

# 119th



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National Association for the  
Education of Young Children

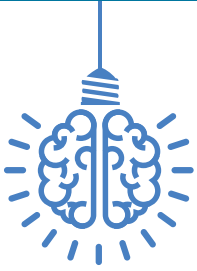
## A Federal Agenda

to Deliver on the Promise of  
High Quality Child Care and  
Early Learning

# Why Early Childhood Education?

What do many parents, teachers, economists, scientists, business leaders, military leaders, faith leaders, researchers, legislators, governors, and voters all have in common?

They want to increase public investment in early childhood education and educators because access to quality, affordable child care and early learning leads to short-term benefits and long-term positive outcomes for children, families, and communities.



The first years of a child's life are the period of the most rapid brain development and lay the foundation for all future learning.<sup>2</sup>



High-quality early childhood programs deliver a substantial return on investment.<sup>3</sup>



Children's cognitive, physical, social and emotional, and language and literacy development are built on a foundation of children's positive interactions with adults, peers, and their environment.<sup>4</sup>



High-quality early childhood education depends on high-quality early childhood educators who ensure that children, supported by families, have the early experiences they need for a strong foundation.<sup>5</sup>

NAEYC knows that access to high quality early childhood education boosts the well-being of children and helps parents get and keep a job. Americans—of all political, geographic, and demographic backgrounds—know this, too. They want families to be able to choose safe, quality early childhood education that meets their needs without breaking the bank. They recognize early childhood educators as professionals who should be well-compensated for their complex and demanding jobs and responsibilities, whether they work in a home, school, or center. They know that care and education go hand-in-hand, and that learning and development start well before the first day of kindergarten. And they know that building the supply and quality of child care by investing in early childhood education and educators helps our country win at home and around the world.

The essential nature of child care in supporting children's positive growth and development—and in driving our local and national economies—was never more apparent than during the pandemic when policymakers finally recognized and funded child care as an essential public good, investing tens of billions of dollars directly into child care programs and early childhood educators.

Well-spent relief funding helped stabilize the sector during the pandemic, but since the 118th Congress allowed that funding to expire, challenges that plagued the sector prior to the pandemic have resurfaced and been exacerbated. Staff shortages and turnover brought on by low compensation are restricting the supply of quality care, families who can't afford it are being forced to pay higher tuition costs as programs struggle to retain qualified staff, and as operating costs continue to go up, some programs are being forced to close their doors for good.<sup>1</sup>

Yet with states and localities as partners, Congress and the Administration can turn again towards protecting and supporting the necessary, significant, and sustained investments in quality child care and early learning that respond to our communities' short- and long-term needs, and support America's economy, families' economic security, and children's success.

# Why NAEYC?

For nearly 100 years, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has been the trusted voice of high-quality early learning in the United States and around the globe. As the foremost professional association for the early childhood field, NAEYC promotes high-quality early learning for all children, birth through age 8, by connecting practice, policy, and research. We advance a diverse, dynamic early childhood profession and support all who care for, educate, and work on behalf of young children.

## Research and Evidence Based

The policies, standards, and practices we develop and advocate for are based on research and evidence in child development. This ever-growing body of work forms the foundation for NAEYC's accreditation standards, which serve as the industry standard of quality for early learning programs. The accreditation standards and their implementation support developmentally appropriate practices and foster rich learning environments and experiences. These, in turn, have been shown to have a positive impact on children's brain development, early literacy skills, social relationships, and learning foundations.

In addition to our early learning program standards, NAEYC leads the field in developing and implementing professional preparation standards. *The Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators* are designed for adoption by states and institutions of higher education across the country so that practitioners and students who commit to careers in the early childhood profession develop into educators with the requisite skills and knowledge.

As members of Congress and this Administration make critical choices to guide our nation's future they must recognize the importance of child care and early learning in helping our children, families, communities, and economy thrive. The agenda described below represents the key federal goals and priorities of NAEYC, our Affiliate network, and our more than 55,000 members across the country. Core to this agenda are investments that are sufficient to support and compensate a diverse early childhood education workforce, without which there won't be enough safe and high quality child care and early learning options for families and children who need them.

### NAEYC Fast Facts

More than **55,000** members

50 Affiliates in **41** States, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico

More than **220** institutions of higher education house programs that are accredited by NAEYC

More than **7,100** early childhood programs are accredited by NAEYC across the country

### NAEYC Strategic Priorities

**Goal:** Each and every child birth through age 8 has equitable access to developmentally-appropriate, high-quality early childhood education

**Goal:** Early childhood educators are effective, diverse, well-prepared, and well-compensated across all states and settings in alignment with the Unifying Framework.

### Did You Know?

**More than 1/2 of child care programs report a staffing shortage, which limits the number of families they can serve.**

For more national and state-based data from NAEYC's ECE workforce surveys, visit [naeyc.org/ece-workforce-surveys](http://naeyc.org/ece-workforce-surveys).

# Child Care and Early Learning is a Public Good Operating in a Broken Market

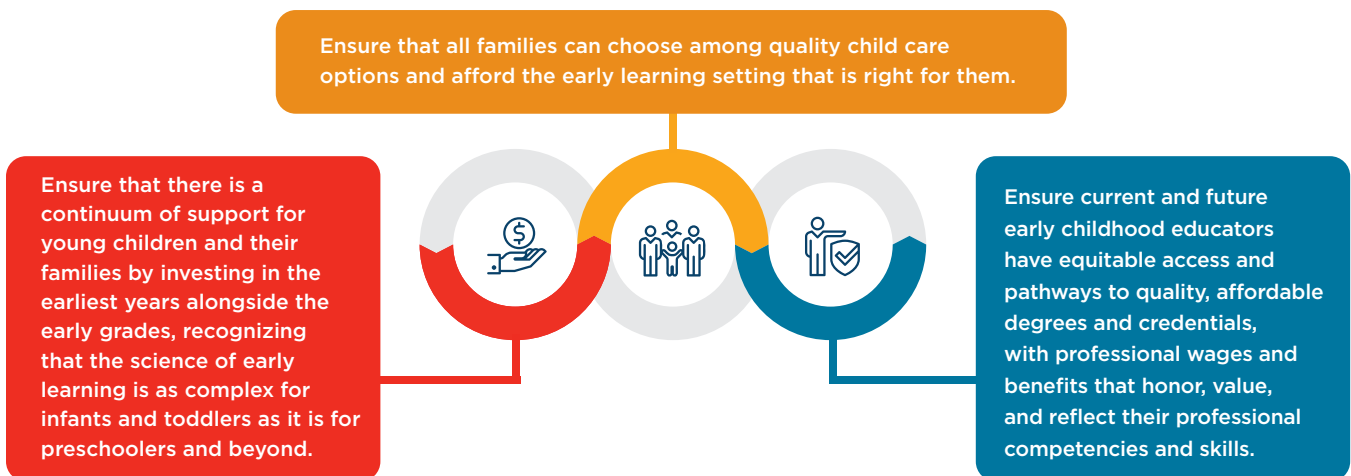
High quality child care is a public good that benefits families, young children, and society at large, both in the short-term by enabling families to work or go to school, and in the long-term by building a strong foundation for children’s future development and learning. However, policymakers in the United States have long failed to embrace this truth, instead treating education in the earliest years of most rapid, foundational brain development as an individual responsibility for working families. Since only the wealthiest families can afford to pay the true cost of providing high-quality child care, which is complex, labor-intensive work, early childhood educators have been forced to subsidize the system with their own low compensation. As a result, the supply of high-quality care available to families with young children falls far short of the need, and child care remains one of the single greatest costs families face during the earliest years of their children’s lives.

*“My parents can not afford to pay more, they already pay more for housing, food and gas. I can’t hit them too. Even though all these have gone up for me.”*

—Family child care owner, UT

There is a better path forward: a comprehensive, robustly funded child care and early learning system that ensures early childhood educators, regardless of the setting in which they work, are recognized and supported as professionals, including through pathways to high-quality affordable credentials and degrees, with professional wages and benefits that reflect the true value of the complex, critically important work they do. A recognized, diverse, well-compensated early childhood education workforce represents the foundation of a high-quality system for young children and families. All families with young children, but especially those with the fewest resources, should have access to a diverse range of affordable, high-quality child care and early education options that meet their needs and the unique needs of their children, and they should be confident that wherever their children are being cared for, they are healthy, safe, and receiving high-quality, developmentally appropriate care that sets them up for future success in school and in life.

A system aligned with this vision cannot be created without a significant investment of public funding and resources. However, as we continue to see families, educators, businesses, and our broader society suffer from the impacts of our nation’s failure to invest in a high-quality early childhood education system, we urge today’s policymakers to consider not only the costs of building the system we need, but also the significant past, current and future costs of not doing so.



# Recommendations for the 119th Congress and Administration

## Increase Appropriations for Programs that Support Early Childhood Educators, Families, and Young Children

While federal policymakers have not yet invested in child care and early learning in a way that reflects its value as a public good, they have continued to invest in programs that support some families' access to quality child care and early learning opportunities. Yet despite bipartisan progress in recent years, funding for these existing programs has fallen far short of the need. For instance, 85 percent of children who are eligible to receive a child care subsidy are unable to do so, while the value of those subsidies to providers falls far short of the cost of providing quality care in most states.<sup>6</sup> While states were able to make progress in improving subsidy access with federal relief funding, now that funding has expired, parents, providers, and businesses are facing an increasingly dire situation that compels the Administration and Congress to build on its bipartisan support for child care and early learning through the annual appropriations process, even as they work towards a more comprehensive vision for a high-quality child care and early learning system.

Providing child care funding sufficient to expand access to subsidies for families and raise payment rates for providers to reflect the true cost of providing high-quality child care will lead to an increase in supply and quality, ensuring more low- and moderate- income families are able to choose and afford quality child care provided by compensated, supported early childhood educators. New funding for Head Start is needed to support improved compensation for educators and to expand access to the program's high-quality, comprehensive services for eligible infants and toddlers and preschool-aged children living in poverty. And as the impacts of the pandemic on children's developmental well-being and social development come further into focus, it is increasingly important to provide funds that help programs provide inclusive and comprehensive services to young children with disabilities.

For these reasons, the Administration should request and Congress must ensure spending levels are robust enough that they can:

- › Promote funding increases for the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) in order to support states in increasing the supply, affordability, and quality of child care programs.

***“Inclusive early childhood programs are uniquely positioned to provide the high-quality education and care children need, but this cannot be sustained without equitable investments. With increased funding for IDEA’s Part B and Part C, we can ensure that programs like ours continue to offer inclusive, year-round care while supporting the development of all children. This is not just an investment in early education; it is an investment in equity, opportunity, and the future of every child”***

—Child Care Center Director, VA

- › Increase funding for Head Start, Early Head Start and Early Head Start – Child Care Partnerships so that educators have the supports they need to remain in their programs and more children and families can benefit from high-quality early learning and comprehensive supports that help them achieve short- and long-term success.
- › Increase funding for IDEA Part C Early Intervention, and IDEA Part B (619) Preschool Special Education grants to ensure children with disabilities are identified and supported in thriving and inclusive early childhood education settings.
- › Increase funding for the Child Care Access Means Parents in Schools (CCAMPIS) program to better support student parents in accessing the child care supports they need to stay in school and thrive.
- › Grow funding for Preschool Development Grants B-5 so states can implement plans to improve birth through five early childhood education systems.

## Invest in the Early Childhood Education Workforce

Congress can support the early childhood education workforce — which makes all other work possible — by following the lead of states that are prioritizing in their education and compensation, with policies and funding designed to:

- › Raise educator wages and increase their access to benefits, including but not limited to health insurance, paid leave, and retirement. This should happen primarily through direct support, but may also include tax credits.
- › Reduce educators' cost burdens by expanding scholarships, increasing the value and availability of PELL Grants, and directing other funding, loan forgiveness, and loan cancellation to current and prospective early childhood educators working in all settings, including for-profit and non-profit, family child care, faith-based, and center-based child care, as they earn ECE credentials and degrees.
- › Help educators gain competencies by investing in technical colleges, community colleges, and universities. Ensure higher education is affordable and accessible to everyone, regardless of immigration status.
- › Increase access to ECE apprenticeship programs and other practice-based ECE preparation models.
- › Provide increased support to students who are also parents, helping them afford child care while they complete their degrees and credentials.
- › Increase investments in educator preparation programs, including through the Higher Education Act's Title II Teacher Quality Partnership (TQP) grants. Ensure federal programs allow for preparing early childhood educators for all settings. Target investments in educator preparation programs at MSIs, HSIs and HBCUs.
- › Maintain TEACH Grants and expand access to them for early childhood educators working across all settings.
- › Embed a phased-in, profession-determined baseline of knowledge, skills, and competencies for early childhood educators, aligned with compensation and inclusive of the necessary funding and capacity building supports to ensure existing and new educators can succeed.

***“While early childhood education is a demanding profession that requires skilled workers, the compensation does not reflect its value. We are asking these workers to care for and educate our youngest citizens, yet the pay they receive is far below what’s necessary to support their own families.”***

—Child Care Center Director, PA

## **Reform the Tax Code to Support Families and Educators**

Tax-code approaches alone are not well suited to address the comprehensive challenges facing the child care system, and should not come at the expense of needed investments in critical programs that support families and educators. However, as Congress considers revisions to the tax code, there are opportunities both for new revenue to support direct spending on child care and early learning priorities, and for benefiting early childhood educators and families, including by:

- › Expanding the value of the existing Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit (CDCTC), making it fully refundable, and indexing the credit to inflation to help ensure the CDCTC matches the rising costs of child care, more equitably benefits low-income families, and provides more substantial value given the high cost of child care. Support to families specifically to offset the high cost of child care should be prioritized alongside enhancements to the Child Tax Credit for families.
- › Recognizing early childhood educators as educators by making sure they are eligible for the same benefits and tax credits that K-12 teachers can receive, such as the Educator Expense Deduction, which allows K-12 educators to deduct qualifying expenses to offset a portion of their costs for professional development courses, books, supplies and other job-related expenses.
- › Creating new refundable tax credits for both ECE programs and early childhood educators to incentivize programs to provide high quality care for subsidy-eligible families and to support the recruitment and retention of a quality ECE workforce.
- › Generating and dedicating new revenue to support mandatory child care funding increases through the Child Care Entitlement to the States (CCES), in order to increase grants that address the ECE workforce, supply, quality, and access in areas of particular need.

***“NJ providers are crippled by a broken market system and a terrible staffing crisis. To truly support early learning, we need a tax code that better supports educators and families alike. Fair wages for early childhood professionals are long overdue, and cannot be left out of the conversation. We need dedicated, long-term funding—both discretionary and mandatory—to ensure educators are paid well, and that the supply of resources and benefits needed to sustain quality education is guaranteed.”***

—Child Care Center Director, NJ

## Enhance and Grow Comprehensive Supports for ECE Programs, Educators and Families

Congress can strengthen ECE programs in all settings and meet children’s needs with policies and funding designed to:

- › Improve the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) to promote children’s development and early learning by supporting legislation that supports an additional meal reimbursement for child care programs and guarantees family child care homes are reimbursed at the same rate as centers for the food they purchase and offer children in their care.
- › Protect and grow critical safety net programs that early childhood educators rely on to support their own families. Recent data from the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment show that early childhood educators are nearly 6 times as likely to live in poverty than their peers working in elementary and middle schools, and are more than twice as likely to experience food insecurity. As a result, nearly half of the ECE workforce relies on public safety net programs to support their families, including the EITC, Medicaid, SNAP, and CHIP.<sup>7</sup> As the 119th Congress considers its approach to taxes and spending, it is critical that it promotes and protects these and other critical programs that early childhood educators and their families rely on.
- › Ensure child care and early learning programs are specifically considered and supported in disaster relief and mitigation efforts. In the past several years, the country has seen an increase in severely damaging storms, wildfires, flooding, and heat waves that have decimated communities across the nation. As policymakers design plans to both mitigate future damage and address the fallout of natural disasters, they should specifically consider the needs of child care and early learning programs in all settings, and dedicate funding for these programs through the funding streams they are most efficiently able to access.
- › Protect young children and their families from the traumatic harms brought by family separation. Early childhood educators have an ethical obligation to stand against policies that are “emotionally damaging, physically harmful, disrespectful, degrading, dangerous, exploitative, or intimidating to children.”<sup>9</sup> As the Administration and Congress consider new actions related to immigration, we urge them to prioritize the well-being of children and not implement policies that would harm children by separating them from their families.
- › Provide sufficient funding and support to ensure military families have access to high-quality and affordable child care options both on-base and in their communities. While the Department of Defense child care program has been lauded for investing in high-quality care options for many military families, there remain significant barriers to access for many military families, exacerbated both by broader national child care supply challenges and the unique needs of military families, including frequent relocations, deployments, and non-traditional work schedules.<sup>8</sup>



<sup>1</sup> NAEYC ECE Workforce Surveys. <https://www.naeyc.org/ece-workforce-surveys>

<sup>2</sup> Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University. <http://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/brain-architecture>

<sup>3</sup> The Heckman Equation. <http://heckmanequation.org/content/resource/lifecycle-benefits-influential-early-childhood-program-one-page>

<sup>4</sup> Kontos, S., & A. Wilcox-Herzog. 1997. "Teachers' Interactions with Children: Why Are They So Important?" *Young Children* 52 (2): 4-12; Hamre, B.K., B.E. Hatfield, R.C. Pianta, & F.M. Jamil. 2013. "Evidence for General and Domain-Specific Elements of Teacher-Child Interactions: Associations with Preschool Children's Development." *Child Development*, DOI: 10.1111/cdev.12184

<sup>5</sup> Institute of Medicine (IOM) & National Research Council (NRC). 2015. *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.

<sup>6</sup> Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation. (2024). *Estimates of Child Care Subsidy Eligibility and Receipt for Fiscal Year 2021*. <https://aspe.hhs.gov/reports/child-care-eligibility-fy2021>

<sup>7</sup> Early Childhood Workforce Index 2024. <https://cscce.berkeley.edu/workforce-index-2024/>

<sup>8</sup> Government Accountability Office. (2023). *Military Child Care: DOD Efforts to Provide Affordable, Quality Care for Families*. <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-23-105518>

<sup>9</sup> Code of Ethics. <https://www.naeyc.org/resources/position-statements/code-of-ethics>

To meet the needs of the present, and prepare for a stronger and more equitable future, our nation's leaders must make the investments that help all our families access opportunities to thrive.

We must prioritize the early childhood professionals who, through their complex and critical work, are supporting our nation's economy while caring for and educating the next generation.

We call on Congress to continue to make progress towards the necessary, significant, and sustained investments in quality child care and early learning that respond to our communities' short- and long-term needs, and support America's economy, families' economic security, and children's success.

