

Opportunities to Enhance Supports for Contra Costa County's Early Educator Workforce

Executive Summary

Pamm Shaw, August 2026

Commissioned by First 5 Contra Costa: this work is made possible through aligned investments from California Proposition 10 and a California Jobs First Catalyst Planning Grant for regional planning efforts related to early care and education.

Contra Costa County's early childhood education (ECE) workforce is essential to children's development, family economic stability, and the region's overall economic health. Approximately 4,000 early childhood educators support thousands of children across the county's variety of child care programs (Powell et al., 2024). Despite a highly experienced and diverse workforce, persistent challenges—including low wages, limited benefits, and high stress—threaten the stability of the early childhood education field (McLean et al., 2024).

A strong body of research shows that no single intervention can stabilize the early childhood education workforce. The most effective strategies align four key elements: competitive compensation, sustained professional supports, accessible career pathways, and coordinated systems supported by data (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2015; McLean et al., 2024; Bernardi et al., 2024). Compensation attracts educators, while coaching and supportive leadership retain them (Morrissey & Bowman, 2024; Cavadel et al., 2022). Career pathways and apprenticeships strengthen recruitment and advancement when tied to wage progression (Abenavoli, 2025; Spaulding et al., 2019).

In Contra Costa County, there is an array of 22 early childhood education workforce supports, each with different intended outcomes, varying levels of intensity for participants (from one-time engagement to sustained engagement over years), different numbers of participants served annually, and available due to a mix of funding sources.



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Based on available data, the existing ECE workforce supports that fall within the on-the-job support and retention categories reach about 25% of the current ECE workforce. For details about each existing support, please refer to the Profiles section of the report in Appendix A. For a more detailed version of the table that includes estimates of participants served annually by each workforce support, please refer to Appendix B.

Combining this landscape analysis with existing research on what supports stability in the early childhood education field, this report identifies three priority opportunities for Contra Costa County:

1 Improve Compensation and Benefits Across the ECE Workforce

Compensation is the strongest predictor of recruitment and retention in the early care and education workforce (McLean et al., 2024; Morrissey & Bowman, 2024; Whitebook et al., 2014). Scaling wage supplements, expanding benefits, and improving working conditions are essential to stabilizing the early childhood education workforce (Child Care Aware of America, 2025; Bernardi et al., 2024). Pay parity strategies between transitional kindergarten and community programs can reduce workforce attrition and strengthen the overall child care field (Lee & Muñoz, 2026).

2 Prioritize On-the-Job Supports that Emphasize Retention

On-the-job professional supports—especially coaching, mentoring, and leadership development—are among the strongest predictors of retention in the early childhood education field (Cavadel et al., 2022; Grogan et al., 2018; Bloom et al., 2015). These supports improve job satisfaction, instructional quality, and professional belonging while reducing burnout (Harding et al., 2019; Downey et al., 2024). Sustained, job-embedded coaching is significantly more effective than one-time training (National Center on Early Childhood Development, Teaching, and Learning, 2020; Glazerman et al., 2010; National Institute for Early Education Research, 2017).

3 Expand Credentials and Credit-Bearing Advancement Pathways

Strengthening credit-bearing pathways and apprenticeships is essential for recruitment and long-term workforce stability. Limited career advancement opportunities contribute to turnover in the early childhood education field (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2015;

The existing early childhood education workforce supports in Contra Costa County can be categorized into the following three primary goals:

Recruitment:

Existing supports engage either high school students or adults and aim to recruit them to the ECE field

On-the-Job Support:

This is the primary focus of most existing supports in the county

Retention:

Only a handful of existing efforts expressly work toward this goal

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Whitebook et al., 2018). Well-designed, funded career pathways for early childhood educators improve recruitment, credential attainment, and retention (Abenavoli, 2025; Spaulding et al., 2019; U.S. Department of Labor, 2021). Apprenticeship models reduce barriers by linking education, wages, and advancement (Abenavoli, 2025).

Next Steps

Contra Costa County has a strong foundation of early childhood education programs, partnerships, and workforce supports that can be leveraged to address ongoing workforce challenges. The following next steps could be used to strengthen and broaden collaborations and build support for future investments to address short-term and long-term needs of the early childhood education workforce.



Leverage Existing Early Childhood Education Structures and Partnerships to Develop an Action Plan:

Build on existing state-mandated and active partnerships across early childhood education stakeholders to advance discussions about next steps in each of the opportunity areas identified. Use these existing partnerships, which already understand the local early childhood education landscape, history and context, to develop a coordinated countywide action plan that includes timelines, roles for systems partners, and measurable outcomes for each opportunity.



Engage Business and Workforce Development as Key Partners:

Share findings with employers, chambers of commerce, economic development networks, the Contra Costa County Workforce Development Board and its partners to strengthen recognition of early childhood education as essential economic infrastructure and expand cross-sector collaboration and investment.



Build Support for Funding to Address Early Childhood Education Needs:

Strengthen stakeholder alignment for dedicating local, state, federal, and philanthropic funding to support these identified early childhood education workforce priorities, including compensation, coaching and mentoring, career pathways, apprenticeships, and other workforce supports.



Conclusion

Stabilizing the early childhood education workforce requires a comprehensive and aligned approach. Compensation drives recruitment, while retention depends on professional supports, workplace conditions, leadership, and career pathways¹. When implemented together, these strategies drive entry into the field, improve workforce stability, and support advancement². Ultimately, a more stable early childhood education workforce brings stability to the field and to the families that depend on child care to go to work and support their own families.

¹National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2015; McLean et al., 2024; Morrissey & Bowman, 2024

²Bernardi et al., 2024; Spaulding et al., 2019)

Learn more about how First 5 Contra Costa is strengthening early care and education:

First 5 Contra Costa partners with providers, educators, and communities to ensure young children enter school healthy, supported, and ready to thrive. To explore partnerships and opportunities, contact Stephanie Shieh, Early Childhood Program Officer, at sshieh@first5coco.org.

