeted toward the specific competencies of their daily work.

Figure 12. Average salary ranges and percent of individuals with bachelor’s degrees or higher across sectors of the early childhood workforce.



¹¹It should be noted that compared to PDS registrants, the workforce study had higher rates of directors represented (26 percent and 18 percent, respectively) and lower rates of assistant teachers (9 percent and 32 percent, respectively). Thus, rates of educational attainment and salary ranges presented here are likely overestimates for the overall child care sector.

¹²Whereas no formal degree is required for child care staff, a CDA is required for teacher assistants in Head Start, Early Head Start lead teachers, teachers and assistants in private preschool programs, and home visitors. Associate degrees are required for Head Start lead teachers and half of all teachers within a Head Start center must have bachelor’s degrees. Bachelor’s degrees are required for ECSE teachers, developmental specialists in Idaho Infant Toddler programs, and kindergarten teachers.

Degrees in the context of the Idaho early childhood system. Idaho early childhood core competency levels are associated with progressively higher educational attainment. However, given the variation in minimum employment qualifications across sectors, this sets differential expectations of competence across roles and reinforces low expectations for child care providers. Furthermore, there is no clear evidence that increased education levels would translate to higher levels of competency, especially given the lower proportion of time bachelor's degree programs devote to early childhood-specific content.

Although professional development recognition awards were designed to increase educational qualifications within the workforce, two-thirds of PDS registrants remain at the lowest level of the Early Childhood Care and Education Pathway. Furthermore, because awards are tied to individuals' educational attainment, inequities in higher education are replicated and perpetuated, with BIPOC professionals earning smaller recognition awards on average than their White peers. A similar phenomenon is seen at the program level through the state's Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS). While most levels of Idaho's QRIS do not require high levels of staff education and offer multiple pathways to meet staff qualification requirements, the highest level (Step 6) is based on accreditation or Head Start status, both of which have stringent education requirements. Of the 30 programs in the state that are rated as Step 6 and/or accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), 27 are affiliated with some type of broader institution or source of funding that can provide the scale and capital to meet higher staff education standards that are out of reach for most child care programs.

KEY FINDINGS: Early Childhood System Supports



GRADUATE EMPLOYMENT



Most IHEs report that all students are employed and/or pursuing additional education within a year after graduation.



15 percent of Student and Workforce Survey respondents reported challenges finding a job and/or pursuing higher education after graduation. This proportion was higher among BIPOC respondents, suggesting structural barriers to employment.



RETURN ON INVESTMENT



The projected return on earning a degree in early childhood is less than earning a degree in other fields in Idaho.



Although earning an early childhood degree early in one's career is a cost-effective investment, the returns on earning a degree mid-career are negligible (and negative in the case of an associate degree).



CROSS-SECTOR VARIATION



There is significant variation in degree requirements and compensation levels across sectors of the early childhood workforce, and salaries in Idaho across sectors are lower than in neighboring states.



The broad spectrum of content in early childhood bachelor's degree programs in Idaho may encourage graduates to pursue careers in higher-paying sectors such as elementary education, special education, and family services rather than early care and education programs (e.g., child care, Head Start).



These factors contribute to a "degree drain" where early childhood teachers (particularly in child care) are far less likely to have an advanced degree, especially one targeted specifically to the competencies of their daily work.



EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEM SUPPORTS



The explicit link between education and core competency levels in conjunction with differences in minimum employment qualifications across sectors sets differential expectations of competence across roles and reinforces low expectations for child care providers.



Two-thirds of PDS registrants remain at the lowest level of the Early Childhood Care and Education Pathway.



Professional Development Awards replicate and exacerbate inequities in higher education access and attainment, with BIPOC professionals earning smaller recognition awards on average than their White peers.

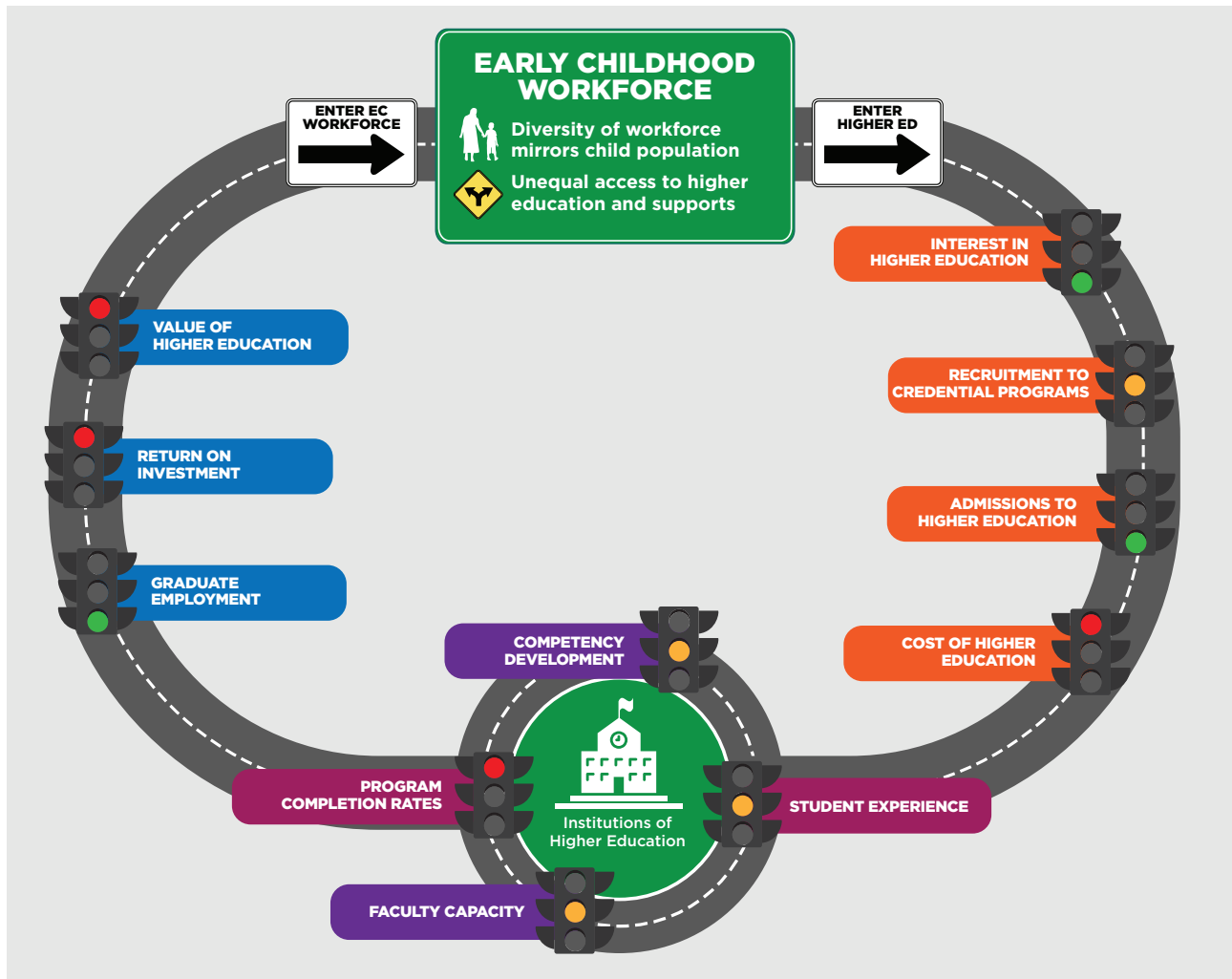


The vast majority of programs in the state that are rated as Step 6 and/or NAEYC-accredited are affiliated with some type of broader institution or funding that can provide the scale and capital to meet higher staff education standards that are out of reach for most child care programs.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The major findings of this study are summarized in **Figure 13**.

Figure 13. Summary of study findings



Based on the findings of this study, we provide the following recommendations:

RECALIBRATING THE DESTINATION

Recommendation 1:

Revising the *Idaho Core Competencies for Early Care and Education*

Early childhood workforce competencies are the “guiding stars” to which all early childhood higher education and professional development opportunities should align. An effective competency framework:

- is grounded in research and focuses on the practices and behaviors that matter most for supporting the outcomes defined in the *Idaho Early Learning e-Guidelines* and other goals of the system;
- holds the same expectations regardless of setting (e.g., child care, Head Start, private preschool); and
- is regularly evaluated and updated to ensure it reflects current knowledge of best practices and the needs of Idaho’s diverse early childhood workforce and the children and families they serve.

The current *Idaho Core Competencies for Early Care and Education* are built on a strong foundation of extensive work synthesizing research, best practices, and national standards. However, since their publication in 2014, Idaho’s early childhood workforce and child population have changed, and best practices have evolved. For example, in 2019 and 2020, NAEYC

released new professional standards and competencies. It also updated developmentally appropriate practice guidance, a position statement on advancing equity in the field, and a new code of ethical conduct and statement of commitment. Furthermore, as noted in this report, Idaho’s current workforce competencies tie competency levels to educational attainment, which is not validated by any evidence and sets differential expectations for practitioners in different settings, reinforcing the hierarchy within the field and compensation levels across sectors.

Idaho’s current early childhood workforce competencies and higher education programs focus on a wide range of roles and disciplines within the early childhood field (e.g., classroom educators, special education providers, home visitors, and family-service professionals). Although this can provide a consistent base of knowledge across professions, it is also possible that individuals lack preparation for the skillsets specific to their role within the early childhood field. In Rhode Island’s latest revision of its workforce competencies, it created different—yet interrelated—frameworks for key roles in the early childhood field. This includes separate frameworks for early childhood teachers, teacher assistants, family child care educators, early intervention/early childhood special education staff, professional development providers, and administrators/education coordinators. Idaho could consider a similar approach in its revision, articulating the essential skills of each role, which would, in turn, guide the types of higher education and professional development experiences needed to foster these competencies.



DEVELOPING NEW MILESTONE MARKERS

Recommendation 2:

Creating a competency-based credential system

If the goal of preparation and development of early childhood professionals is to see them enact practices and behaviors that improve child and family outcomes, then the demonstration of these competencies should be recognized, rewarded, and centered in the early childhood system. Most current models of credentialing place substantial weight on individual experience: for example, attainment of a college degree or certificate, participation in professional development, or hours or years of experience within an early childhood setting. While all of these are valid pathways to develop competencies, they are merely proxy measures for the actual capacity to demonstrate them.

The CDA is one example of a competency-based credential. During a verification visit at the CDA candidate’s place of work, a CDA professional development specialist reviews the candidate’s professional portfolio, conducts an observation of the candidate working with children, and reflects with the candidate about their areas of strength and growth. Candidates are awarded CDAs based on a combination of observed demonstration of competencies, hours of experience and professional development, and written materials including an exam.¹³ Consistent with the recommendation above, the CDA has different competency standards for center-based preschool educators, center-based infant/toddler teachers, family child care providers, and home visitors. The CDA also supports access by being offered in multiple languages and recognizing many types of professional development as valid, including certified higher education courses, trainings, and online learning.

Another example of a credential system that incorporates demonstration of competencies is [Colorado’s Early Childhood Professional Credential Program](#), in which individuals can earn up to 100 points across the domains of formal education, ongoing professional development, experience, and demonstrated competencies. Demonstrated competency points can be earned by achieving a score above a certain threshold on approved tools such as *Environment Rating System* tools, *CLASS* tools, the Colorado State Model Evaluation System, and the *Teaching Pyramid Observation Tool (TPOT)*. However, it should be noted that demonstrated competency points are not required and can only be earned as up to 10 “bonus points” toward the entire 100-point credential.

Idaho has the opportunity to build on models of competency-based credentials and to be a pioneer in the space by innovating further. For example, although the CDA and Colorado models include demonstrated competencies, these are considered alongside other criteria such as formal education, years of experience, and participation in professional development. Idaho could “flip” this model by weighting competencies more heavily than other requirements or offering “fast track” options where as long as an individual could demonstrate certain competencies, other factors such as education or experience need not be considered.

¹³CDA certificates are awarded based on performance on the *CDA Assessment Observation Instrument and CDA Exam*, results of a family feedback questionnaire, the candidate’s written professional philosophy and reflective statements of competence, 120 clock hours of professional education across the CDA subject areas, 480 hours of experience working with young children, and high school graduation/GED attainment.

Additionally, research shows that just as quality varies across classrooms within a program,¹⁴ quality can vary across dimensions in a classroom or family child care setting, as educators have different areas of strengths and potential for growth.¹⁵ Thus, Idaho might consider a “badging” or “module” model of credentialing where early childhood professionals could earn recognition for demonstrating competencies in different areas (e.g., health, safety, and nutrition; language and literacy teaching; social–emotional and early childhood mental health; family partnerships; leadership practices). Demonstration of competencies could be evaluated through submission of a digital portfolio. For example, photos, videos, or written materials could be analyzed off-site using tools such as sub-scales of the *Environment Rating Scales*, *CLASS*, the *CDA Assessment Observation Instrument*, or other domain-specific tools. Using video recordings to conduct classroom observations that could be scored by a central or regional team of expert observers is a solution being explored by major assessment publishers. This would significantly reduce the cost associated with travel and observer training and has the benefit of using video for reflection and professional development for candidates. Critically, the tools used to evaluate competencies must be culturally and linguistically accessible and responsive, and the demonstration of competencies must be tied to incentives such as wage supplements.

PAVING NEW PATHWAYS

Recommendation 3:

Recognizing multiple routes to competency attainment

Idaho’s IHEs play a critical role in supporting the early childhood workforce. However, as documented in this report, the current structure of higher education access and delivery may not be the most efficient or cost-effective way to professionalize the incumbent workforce, many of whom cannot afford to stop working to participate full-time in higher education. Furthermore, there is increasing recognition that the competencies required to work with young children and families are best developed in real-world contexts through applied practice and reflective feedback. Some innovative training models are “flipping the classroom”: Instead of having students spend the majority of time in higher education classrooms with a sub-set of time spent in fieldwork settings, those already employed in early childhood settings can “earn while they learn” through on-the-job training with a mentor coach with supplemental academic opportunities.

For example, in apprenticeship programs, educators earn credits mostly through on-the-job learning with an onsite mentor coach, but also have scheduled time off to attend college courses. Traditionally, apprenticeship programs include guaranteed wage boosts every six months of no less than \$0.50 an hour. For two full years of participation, this would equate to a \$2.00 per hour raise, or over \$4,000 per year. Most programs report that employers are willing to make this investment as it contributes to more qualified staff and greater retention.¹⁶ Programs can also be funded through philanthropic dollars, state funding, and/or federal opportunities such as the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act. Examples of this type of program include the [Childcare Development Specialist Apprenticeship](#) at Red Rocks Community College¹⁷ and [Philadelphia’s ECE Career Pathways Partnership](#).¹⁸ Another example of an earn-while-you-learn model is a “[place-based bachelor’s program](#),” operated as a collaboration between three Denver child care centers and the University of Colorado Denver’s School of Education and Human Development.¹⁹ Through this program, current educators can earn their bachelor’s degree while working full-time by combining credit for previous courses and trainings they have had, participating in regular coaching and feedback from teams of university faculty and field-based coaches, and completing relevant readings and project-based assignments.

¹⁴Sabol, T. J., Ross, E. C., Frost, A. (2020). Are all Head Start classrooms created equal? Variation in classroom quality within Head Start Centers and implications for accountability systems. *American Educational Research Journal*, 57(2), 504-534. doi:[10.3102/0002831219858920](https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831219858920)

¹⁵Curby, T. W., LoCasale-Crouch, J., Konold, T. R., Pianta, R. C., Howes, C., Burchinal, M., Barbarin, O. (2009). The relations of observed pre-K classroom quality profiles to children’s achievement and social competence. *Early Education and Development. Special Issue: Data-Based Investigations of the Quality of Preschool and Early Child Care Environments*, 20(2), 346-372.

¹⁶Brundin, J. (2021). Apprenticeships aren’t just for the trades. It’s also a way to bolster Colorado’s early childhood workforce. Colorado Public Radio News. Retrieved from: <https://www.cpr.org/2021/01/19/apprenticeships-arent-just-for-the-trades-its-also-a-way-to-bolster-colorados-early-childhood-workforce/>

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸McCarthy, M. A. (2017). *Rethinking credential requirements in early education: Equity-based strategies for professionalizing a vulnerable workforce*. Washington, DC: New America.

¹⁹Brundin, J. (2021). *New ‘place-based’ bachelor’s program aims to invest big in Colorado’s early childhood workforce*. Colorado Public Radio News. Retrieved from: <https://www.cpr.org/2021/02/02/new-place-based-bachelors-program-aims-to-invest-big-in-colorados-early-childhood-workforce/>

These innovative approaches could complement existing higher education and professional development efforts, all serving the same goal of providing multiple avenues for early childhood professionals to develop the competencies they need to be effective in their work. Higher education credential programs might have built-in opportunities for students to earn their competency-based “badges,” with support developing their portfolios. A model such as the CDA verification visit might be used for current members of the workforce, but instead of happening *after* the required training and work hours have been completed, it could occur at any time, with credit being given in areas where professionals are already demonstrating proficiency. Professional development specialists/coaches could then help the individual select the appropriate higher education courses and/or IdahoSTARS Essential Trainings in a more *à la carte* model to target certain areas where additional support is needed to earn competency badges. This individualized and targeted approach would be more efficient, effective, and strengths-based compared to current models built around completion of a one-size-fits-all degree or training regimen.

To optimally support competency development and demonstration, IHEs and professional development providers should ensure that their learning opportunities directly map onto the competencies and fill gaps identified in this report, such as leadership and management; teaching science, mathematics, and social studies; working with infants and toddlers; and supporting children who are multilingual, who come from diverse backgrounds, and who have experienced trauma, poverty, and/or ACEs.



BUILDING MORE ON-RAMPS AND GUARDRAILS

Recommendation 4:

Facilitating access to and completion of educational opportunities

Although Idaho’s early childhood credential programs reported steady enrollment and have supportive admissions policies, these programs have difficulty attracting and retaining diverse populations of students, adequately responding to the needs of non-traditional students, and have low overall graduation rates. Among programs in Idaho, there are some innovative models to support the recruitment and success of non-traditional students and those from groups who have been historically disenfranchised from higher education. The [Indigenous Knowledge for Effective Education Program \(IKEEP\)](#) at the University of Idaho recruits tribal students from the 10 Northwest Tribes and helps them obtain their teaching certification within the College of Education, with the expectation that they will return to Native communities and teach in culturally responsive ways. Another example is the [BYU-Pathway program](#), a three-semester online course that students can take before enrolling at BYU to earn credits toward a degree at a reduced cost. National models of best practice also exist, such as the [Pamoja Early Childhood Education Workforce Program](#), an 18-week CDA training program offered in multiple languages to immigrant and refugee women. These models all go beyond basic student assistance to provide the financial resources (e.g., scholarships, stipends, food boxes, and diapers), ongoing academic supports (e.g., mentor teachers and coaches to help with homework, study skills, and technology), connection to peers through cohort programs, and culturally responsive models to fully support individuals who face disproportionate barriers in higher education.

Another strategy to build the early childhood workforce pipeline is establishing concurrent enrollment programs, which provide high school students the opportunity to enroll in college-level classes and earn college credits at no cost to them for tuition. These increasingly popular models try to augment the early childhood workforce pipeline by opening up opportunities for high school students to look at teaching as a viable career, particularly for students who traditionally face barriers to higher education access such as first-generation, multilingual, and BIPOC individuals. As part of their coursework, students are often paired with mentor teachers and placed in early childhood settings to gain real-life experience in the classroom. One such model is the [Pathways to Teaching \(P-TEACH\)](#) program, one of 48 high school early childhood education pathway programs in Colorado that are pursuing or have received federal and state funding.²⁰

²⁰Brundin, J. (2021). *Looking for a new generation of early childhood educators? High schoolers might fit the bill*. Colorado Public Radio News. Retrieved from: <https://www.cpr.org/2021/01/26/looking-for-a-new-generation-of-early-childhood-educators-high-schoolers-might-fit-the-bill/>

STRENGTHENING SYSTEM INFRASTRUCTURE

Recommendation 5.

Building a strong system of early childhood workforce supports

Any investments in the preparation and training of the early childhood workforce—particularly in the child care sector—are lost as long as poverty-level wages continue to drive qualified teachers out of the field. There should be a seismic shift in how funding is invested and allocated within the early childhood system, creating meaningful financial recognition for the skills and work early childhood professionals already demonstrate as well as incentivizing and rewarding ongoing advancement of their competencies. Additionally, current workforce support policies should be studied to ensure that they are not perpetuating inequities within the early childhood system. For example, current academic scholarships go further at some institutions than others, may result in higher overall education costs due to the part-time attendance structure, and may contribute to some of the “degree drain” from the child care sector. Financial awards tied to education levels, such as professional development awards and QRIS participation awards, may replicate and exacerbate inequities among individuals and programs with differing levels of resources.

CONCLUSION

Idaho’s early childhood workforce is composed of a diverse group of professionals, many of whom are eager to pursue educational opportunities to enhance their knowledge and skills. However, current systems and structures were not designed to meet the needs of early childhood credential students, many of whom cannot afford to quit working to attend school full time, are older than traditional college students, or are members of groups that have been historically marginalized. Furthermore, degree programs may not be the most efficient or cost-effective means of developing the workforce, given the wide range of courses required that may not pertain to specific job-related competencies. To capitalize on the significant potential of Idaho’s current and future workforce, the state’s early childhood and higher education stakeholders should consider developing role-specific competencies, which would be the basis of a new type of competency-based credential. Rather than the sole desired output of the system, traditional degree programs could be one path among many in a targeted approach to workforce development that recognizes, supports, and directly rewards the essential skills early childhood professionals need to be effective in their work.