



Professionalizing the Child Care Workforce through Credentialing: Lessons from Louisiana’s Early Childhood Ancillary Certificate

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Summary:

- Since 2019, Louisiana has required all lead teachers in publicly funded child care centers to obtain a new credential called the Early Childhood Ancillary Certificate (ECAC).
- Teachers who do not hold a qualifying credential (e.g., Bachelor’s degree), must complete coursework and coaching at a state-approved ECAC program to earn the credential. However, most teachers who enroll in ECAC programs do not ultimately earn their certificate.
- This report summarizes findings from a December 2020 survey of ECAC program leaders about barriers to ECAC completion.
- ECAC program leaders identified three key obstacles to program completion: (1) administrative burden, (2) ECAC program requirements, and (3) Child Development Associate (CDA) requirements.
- Leaders identified promising strategies for supporting early educators in earning their credential including reducing administrative burden, providing peer and administrative support, and involving child care directors as partners.
- However, they also identified high rates of teacher turnover from child care settings—and in turn from credentialing programs—as severely undermining early childhood professionalization efforts.

Early educators do complex work to support children’s academic, social, and emotional development during a foundational period in their lives. They can have profound impacts on children’s learning trajectories. Unfortunately, the educators who teach and care for young children, especially in child care settings, often lack training and professional supports. They face challenging working conditions and low levels of compensation, and they leave their jobs at high rates. Given these factors, it is not surprising that many early care and education programs in the United States do not consistently provide the types of warm, engaging learning experiences that young children need to thrive.¹

To professionalize the workforce and improve quality, some states have introduced new training requirements for early educators.² These requirements can also unintentionally create challenges for early educators, who may lack the time, resources, and necessary supports to meet these new demands. This report examines these challenges in the context of Louisiana’s Early Childhood Ancillary Certificate (ECAC).

Since 2019, Louisiana has required that all lead teachers in publicly funded child care settings obtain an ECAC, a new credential, within 24 months of being hired at the center. Teachers who already hold a degree (e.g., a Bachelor’s degree) automatically qualify for an ECAC.³ However, for the many teachers who lack a higher education credential, earning the ECAC means enrolling in one of 29 state-approved training programs housed at colleges, non-profits, and other community organizations throughout the state.

The ECAC credential builds on the widely-recognized Child Development Associate (CDA) credential, which is the most common early childhood education (ECE) credential in the United States. The CDA requires teachers to complete 120 hours of professional education in early childhood development, 480 hours of ECE work experience, a professional portfolio, and an exam. The ECAC combines these traditional CDA requirements with a more explicit focus on improving teacher-child interactions through coaching and training.⁴ In this way, the ECAC is well aligned with the state’s broader ECE quality improvement efforts, which all center around improving teacher-child interactions as measured by the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), an observation tool that measures the quality of teacher-child interactions in the classroom.

Louisiana Pathways (LA Pathways), the state’s ECE workforce registry, fully covers the cost of ECAC tuition through scholarships. Further, once teachers complete the credential, they are eligible for the School Readiness Tax Credit (SRTC), a refundable credit worth up to \$3,300 per year. Yet even with the tuition coverage and the strong financial incentive, many teachers who enroll in the ECAC never complete it. In 2018, the Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE) estimated that up to 75% of teachers who enroll in ECAC programs do not earn their credential. That so many teachers who begin work on the ECAC fail to complete it raises concerns about the barriers early educators face when pursuing professional credentials. Overcoming these barriers requires a better understanding of *why* teachers do not complete the ECAC, and how these challenges can be overcome.

Through the Study of Early Education in Louisiana, a longstanding Research Policy Partnership, we invited leaders of every state-approved ECAC program to complete a survey aimed at identifying the obstacles teachers face en route to

earning an ECAC and strategies that could support them in completing the process. This is the first of three reports about teachers’ experiences pursuing the ECAC. More broadly, these results speak to how best to support child care teachers in attaining additional education and training.

Sample Description

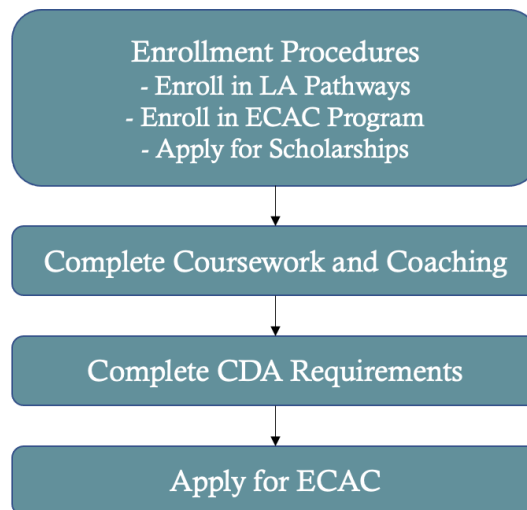
We invited program leaders from all 29 state-approved ECAC programs to complete the survey in December 2020 and received responses from 23 programs (80% of all ECAC programs). For some programs, multiple leaders completed the survey: Our sample includes the 26 respondents who identified as program directors or held an administrative position within their program (e.g., “Project Manager”).⁵

The majority of leaders who responded to the survey were experienced ECE educators: 80% had at least five years of experience as an early educator, and nearly three-quarters had at least one year of experience as a program director. More than 75% of leaders held graduate degrees. The majority of ECAC leaders reported that their program serves cohorts of 11 to 30 teachers.

The ECAC Process

Earning an ECAC is a complex, multi-step process. This section describes the key steps candidates— or child care teachers pursuing an ECAC— must follow to complete this process (shown in Figure 1). It highlights the many points within the process where teachers may face potential challenges.

Figure 1: ECAC Process



1. Enrollment Procedures

In order to enroll in a state-approved ECAC program, candidates must complete several distinct but related enrollment tasks: (a) enrolling in Louisiana Pathways, (b) enrolling in the ECAC program, and (c) applying for scholarships.

1a. Enroll in Louisiana Pathways

LA Pathways fully covers the cost of ECAC tuition through scholarships. However, to receive a scholarship, teachers must first be enrolled in LA Pathways. To enroll in Pathways, candidates must submit an enrollment form as well as an employment verification form to LA Pathways. The employment verification form must be completed by the candidate's employer. Candidates can either mail the original copy of each form or email a scanned copy to LA Pathways.

1b. Enroll in ECAC Program

Next, candidates must enroll in a state-approved ECAC program. Although application requirements vary across ECAC programs, generally admissions are not competitive: So long as applicants meet the ECAC eligibility requirements (i.e., working 16 or more hours per week at a publicly funded child care center), they may enroll. Many ECAC programs assist candidates with enrolling in LA Pathways if they have not already done so prior to applying to the ECAC program.

1c. Apply for Scholarships

During the enrollment process, candidates must formally apply for LA Pathways scholarships to cover the cost of attending their ECAC program. Candidates complete the scholarship application forms and return them to their ECAC program. The ECAC program then mails the completed scholarship paperwork to LA Pathways. When LA Pathways receives the applications, they process them and send scholarship agreements to candidates, who must then sign them and return them to LA Pathways. So long as candidates remain employed at a qualifying center and maintain "good academic standing" in their ECAC program, scholarships cover the full cost of program tuition.

2. Complete Coursework and Coaching

Once enrolled in LA Pathways and their ECAC program, candidates begin the coursework and coaching activities designed to improve their classroom practice. Candidates must complete 120 hours of coursework covering topics such as promoting safe and healthy learning environments, supporting children's social and emotional development, and managing program operations. Some ECAC programs deliver this coursework in a face-to-face setting, while others do so in a blended or fully online learning environment.

In addition to the CDA-aligned coursework requirements, candidates complete an additional 30 hours of “applied practice” activities. These applied practice opportunities could include participating in structured coaching sessions or observing high-quality classroom instruction and interactions. As part of this requirement, candidates must be observed in their classroom at least twice using the CLASS rubric. These observations are designed to give candidates feedback on their classroom practice. We refer to these applied practice activities as “coaching.”

3. Complete CDA Requirements

After completing the coursework and coaching component of their ECAC program, all candidates must formally apply for a CDA credential. To do so, candidates must create a “professional portfolio” containing a family questionnaire (completed by families whose children are under the candidate’s care), documentation certifying they have completed requisite coursework, a professional philosophy statement, and other required materials. In addition, candidates must complete a verification visit conducted by a CDA professional development specialist.

Finally, candidates must take and pass the CDA Exam, which consists of 65 multiple choice questions related to child development and care giving. LA Pathways offers candidates a separate scholarship to cover the CDA Exam fee (over \$400). In order to receive this scholarship, candidates must submit an additional application as well as a transcript from their ECAC program and a checklist certifying that they have completed all other CDA requirements.

To officially earn their CDA, candidates then must submit a formal application to the Council for Professional Recognition, the organization that administers the CDA.

4. Apply for the ECAC

After candidates complete the coursework and coaching component of their ECAC program and earn their CDA, they still must submit a final application to LDOE to receive their ECAC. Unlike LA Pathways enrollment and scholarship applications which rely mainly on hard-copy forms, candidates must apply for their ECAC certificate through an online portal.

Challenges to Completing the ECAC

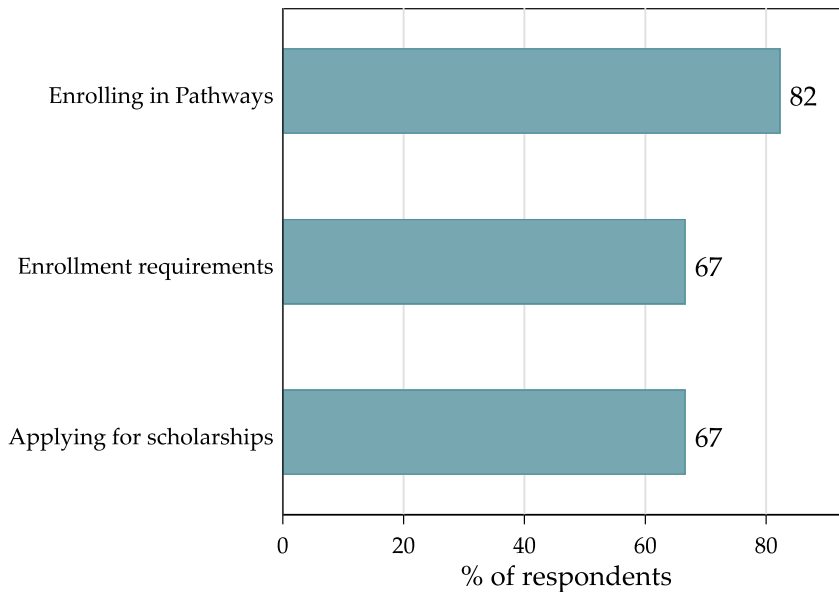
The purpose of the ECAC Program Leader Survey was to identify the aspects of the complex, multi-step ECAC process that posed the greatest challenges for candidates. As described, leaders’ highlighted three key challenges: (1)

administrative burden, (2) ECAC program requirements, and (3) CDA requirements.

Challenge 1: Administrative Burden

ECAC program leaders reported that candidates face considerable challenges in completing the administrative tasks necessary to earn their ECAC. As Figure 2 shows, most leaders indicated that at least some candidates struggle with completing enrollment requirements for their ECAC program, enrolling in LA Pathways, and applying for Pathways scholarships. We refer to bureaucratic steps like these as “administrative burden.”

Figure 2: Percentage of ECAC program leaders indicating at least some candidates found the task challenging



Based on 17 to 21 responses

Leaders indicated that some candidates are not even aware of LA Pathways, with one sharing that, “candidates do not know about Pathways or why they have to register.”

ECAC program leaders also shared that they do not have an easy way to check which of their candidates are enrolled in LA Pathways. This confusion leads to additional administrative challenges. As one ECAC program leader explained, “Candidates (and their directors)...don’t realize that the candidates are not enrolled in Pathways – we usually discover about 50% of candidates are not enrolled, once we send scholarship applications to Pathways.”

After candidates are enrolled in LA Pathways, they still need to formally apply for a scholarship, and ECAC leaders indicated that completing scholarship

applications is also a burden. They shared that the “process to complete [scholarship] applications is too cumbersome and lengthy,” and that “many [candidates] do not complete the entire application.”

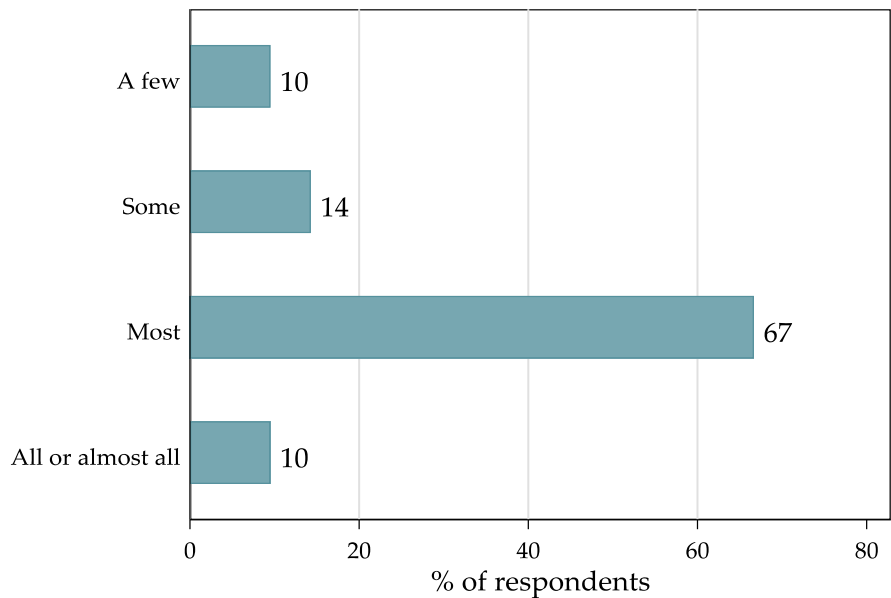
Although the bulk of administrative burdens for candidates occur at the beginning of the process, once candidates complete their ECAC program requirements and all requirements for the CDA there is still one additional administrative step they must complete for LDOE: formally applying for the ECAC. Program leaders noted this final step “was not clear for candidates,” and several leaders pointed to the need for additional supports in helping candidates submit their ECAC application.

Program leaders reported they devote a significant amount of time and energy to working with candidates to complete forms and following up to retrieve missing information. Survey responses indicated that these procedures are onerous and make the process more difficult for both candidates and program staff.

Challenge 2: ECAC Program Requirements

Completing the ECAC coursework and coaching requirements, which are the heart of the training experience, also poses a challenge. As shown in Figure 3, the majority of program leaders reported that “all” or “most” candidates complete these requirements. However, one in four indicated that only some or a few candidates successfully complete all program requirements.

Figure 3: ECAC program leaders’ reports of the number of candidates who complete the coursework and coaching component of their program?

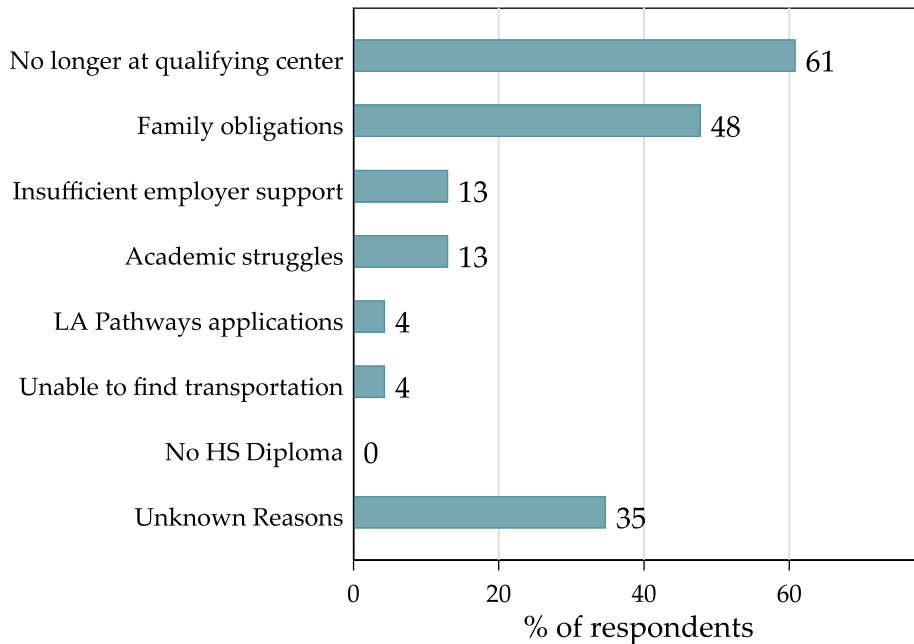


Based on 21 responses

The survey asked leaders to identify the two most common reasons why candidates do not complete the coursework and coaching component. As shown in Figure 4, the most common response (61%) was that candidates drop out of ECAC programs because they no longer work at a qualifying, publicly funded child care center. Given the importance of candidates’ leaving their positions—and the broader challenge of high turnover rates in Louisiana’s child care settings—we devote a separate section below to this issue.

Family obligations such as child and elder care are the second most common reason candidates do not complete the coursework and coaching component of the program. Relatively few leaders suggested that academic struggles are one of the primary reasons candidates leave their programs, perhaps because, as discussed below, ECAC programs have a number of supports in place to assist candidates with completing coursework.

Figure 4: ECAC program leaders’ top two reasons candidates do not finish your program?



Based on 23 responses

Notably, many leaders shared that they often do not know why candidates leave their program: More than one-third of respondents included “Unknown reasons” as one of their top two reasons candidates leave their program.

Challenge 3: Completing the CDA

Once they have successfully finished the coursework and coaching requirements of their ECAC program, candidates still must fulfill all CDA requirements before they can receive their ECAC. Nearly all ECAC program leaders indicated that they viewed supporting candidates in completing CDA-related tasks as their responsibility (96% agree or strongly agree), and the majority (82%) reported that at least some candidates found fulfilling these requirements (e.g., the CDA exam) challenging.

Leaders noted that the process to earn the CDA is “confusing and stressful,” and that candidates often need considerable support to complete the CDA paperwork and requirements. Many pointed to communication with the Council for Professional Recognition as a key obstacle. Leaders shared that “it is difficult to get in touch with the CDA council to resolve glitches” and that the council does not release policy changes in a timely manner. One leader suggested that completing the CDA portfolio represented one of the largest obstacles to program completion for candidates.

Strategies to Support Early Educators in Pursuing Additional Training and Education

ECAC program leaders provided a number of concrete suggestions and promising practices already in use that may support candidates in successfully earning their credential. Below we highlight four strategies to support child care teachers in furthering their professional training.

Strategy 1: Reduce Administrative Burden

Complex administrative tasks—such as multi-step application processes—can prevent individuals from accessing and benefiting from programs for which they are eligible. For example, the complexity of financial aid paperwork discourages many aspiring college students from applying for and receiving the financial aid they need to afford college.⁶ ECAC candidates face similar administrative burden as they work toward earning their credential in the form of a large amount of enrollment and scholarship paperwork. Reducing administrative burden may be one important strategy for helping candidates complete the ECAC.

The extent to which these forms and administrative requirements have led to candidates dropping out of the program altogether is unclear, but ECAC program leaders reported spending significant amounts of time walking candidates through the various applications and tracking candidates down to fill out missing information.

Although they recognized the need to collect this information, many leaders suggested moving as much of the enrollment and scholarship process online as possible. Specific suggestions included:

- “Paperwork needs to be completed virtually. The paper versions of scholarships need to go away and the entire thing needs to be done online.”
- “[I would recommend] eliminating the amount of paperwork, put everything on one website.”
- “If the process was all computer-based I would assume this would [solve] some of the issues.”

Moving administrative processes online could substantially reduce challenges associated with completing scholarship applications for both ECAC program staff and the candidates themselves while allowing LDOE to continue to collect necessary information.

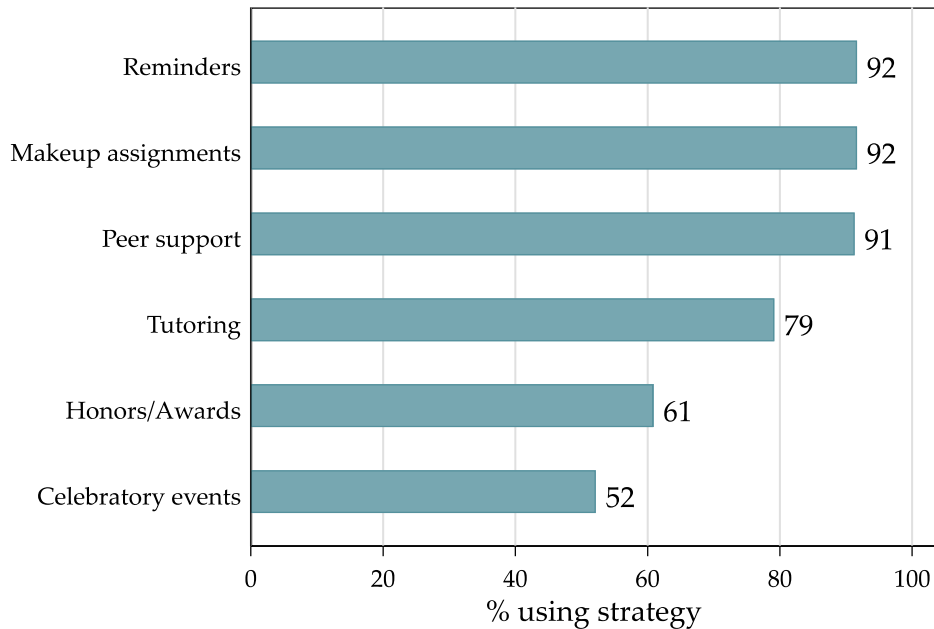
Leaders noted they could better support candidates through the ECAC process if they had a centralized way to track their progress. One wrote: “There should be one portal that tracks the candidates from Pathways enrollment until completion of ECAC certification.” Others suggested such a portal ought to include information about candidates’ progress toward earning their CDA as well. By accessing a portal that contained information on candidates’ progress toward earning the credential, leaders would be better able to identify which candidates need additional support. LDOE could also use such a portal to better understand why candidates leave their ECAC program.

Strategy 2: Provide Candidates with Peer and Administrative Support

Program leaders reported using a wide range of practices to support candidates throughout the coursework and coaching component of the program. The most common of these practices are highlighted in Figure 5. Nearly all programs send candidates regular reminders to attend class or complete assignments, offer makeup work when they missed class, and provide opportunities for peer support (e.g., study groups or candidate “buddy systems”). Tutoring is also employed by about 80% of programs. When asked to identify which of the strategies in Figure 5 were most successful in keeping candidates on track for success, about two-thirds of leaders pointed to either reminders or peer support.

One seldom-used but potentially promising strategy for supporting candidates is providing child care during ECAC classes. Only two leaders reported using this strategy, but both found it highly effective. Given that family obligations were among the most common hurdles for program completion, providing child care may be a worthwhile investment.

Figure 5: Common support strategies employed by leaders



Based on 24 responses

Program leaders noted that support strategies must continue after candidates have completed the coursework and coaching component of their program. Leaders pointed to the importance of personal contact with candidates as they complete CDA requirements and apply for the ECAC. One leader suggested it would be beneficial to provide ECAC programs with additional resources to “hold post-graduation CDA/ECAC paperwork meetings to get everything completed and turned in by everyone at once.”

Strategy 3: Foster Strong Relationships and Buy-In from Center Directors

Nearly every program leader indicated that support from center directors is very important in helping candidates succeed. Many highlighted specific instances when site directors have been a driving force behind candidates’ success. One common way directors support candidates is by providing access to center computers and internet so candidates can complete ECAC assignments. This is useful, as 70% of program leaders reported that access to technology represents a challenge to at least some candidates in their program.

Other ways center directors supported candidates included assisting candidates with ECAC registration and coursework, providing food for candidates before attending evening ECAC classes, and even paying their employees to work on ECAC coursework after hours.

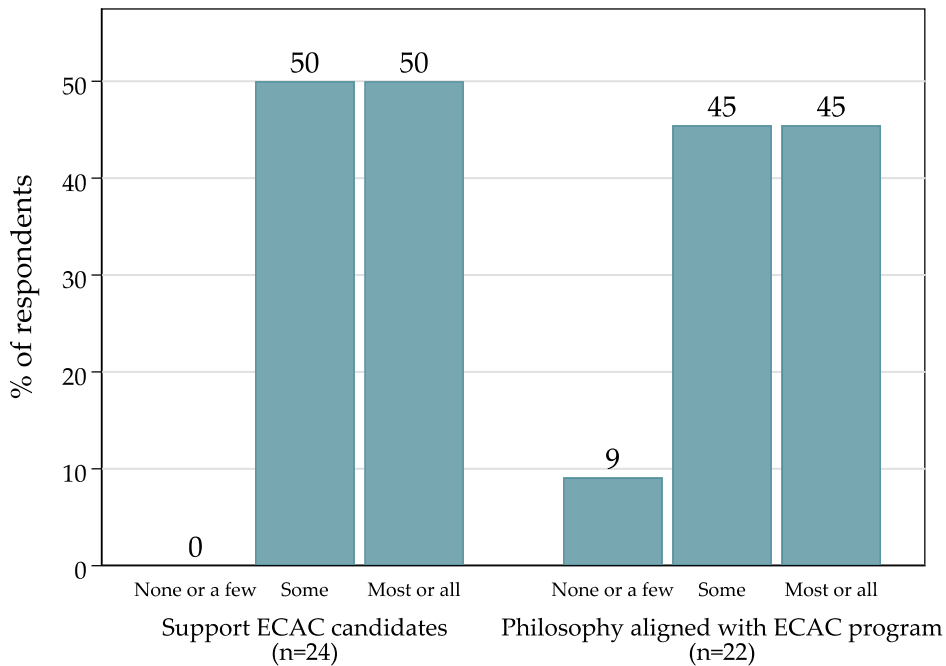
One ECAC program leader highlighted the impact of a center director whose philosophy was well-aligned with the ECAC program:

“One director strongly supported me...in reminding her workers about the importance of attending class. If they missed class, she addressed it with them. I think that because she strongly believed in the value of the ECAC program, her employees did too.”

Though program leaders reported largely positive relationships with center directors, they also highlighted instances in which center directors hindered candidates’ progress toward the ECAC. As shown in Figure 6, half of ECAC leaders indicated that at least some site directors do not adequately support ECAC candidates. According to ECAC program leaders, some center directors do not allow candidates to complete ECAC requirements such as recording classroom activities and others do not allow candidates to leave their center in order to make it to their ECAC class on time.

Leaders also reported philosophical differences with some directors that impede candidates’ progress (e.g., refusing to allow candidates to implement strategies they learned in their ECAC program in the classroom).

Figure 6: ECAC program leaders’ reports of the number of center directors for whom the following are true



Given the reported importance of directors in supporting ECAC candidates, generating “buy-in” among directors regarding the credentialing process might ensure more candidates earn their ECAC. Program leaders offered a number of strategies that can successfully promote such buy-in from center directors including reaching out to directors directly to highlight the value of the ECAC program, including the director on all communication with ECAC candidates, and updating directors on candidates’ progress in their ECAC program.

LDOE and community networks can also work to increase support for ECAC requirements among child care center directors through their regular communication channels (e.g., regular email blasts or network meetings). These meetings can highlight the alignment between ECAC experiences and Louisiana’s broader quality improvement initiatives, spotlight candidate success stories, and provide tips about ways in which directors can best support their candidates.

Strategy 4: Address Underlying Workforce Challenges

Lastly, the most common reason leaders gave for why candidates do not complete their ECAC is that they no longer work at a qualifying, publicly funded child care provider. The survey does not provide information about *why* candidates leave their center. However, teacher turnover is a pervasive issue in child care settings nationwide.⁷ In Louisiana, nearly half of child care lead teachers leave their sites from one year to the next.⁸

This high turnover is problematic for a variety of reasons, including the way it compromises investments in professional development like the ECAC. Dollars spent on scholarships and other ECAC supports are lost when teachers leave their programs before they are finished.

That employment issues loom so large among the reasons that candidates do not earn their credential serves as a sobering reminder that a well-designed effort to improve the knowledge and skills of child care teachers will not yield the desired impacts if not coupled with compensation and other supports to reduce turnover. In fact, it may even be the case that, in the context of low compensation and few job supports, heightened job expectations may have the unintended consequences of driving some teachers out of the workforce.

As policymakers leverage child care relief funds through the American Rescue Plan and other investments, policies designed to improve the working conditions and pay of child care teachers may increase the likelihood ECAC candidates remain in the classroom and in turn that they complete their ECAC program. Funding to compensate child care teachers for time spent on required

professional development and training (including the ECAC) may also be beneficial.

Conclusions

Credentialing requirements like the ECAC are intended to professionalize the ECE workforce and foster higher-quality ECE classrooms. However, these policies can also create new burdens for both the already overextended ECE workforce and the child care programs that employ them. The success of these requirements may be undermined without financial supports and incentives for early educators.⁹

Louisiana's ECAC program addresses many of the concerns that accompany policies that raise educational requirements for early educators: tuition is fully covered and teachers who complete the credential are eligible for a large, refundable tax credit. Yet in spite of the program's thoughtful design, the majority of teachers who begin an ECAC program fail to earn the credential.

The ECAC Program Leader Survey highlighted the hurdles that teachers face in pursuing credentials, as well as promising practices that might help to overcome these challenges and support candidates in earning their credential.

First, ECAC program leaders suggested that (1) simplifying the process of enrolling in ECAC programs and applying for scholarships and (2) moving these materials to digital formats could make things easier for both ECAC candidates as well as program staff. Program leaders indicated these processes are unnecessarily cumbersome and can hinder candidates from completing the program. Reducing administrative burden may be one relatively efficient way to help child care teachers as they work to increase their training and education.

Second, ECAC program leaders suggested that the most widely used and successful techniques for supporting candidates to complete their ECAC are consistent check-ins with candidates to ensure that they remain on track and offering opportunities for peer support during the course of the program. Leaders reported that candidates need considerable "hand holding" throughout the ECAC process, and these sorts of high-touch supports were viewed as critical in helping candidates earn their ECAC.

Third, center directors can play a "make or break" role in candidates' experiences in their ECAC program. Program leaders nearly unanimously agreed that the support of site directors is crucial to candidates' success, and most reported having positive relationships with directors. However, ECAC leaders also shared a number of examples in which directors impeded candidates progress in the

program. Efforts from LDOE and local community networks to generate “buy in” from directors through consistent communication about the value of the ECAC program and candidates’ progress may improve candidates’ outcomes.

Finally, our survey revealed that, even if all of the program-related challenges are addressed, employment challenges will continue to hamper candidates’ ability to complete their ECAC program. Each year, a large number of ECE teachers leave their jobs,¹⁰ making them ineligible to receive the scholarships needed to remain enrolled in an ECAC program. Addressing underlying issues of turnover and compensation in ECE settings, and especially among new ECE teachers, thus stands out as an extremely challenging yet necessary step toward ensuring a more professionalized, better-prepared teaching force.

Endnotes

- ¹ Bassok, D. & Galdo, E. (2016). Inequality in Preschool Quality? Community-Level Disparities in Access to High-Quality Learning Environments, *Early Education and Development*, 27:1, 128-144.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2015.1057463>
- ² Institute of Medicine and National Research Council. (2015). *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/19401>
- ³ Teachers who already hold a CDA and high school diploma (or equivalent), an associate's degree in an early childhood related field, or a bachelor's degree (or higher) automatically qualify for the ECAC and just need to submit proof of their qualifying credential. Teachers who began coursework toward a technical certificate or who had completed 36 hours of training toward their CDA prior to July 2018 also qualify for the ECAC. Teachers who cannot access an ECAC program because of geographic availability may also submit a waiver to LDOE.
- ⁴ Lieberman, Abbie. (2018). *Lessons from the Bayou State: Three Reforms for Improving Teaching and Caregiving*. New America. Retrieved from: <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/reports/lessons-louisianas-early-childhood-system/>
- ⁵ We excluded three respondents who indicated that they acted only as a teacher or coach in their ECAC program and did not hold any directorial or managerial position. We included one respondent who indicated that they were an ECAC teacher (rather than director) but who was the only respondent from their program.
- ⁶ Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. *Better for Students: Simplifying the Federal Financial Aid Process*. (2015). Retrieved from <https://www.luminafoundation.org/files/resources/better-for-students.pdf>
- ⁷ Whitebook, M, Howes, C, & Phillips, D. (2014). *Worthy Work, Unlivable Wages: The National Child Care Staffing Study, 1988-1997*. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED419614>
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- ¹⁰ Bassok et al., 2021.