From Childcare to Educare: Inspiring Change in Early Childhood Education for Rural Tennessee

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Digital Promise
Accelerating Innovation in Education

Acknowledgments

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Executive Summary

The expansion of early childhood education (ECE) and increased spending have benefited children and supported families. However, these investments have not addressed inequities within the ECE workforce. ECE providers face economic insecurity, earning an average of $14 per hour, which is below a living wage. In rural communities, this median wage drops to $11.42, and in Tennessee, it is even lower at under $10 per hour ([Whitebook et al., 2014](#)). Women of color, especially in rural areas, are disproportionately affected by poor compensation and benefits. To address these issues, this project partners with an organization called Tennessee Early Childhood Training Alliance (TECTA)[1] to understand the experiences of ECE providers in an effort to raise awareness of

- the benefits of the TECTA program and the resources they provide,

- the key challenges and barriers they navigate on the pathway to their education, and

- the need for program expansion to enable opportunities for social and economic mobility.

This study underscores the need for systemic changes to support ECE providers, particularly in rural areas and other marginalized communities. By addressing economic insecurity, professional recognition, training disparities, and policy inconsistencies, we can create a more equitable and effective ECE workforce. Addressing these challenges is crucial for fostering a supportive and equitable environment within the ECE workforce. By implementing targeted recommendations, we can enhance the professional growth, job satisfaction, and economic stability of ECE providers, ultimately benefiting children and families.

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1 The Tennessee Early Childhood Training Alliance (TECTA) is a statewide program that provides free training and academic tuition support to childcare providers and administrators. The program offers a free 30-hour orientation with instruction in five areas: center-based child care, infant/toddler care, family child care, school-age child care, and administrator training. After completing the orientation, participants are eligible to receive tuition assistance for coursework at any public higher education institution. Participation is open to any staff employed in a licensed child care facility in Tennessee. https://www.tnstate.edu/learningsciences/tsutecta.aspx

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About Digital Promise and the Pathways Team

Digital Promise is a global nonprofit working to expand opportunity for every learner. We work with educators, researchers, technology leaders, and communities to design, investigate, and scale innovations that support learners, especially those who have been historically and systematically excluded.

Our mission is to shape the future of learning and advance equitable education systems by bringing together solutions across research, practice, and technology.

Guided by three Impact Goals, we are working to ensure the following by 2031:

1. Seventy-five percent of historically and systematically excluded learners in America are learning in education systems with the knowledge and tools to create the conditions for them to succeed.
2. Thirty million historically and systematically excluded learners have sustained and meaningful experiences of Powerful Learning, putting them on a path to postsecondary completion.
3. Thirty million historically and systematically excluded learners are enabled to achieve postsecondary credentials that offer economic security, well-being, and agency.

The Digital Promise Pathways Team employs research and design efforts to ensure historically and systematically excluded adults have **equitable access** to **pathways and tools** that will **advance their skills** and help them achieve **economic security**, **agency**, and **well-being**.

Project Overview

Introduction

The expansion of early childhood education (ECE) has garnered significant attention in recent years, with increased investment aimed at benefiting both children and families (Schneider et al., 2023). However, amidst this growth, an alarming trend persists: The inequities within the ECE workforce remain largely unaddressed (Adams et al., 2021). Despite the proven benefits of ECE programs, many ECE providers[2] face economic insecurity due to unlivable wages, particularly in rural communities where the median wage for an early childhood teacher falls far below a sustainable standard. There is a crucial yet often overlooked issue of compensation and support for ECE providers. This report specifically focuses on the disparities experienced by participants in the state of Tennessee. By analyzing program-level participation data and data collected from focus groups with ECE service providers and administrators of the Tennessee Early Childhood Training Alliance (TECTA), we aim to assess the effectiveness of this current program, shed light on the challenges faced by providers, and propose recommendations that could improve the state of early childhood education for providers, children, and families.

About TECTA

The Tennessee Early Childhood Training Alliance (TECTA) is a statewide program that provides free training and academic tuition support to childcare providers and administrators throughout the state of Tennessee. All childcare providers who are employed in a licensed family, group home, or licensed child care center in Tennessee are eligible to take a free 30-hour orientation with instruction in five areas: center-based child care, infant/toddler care, family child care, school-age child care, and administrator training. After completing the orientation, participants are eligible to receive tuition assistance for coursework at any public higher education institution across the state of Tennessee. The program currently supports ECE workers who are pursuing their CDA, associate degree, and bachelor's degree. Currently, there are nine state and community colleges throughout the state offering TECTA programs.

Background

The expansion of early childhood education (ECE) and the increase in associated spending have proven beneficial for children and supported families with young children. Access to safe, dependable child care is a requirement for many parents who work full time out of the home. Furthermore, the professional development of childcare providers results in a trained workforce able to implement best practice techniques, which has a positive impact on child development and the social and emotional well-being of the children in care (Brunsek et al., 2020). Still, investment efforts in early childhood programming have not come with a parallel focus to address inequities in the ECE workforce. ECE providers face economic insecurity due to unlivable wages, often relying on public assistance programs to survive and provide for their families. On average, full-time ECE providers in the United States earn about $14 per hour, less than a living wage for many Americans (Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, 2020). However, in rural communities, the median wage for an early childhood teacher is even lower at $11.42 per hour. In Tennessee, the hourly rate for childcare workers is below $10 per hour (Whitebook et al., 2014). Research shows that poor compensation and benefits disproportionately impact women of color, especially Black, Latina/x, Indigenous, and immigrant women in rural communities (Ulrich et. al, 2016).

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2 "ECE providers" in this report refers to teachers and administrators working in early childhood education facilities.

There is limited information on how and to what extent the intersection of economic insecurity, low wages, and lack of support disproportionately impacts targeted groups in rural communities within the ECE work-force. There are a range of interconnected challenges to consider. Firstly, the pervasive "babysitter stigma" undermines the professional recognition of ECE providers, relegating them to the role of mere caretakers rather than skilled educators (CQEL, 2024). This perception not only diminishes the status of the profession but also influences compensation and career advancement opportunities. Secondly, the lack of standard-ized training requirements perpetuates disparities in skill levels and quality of care among ECE providers (Hannaway et al., 2019). Without consistent training standards, individuals entering the field may lack the necessary competencies to support children's development effectively. Moreover, the ever-changing land-scape of educational policies introduces uncertainty and inconsistency, further complicating the profes-sional environment for ECE providers (Matjokana, 2023). Navigating these policy shifts can be challenging and may hinder efforts to maintain quality standards and continuity in educational practices. Additionally, the persistent pay gap within the education sector exacerbates economic insecurity among ECE providers, particularly in rural communities where wages are disproportionately low. This disparity not only under-mines the financial stability of ECE professionals but also compromises the quality of care and education provided to children. Lastly, the concept of identity and intersectionality underscores the unique challenges faced by men in early childhood education and by women of color within the ECE workforce, reflecting the compounded effects of race, gender, and geographic location on their experiences and opportunities for advancement (Adams et al., 2021). Addressing these key components is essential for fostering a supportive and equitable environment within the ECE workforce, ultimately benefiting both providers and the children and families they serve.

Those who work to address the challenges within the ECE workforce are shaping the future of the profes-sion and determining the quality of care provided to young children (Matjokana, 2023). ECE service pro-viders, including educators and caregivers, are at the forefront, facing economic insecurity and insufficient wages that impact their livelihoods and professional fulfillment. Their experiences and insights are pivotal in identifying systemic issues and formulating solutions that prioritize fair compensation and supportive work-ing environments. Training programs play a vital role in preparing individuals for careers in ECE (Brunsek et. al, 2023; Jackson, 2023) . By establishing comprehensive training standards and providing ongoing professional development opportunities, these programs can enhance the quality of care and education offered to children, while also building confidence and capacity among early childhood educators (Dyment et. al, 2014). By collaborating with ECE institutions, such as childcare centers and preschools, training programs and policy makers can ensure that the implementation of supportive policies and practices aligns with the needs and realities of frontline providers, fostering a conducive environment for both educators and children to thrive (Hannaway et al., 2019).

Through a mixed-methods approach, this study provides comprehensive insights into the experiences of early childhood educators and TECTA program administrators across the state of Tennessee. By quantifying the level of program engagement and degree attainment across demographic factors, exploring the first hand experiences of ECE providers through qualitative methods, and considering the intersecting factors of race, gender, and geography, the study aims to inform evidence-based policies and initiatives targeted towards improving educational, professional, and systemic elements of early childhood care for all collabo-rators involved.

Conceptual Framework

While this study draws upon Social Capital Theory[3] and Cultural Historical Activity Theory,[4] We employ Boeren's Lifelong Learning Participation Model as the primary guiding framework for the examination of early childhood workers in rural Tennessee. According to the Lifelong Learning Participation Model (Boeren, 2016), participation in lifelong learning is determined by a number of nested and layered structural factors at the micro, meso, and macro levels.

The micro level is focused on differences that occur on the individual level. This includes behavioral characteristics, such as motivation levels, personality, confidence, etc. It also recognizes that participation in lifelong learning is characterized by sizable inequities along racial and socioeconomic lines and encourages those adopting the theoretical framework to acknowledge and consider the impact that these factors play on an individual's pursuit of lifelong learning. To this end, the individual level also includes a number of social characteristics including age, race, socioeconomic status, geographic location, gender, etc. In the context of the current study, there are a number of individual factors that may influence an ECE to pursue further education including their own personality factors, their geographic location, their personal educational background and history, their socioeconomic realities, and their family circumstances, among others.

However, it would be shortsighted to assume that the pursuit of lifelong learning is predicted solely by individual factors. The theoretical framework introduced the meso level to acknowledge and examine the role of education and training providers in the pursuit of lifelong learning activities. Within this layer, the focus is on structural elements in place with regard to education and training providers (ex: courses and resources offered, class times, online vs in-person availability, etc.). These structural factors often play a significant role in one's ability to pursue, and persist through, lifelong learning opportunities. In the context of the current study, we consider the structural aspects of the TECTA program through a number of universities and community colleges in Tennessee. However, we also consider other educational and training institutions that our participants have engaged with (or not) over the course of their education and professional pathways.

Following along the nested model, the macro level is the ecosystem in which the educational and training institutions are nested: specifically state and/or country-level culture and political climates. In a broad context, individuals and education and training institutions are heavily influenced by state and country level policies, particularly with regard to funding, curriculum, and access. However, they are also influenced by cultural and economic factors. In the context of the current study, ECEs in Tennessee are influenced by the political and cultural realities of their state, and also the United States at large.

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3 Social Capital Theory emphasizes the value of social networks and trust in accessing resources and opportunities, which is crucial for rural early childhood education (ECE) providers who often face isolation, resource scarcity, and limited professional networks. Programs that enhance training for these providers should focus on leveraging online platforms, community workshops, mentorship, and partnerships with educational institutions to overcome these challenges.

4 Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) emphasizes the social and cultural mediation of human activities, crucial for understanding how rural early childhood education (ECE) providers' practices are shaped by their unique contexts. Programs to enhance their training should respect local practices while providing access to modern resources and professional development through various platforms and partnerships.
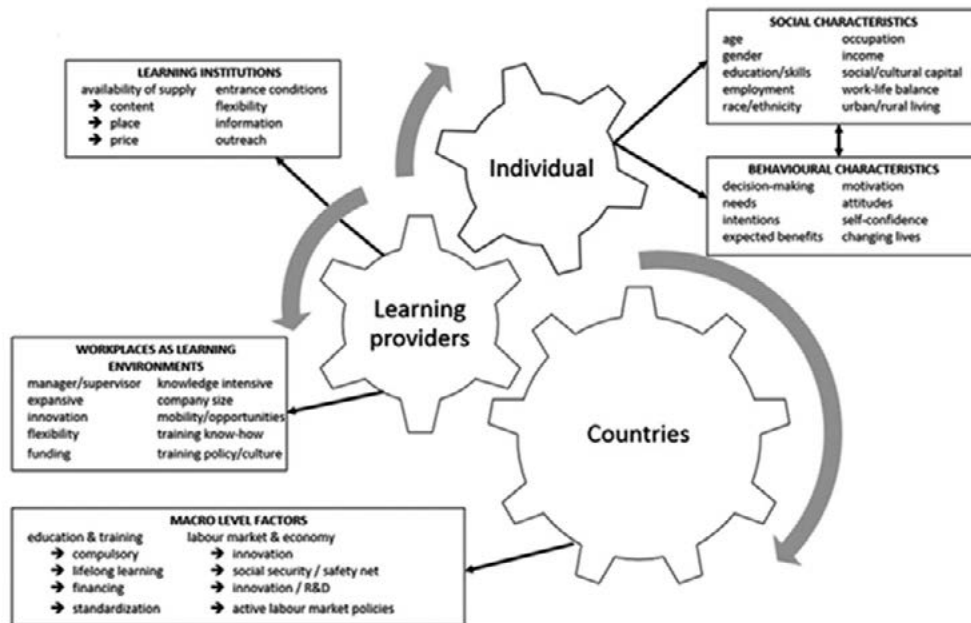
Figure 1 (retrieved from [Boeren, 2016](#))

FIGURE 1. Comprehensive lifelong learning participation model.

The current study draws upon Boeren's Lifelong Learning Participation Model in a number of key ways. First, the study recognizes and acknowledges the multilayered realities that impact the pursuit of lifelong learning among ECEs in Tennessee, including factors at the micro, meso, and macro levels. The research questions and interview schedules directly address aspects of these levels in our data collection instruments in an effort to capture the relationship between all levels in the lives of our participants. Furthermore, the methodology of the study involves data collection from both service providers (micro level) and TECTA administrators (meso level). This allows us to examine the individual experiences of ECEs and the structural realities that inform the implementation, progress, and success of the TECTA program according to their goals. Finally, we present our findings with a consideration of the political and cultural realities of both the state of Tennessee and the United States as a whole (macro level). Our goal is for the findings drawn from the experiences of ECEs and administrators to have a lasting impact on those who make policy decisions with regard to lifelong learning opportunities.

Methodology

This project was guided by the following research questions:

1. Do rural TECTA participants progress through education pathways differently than their urban counterparts? Are there differences in progression and experience between ethnicity/race?
2. Does the TECTA program achieve its intended goals for rural participants? In what ways has TECTA impacted the field of ECE across rural regions of the state?
3. To what extent has TECTA promoted economic/social mobility for ECE providers earning low wages in rural communities?
4. What are the perceptions of ECE providers concerning potential return on investment (ROI) for upskilling opportunities associated with TECTA?

This project employed a multi-level, mixed method design to capture the experience of TECTA participants, with a focus on rural early childhood educators (service providers), and TECTA administrators. The study relied upon quantitative data provided by TECTA to capture program enrollment and engagement over time. We also relied upon focus groups with service providers and TECTA program administrators to capture and elevate the lived experiences of early childhood workers across the state of Tennessee.
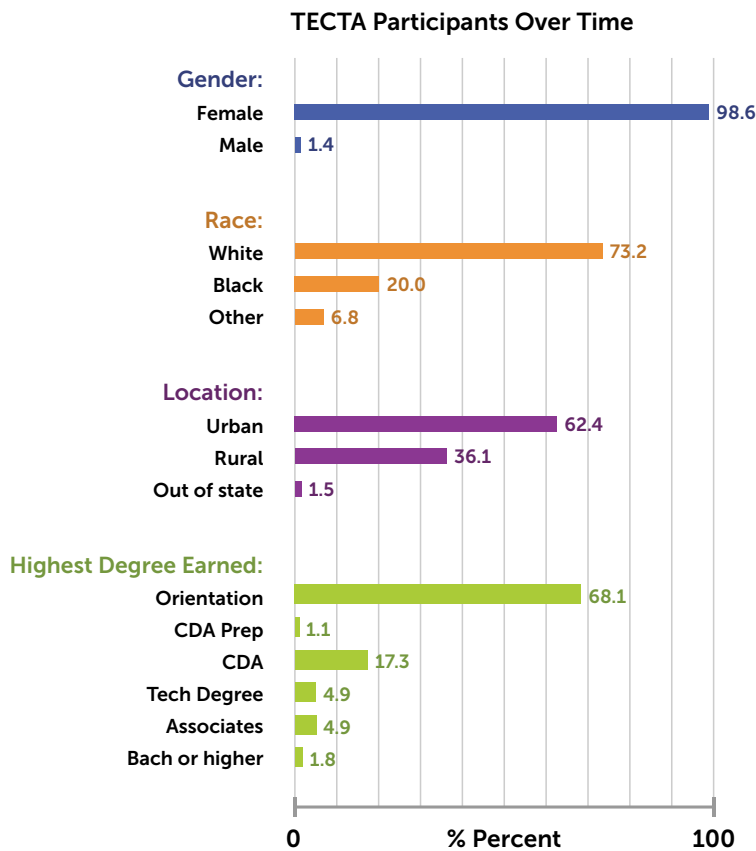
Quantitative Approach

Quantitative data on program enrollment, engagement, retention, and degree attainment from 2013-2022 was provided by the TECTA program. From January 2024 to May 2024, we analyzed credential completion data for TECTA program participants from 2013 to 2022. Using the R statistical package, we conducted summary statistics, regression analysis, and cumulative link mixed models using the ordinal package (Christensen, 2023) to determine if there were differences between rural and urban participants in credential attainment and time to completion.

From February 2013 to December 2022, there were 2,284 early childhood educators who entered TECTA through the gateway orientation program. Of those participants, 825 (36.1%) lived in a rural county as designated by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget. There were 1,673 (73.2%) participants who self-identified as white and 456 (20.0%) who self-identified as Black. The vast majority of TECTA participants (2,252, 98.6%) self-identified as female.

Of all participants, 394 (17.3%) completed a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential after orientation, and 125 (4.9%) completed an associate degree after orientation. Only 44 (1.8%) participants completed a bachelor's degree or higher.[5]

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5 TECTA participants who completed a baccalaureate, master's, or doctoral program.

Figure 2[6]

TECTA Participants Over Time

Gender:
- Female — 98.6
- Male — 1.4

Race:
- White — 73.2
- Black — 20.0
- Other — 6.8

Location:
- Urban — 62.4
- Rural — 36.1
- Out of state — 1.5

Highest Degree Earned:
- Orientation — 68.1
- CDA Prep — 1.1
- CDA — 17.3
- Tech Degree — 4.9
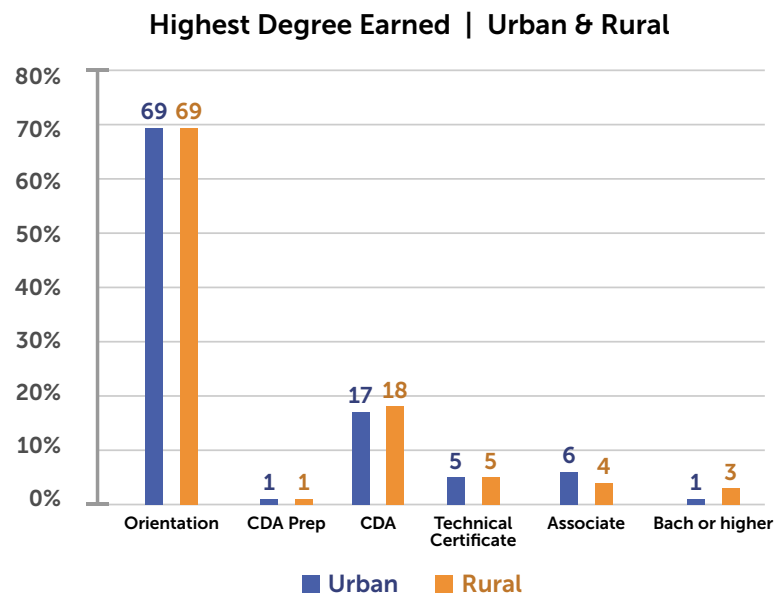- Associates — 4.9
- Bach or higher — 1.8

0 — % Percent — 100

As very few learners completed a bachelor's degree or higher, we analyzed time to completion from orientation to the two most common credentials, a CDA and an associate degree. We looked at the number of months between completing orientation to completing a CDA, and completing orientation to earning an associate degree. Using a linear model, our results showed no statistically significant difference in time to completion for rural learners compared to urban learners (CDA, $p = 0.32$; Assoc., $p = 0.23$). However, on average, we found that Black TECTA participants took 7.4 more months to earn a CDA after completing orientation than white TECTA participants ($p < .001$). There were no significant differences along the lines of race or gender with regards to time to complete an associate degree after orientation completion.

Likewise, using a cumulative link mixed model, we found no statistically significant difference for degree attainment between participants who lived in urban counties compared to rural counties ($p = 0.84$). However, we did find differences between participants along the lines of race. With regards to degree attainment, Black TECTA participants were 30.8% less likely to obtain further credentials after their initial TECTA orientation compared to their white counterparts ($p < .001$).

Figure 3

Highest Degree Earned | Urban & Rural

Category	Urban	Rural
Orientation	69	69
CDA Prep	1	1
CDA	17	18
Technical Certificate	5	5
Associate	6	4
Bach or higher	1	3

■ Urban ■ Rural

6 Percentages reported based on total number of participants (2,284)

Qualitative Approach

To recruit service providers for our focus groups, we partnered with the eight TECTA programs situated in colleges and universities across Tennessee:

- Tennessee State University
- Chattanooga State University
- Tennessee Tech University
- Roane State College
- East Tennessee State University
- Austin Peay State University
- Dyersburg State University
- Southwest Tennessee Community College

We contacted TECTA representatives in each recruitment site and asked them to circulate information about our study to their internal listservs and through their networks. All participants received a $100 Amazon gift card as a token of appreciation for their time.

Between February 2024 and April 2024, the research team conducted five focus groups with service providers who participated in the TECTA program and one focus group with administrators who work for TECTA. Each service provider focus group took between 75 and 90 minutes and focused on their experience with TECTA, their personal identities and education journeys, their upskilling opportunities, and their return on investment after participating in TECTA. In the end, we spoke with 80 service providers and 8 administrators who represented TECTA programs throughout the state of Tennessee.

The qualitative data analysis began in April 2024. All service provider and administrator focus groups were transcribed verbatim. A team of researchers using both ATLAS.ti and NVivo double-coded all transcripts inductively, according to a series of a priori codes that aligned with our research questions and areas of interest. Transcripts were also coded deductively using thematic analysis[7] to identify emergent themes relevant to our research questions.

Qualitative Recruitment Partner

Our project collaborated with TECTA participants and administrators from across its many service areas, which include Davidson, Rutherford, Williamson, Sumner, Wilson, Cheatham, Robertson, Trousdale, Marshall, Bedford, Giles, Lincoln, and Moore counties. TECTA offers a free 30-hour orientation covering five key areas: center-based child care, infant/toddler care, family child care, school-age child care, and administrator training. Upon completion of this orientation, participants, who are staff members employed in licensed child care facilities in Tennessee, become eligible for tuition assistance for further coursework at public higher education institutions. TECTA also supports Child Development Associate™ (CDA) Credential candidates by providing tuition assistance, textbooks, professional development, and application support. Additionally, TECTA extends its services to family child care programs, offering accreditation support, mentoring, and technical assistance.

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7 Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data by systematically coding, reviewing, and defining themes to produce a detailed and coherent narrative. In this research process, the code reliability analysis form of thematic analysis,which is a detailed list of codes and their definitions as agreed upon by the researchers involved in the coding process, was used

Figure 4[8]

Participants by Institution
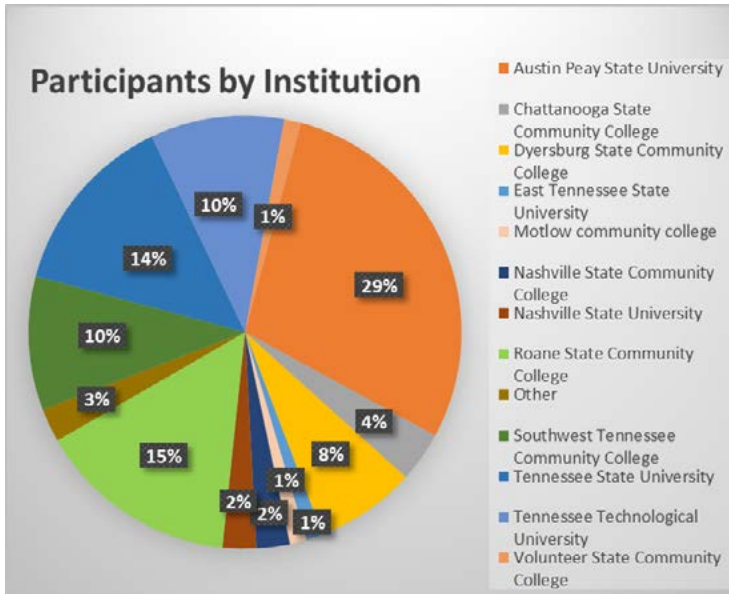
TECTA also has a number of targeted workforce training programs within each service area that aim to foster connection between educare and childcare to aid ECE providers in eliminating the barriers associated with career entry.

Figure 5[9]

Participants by Workforce Program
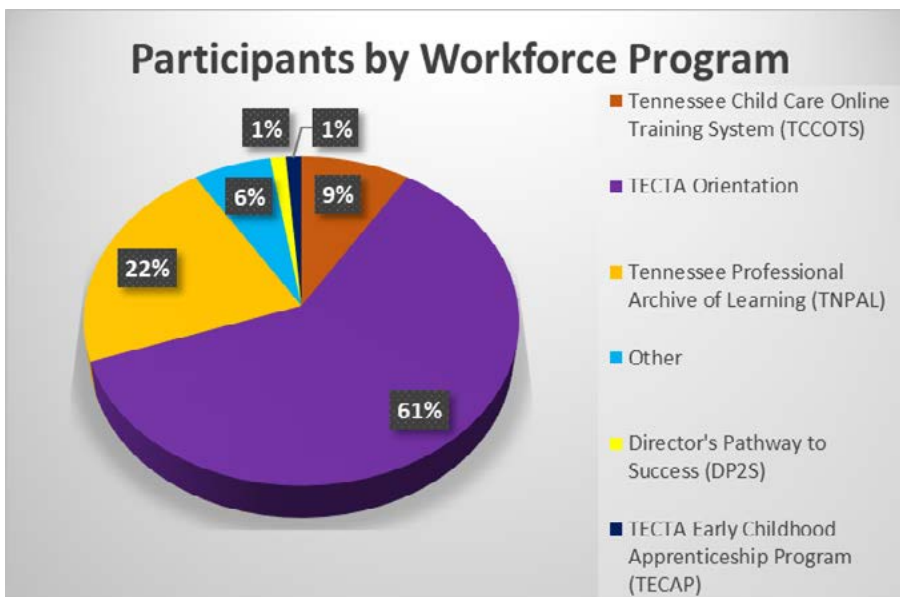
8 This figure was produced from participant data used in this research and displays the percentage of participants by TECTA learning institution.
9 This Figure 9 was produced by participant data from this research and displays the percentage of participants by TECTA Workforce Program.

Findings Overview

The main report findings are organized in the following three sections:

Part 1: Empowering Through TECTA: The Benefits of Guidance and Resources. This section is grounded in the participants' feedback on their perceived benefits of participating in TECTA and the gains that they have surmounted in their education journey with the program. This section also highlights crucial recommendations and wishes as expressed by the service providers in an aim to access more educational and professional opportunities.

Part 2: Navigating Challenges and Surmounting Obstacles to Service Provider Education. This section captures the nature of these service providers' experiences within early childhood education and during their journey through the TECTA program, with an emphasis on the unique challenges faced by rural learners. The section also brings an intersectional lens to the common barriers and challenges faced by service providers and the impact of such barriers on their educational and career development.

Part 3: Measuring Success: Career Advancement and the Need for Program Expansion. Drawing on data from the provider and TECTA administrator focus groups, this section highlights the insights and opportunities for program growth as identified by service providers and administrators. Findings related to upskilling, and social and economic mobility are also presented.

Before delving into the qualitative findings, it is imperative to underscore why research with early childhood educators is paramount. The following section provides a high level overview of the participants of this project and features a few user personas representing some of the early childhood educators' experiences.

Our Participants

Understanding the importance of ECE is fundamental to appreciating its profound impact on individuals and society as a whole. The formative years from birth to age 5 are critical for cognitive, social, and emotional development, laying the foundation for lifelong learning and well-being. Therefore, it is paramount to understand why these service providers chose to delve into a career in this space.

Many of the ECE service providers that participated in this project were drawn to this field for a multitude of reasons, each stemming from a personal connection or a desire to make a positive impact on young lives. Here are some common motivations shared by those who have chosen to embark on a career in ECE:

1. Professional Interest: Some individuals working in daycare or childcare settings aspire to enhance their skills and knowledge in early childhood education. They recognize the importance of providing high-quality care and education to young children and seek opportunities to improve their practice.

2. Employer Incentives: Many service providers are enticed to join ECE programs due to incentives offered by their employers. These incentives may include financial support or access to training programs like TECTA, which can further their professional development.

3. Word of Mouth: Positive experiences shared by colleagues, friends, or family members who work in the field of ECE can influence others to pursue a similar career path. Hearing about the rewarding nature of working with young children and the difference one can make can inspire individuals to join ECE.

4. Personal Experience: Some individuals have personal experiences with childcare or early education that drive them to seek employment in the field. They may have witnessed instances of mistreatment or neglect of children in ECE settings and are motivated to contribute to improving the quality of care and education provided to young learners.

5. Parental Instincts: For many, caring for children as a parent themselves serves as a natural transition into a career in ECE. Parenthood often fosters a deep sense of empathy and understanding toward children's needs, motivating individuals to pursue a profession where they can nurture and support the development of young minds on a full-time basis.

These diverse pathways into the field of early childhood education reflect a shared commitment to the well-being and development of young children. Whether driven by personal experiences, professional aspirations, or a combination of factors, ECE service providers play a crucial role in laying the foundation for children's future success and happiness.

To foster an understanding of how to more efficiently serve service providers as they enter into and advance in early childhood education, researchers first spoke with them directly to understand the lived experiences of both urban and rural learners in the program. There was further exploration into how intersectionality and economic and social factors influenced how, where, and when they were able to pursue this education. Through the analysis of these focus groups, this section captures what life is like for ECE service providers in Tennessee both in and out of the classroom as they balance the responsibilities of developing the minds of tomorrow, cultivating their own education, and navigating their personal lives.

Below we highlight three user personas (created on the basis of our gathered real-world data) that help to provide meaningful representations of who our ECE service provider participants are, how they may be currently situated in their career pathway, and the broader needs of pathway support for ECE service providers.

Figure 6

Anna Cunningham

"I do really enjoy sending my teachers to the 30-hour orientation class. We incentivize it in our salary scale."

Personal Information
Age: 55
Status: Married
Title: Senior Administrator
Location: Sumner County, TN

Background
- Mother of two Adult Children
- Began working in daycare centers out of necessity for childcare for her own children.
- Joined the early renditions of the TECTA program
- Passionate supporting other educators in their professional development.

Goals
Program Development

Professional Growth for ECE

Program Funding Expansion

Gains
CDA, Promotion, Child Development Understanding, Mentorship, Advocacy Opportunities

Challenges
Resource Constraints, Timing, Balancing Innovation and Tradition

Frustrations
- Director certification renewal process extensive and complicated
- Lack of education and resources amongst early childhood education providers

Figure 7

Miranda Vasquez

"English is not my first language. It was hard for me because some word, I would not understand."

Personal Information

Age: 43
Status: Married
Title: Lead Teacher
Location: Crockett County, TN

Background

- Married with three children
- Began working in early childhood education while seeking childcare for her own children
- Overcame language barriers as a non-native English speaker to successfully complete the TECTA program

Goals

Career Development

Education Advocacy

Community Impact

Gains

Resilience, Mentorship, Cultural Competence, Childhood Development Knowledge

Challenges

Language Barriers, Accessibility, Technology

Frustrations

- Lack of access to courses due to living in rural area
- Lack of access to internet
- Issues with Administrative and Logistical Support

Figure 8

Fred Glasglow

" I know there can be a bit of a stigma sometimes, um, when it comes to men and small children but it's probably worth noting that early childhood education is a very female-predominant field."

Personal Information

Age: 38
Status: Married
Title: Art Therapy Teacher
Location: Marion County, TN

Background

- Needed a job after finishing high school and started out working with kids at summer camps and continued on in ECE
- ECE provided stability and was dynamic so he pursued it full time as a career
- Driven by a passion to make a positive impact on young children's development through creative expression.

Goals

Professional Development

Program Expansion

Gains

Patience, Adapatability, Salary Increase, Improved Communication

Challenges

Administrative Process Hurdles

Frustrations

- Delays in class registration
- Issues with Access to resources
- Limited Availability of classes
- Time Constraints
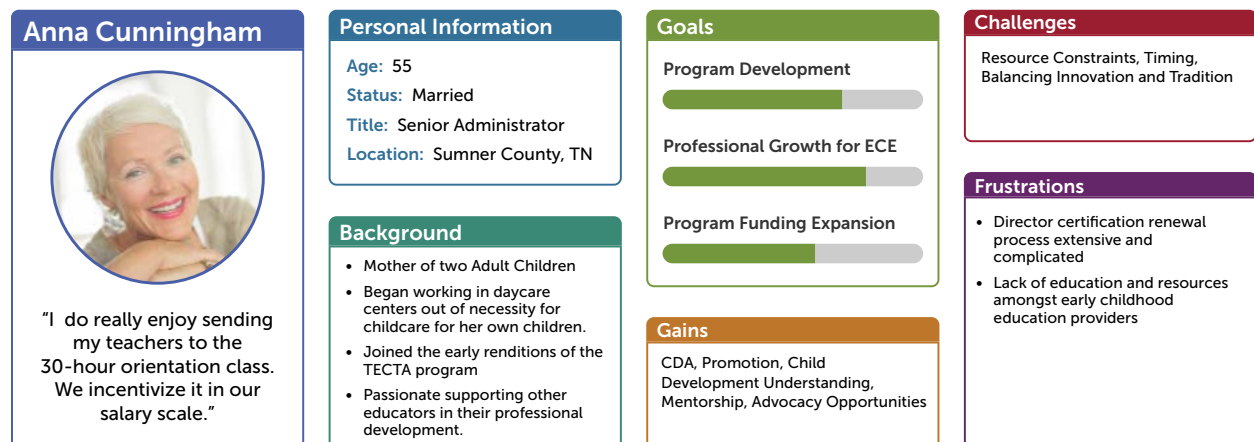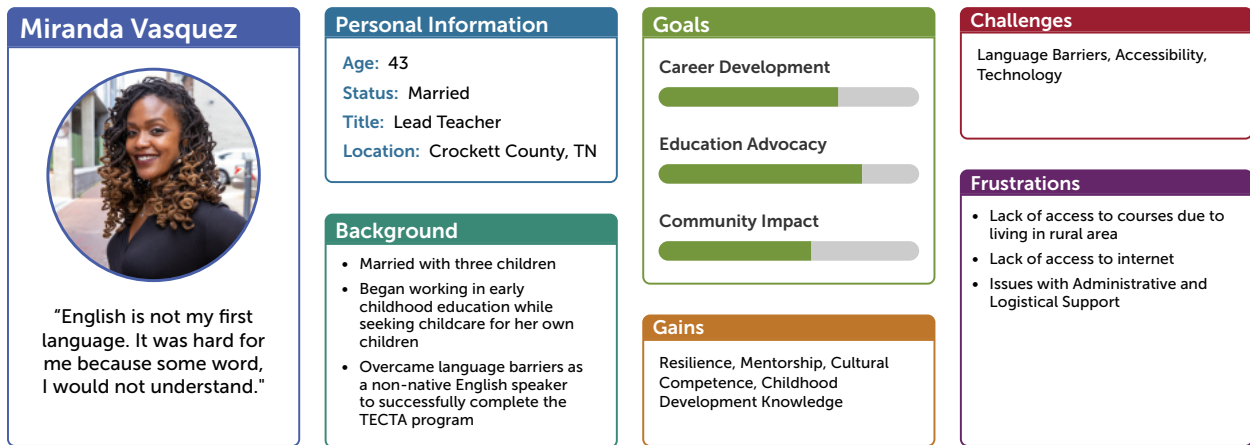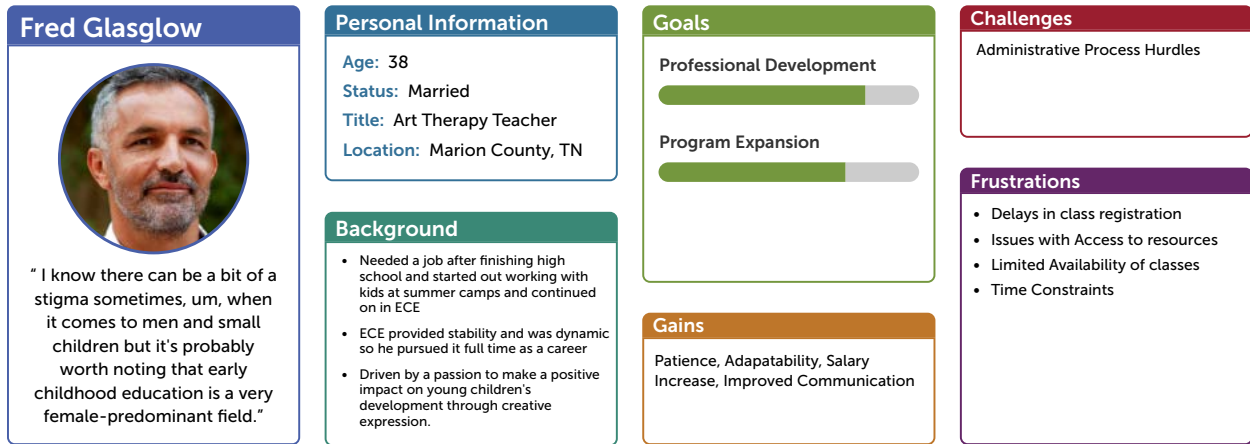
Anna, Fred, and Miranda demonstrate the pathway experiences that many of our participants expressed. In the following sections, we summarize the successes and opportunities, or facilitating factors that participants encountered, through TECTA as well as their own personal and educational circumstances, which influenced their career in early childhood education. By doing so, we showcase the possibilities and impact of non-traditional pathways and how they can provide additional career on-ramps and support for early childhood educators to successfully navigate the field. Additionally, we bring awareness to the challenges and barriers that participants experience along their professional pathway.

Part 1: Empowering Through TECTA: The Benefits of Guidance and Resources

Perspectives on Success of TECTA

The TECTA program plays a crucial role in supporting the professional growth and development of ECE providers. By offering a variety of benefits, TECTA helps participants enhance their skills, advance their careers, and improve their overall job satisfaction.

Beneficial Program Features & Resources
• Free Education
• Skill Development
• Employer Incentives
• Personal Fulfillment
• Ongoing Learning and Upward Mobility
• Resources and Networking
• Guidance and Mentorship
• Accessibility and Stigma Reduction
• Confidence Boost
• Upskilling

TECTA offers free education paid for by the program, allowing ECE providers to access training and coursework without financial barriers. This enables individuals to enhance their knowledge and skills in early childhood education without incurring additional costs. Through TECTA, ECE providers have the opportunity to develop and enhance their skills in various areas related to early childhood education. This includes learning about child development, curriculum planning, behavior management, and fostering positive relationships with children and families.

Participating in the TECTA program often results in bonuses and raises at work, as employers recognize and reward the commitment to professional growth and development. This incentivizes ECE providers to actively engage in the program and invest in their own learning.

> *"We incentivize it in our salary scale. They get paid for the 30-hour training, and then they also get a 50-cent wage increase for that, just attending the orientation, because I think that it's super helpful in kind of exposing them to the whole field of early childhood. I can see a difference after they complete the orientation in their quality of care that they're providing."*
> *—Participant F021*

Engaging in the TECTA program can bring personal fulfillment and excitement to ECE providers as they gain new knowledge, skills, and perspectives that enrich their work with young children. The opportunity for ongoing learning and professional growth contributes to job satisfaction and a sense of fulfillment in their roles. Engaging in the TECTA program can boost confidence and self-esteem among ECE providers, as they acquire new knowledge and skills that enable them to provide high-quality care and education to young children. Participants have access to a continuum of training and educational opportunities that enable them to advance their careers and take on leadership roles within their organizations. TECTA provides access to resources, materials, and networking opportunities that support professional development and collaboration among ECE providers. This fosters a sense of community and allows providers to learn from one another and share best practices. ECE providers enrolled in the TECTA program receive guidance and mentorship from experienced educators and administrators, helping them navigate their professional development journey and overcome challenges they may encounter in their roles.

"I guess they have really amazing people that work in TECTA. I remember me and one of my friends, we missed one of the orientations because we had, like, a work meeting that day, and we weren't able to come. So our orientation teacher, Ms. Jerica, she literally came to our daycare one day we were both off and helped us complete that orientation class."
—Participant F077

"When I re-enrolled, like, she didn't just forget who I was. She helped me out. She was like, 'Okay. Well, I'll work with you with—around your schedule.' And she gave me her personal number to, like, communicate with her. And she was always available when I had questions or if I needed, like, a [packet?] because I wouldn't be able to, you know, make a class so I could just do the work in advance, and then everything would be cool. So I definitely say they have, like, really, really good staff that is understanding and that will work with you."
—Participant F087

TECTA offers flexibility in learning, with some parts of the program featuring Flex Lessons and the ability to complete courses from home. This accommodates the busy schedules of ECE providers and allows them to balance their professional development with their work and personal commitments.

Upskilling as Cornerstone to Success in ECE

Participating in the TECTA program equips ECE providers with a diverse set of skills essential for success in their roles.

Upskilling
• Digital Literacy
• Engaging Children in Group Settings
• Time Management
• Classroom Management
• Professionalism

Professionalism is a cornerstone of the early childhood education profession. TECTA provides early childhood educators with the skills and knowledge needed to effectively manage a classroom of young children, including the following: strategies for organizing the classroom space, implementing developmentally appropriate curriculum, managing transitions and routines, and addressing challenging behaviors in a positive and proactive manner. Providers learn how to create stimulating and inclusive environments that encourage active participation, collaboration, and social interaction among children. By honing these skills through TECTA, ECE providers are better prepared to create nurturing, engaging, and developmentally appropriate learning environments for young children. These skills not only benefit providers in their current roles but also lay the foundation for long-term success and growth within the field of early childhood education.

Providing Support and Resources for Service Providers to Advance in Their Education

Many service providers said that without the support network and resources provided by TECTA, they wouldn't have been able to access higher education or complete a degree.

Testimonial:

> "I had my first child at 24 and I was in college at the time. I lived in Missouri and I, uh, stopped. And then I think just the fact that I'm able to finish I think is because of the TECTA program. I don't know that I would be getting my degree without it because they have people helping you along the way. Um, I don't know. They just made the process so simple that I, I feel like they have helped and I don't know, they encourage you as you go. And so I just think that having them help you through that process has made it so accessible."
> —Participant F100

Enhancing the Credibility and Legitimacy of Early Childhood Educators

Among service providers and administrators, there was a belief that TECTA provides legitimacy and career development for early childhood educators. This added layer of credibility and confidence was important for many who felt early childhood educators were often undermined or dismissed as "just daycare workers."

Testimonial:

"Because for a long time, even when I first started like 12 years ago, you were just kind of a daycare worker. And I don't feel like it was valued as like a true profession. It was like what you were gonna do before you went and got your real job. And so I like that TECTA is kind of breaking down that idea that you're just a daycare worker and this is a profession. You're an educator. Um, and I agree with what Rita said about all of—um, I think there are things that you learn through TECTA that you aren't taught in all of your early childhood education classes. But yeah, I think that's my favorite part is that it's kind of giving, I guess empowering the field rather than, um, like you're just a daycare worker kind of thing."
—Participant F100

Rural Learner Experience in ECE

Rural learners often face a number of challenges and barriers that are less common among their urban and suburban counterparts. In this section, we present the challenges and successes highlighted by our rural participants. While some of the challenges they identified are similar to those discussed by all early childhood educators.

Challenges Faced by Rural Participants

Travel Burden

Rural participants often face lengthy commutes of one hour or more each way to attend in-person TECTA classes. These commutes are particularly challenging after a full day of work, which is when some in-person classes are offered. Furthermore, long commute times extend the total number of hours that an individual is away from home, which also has an impact on their out-of-work responsibilities such as child and family care.

Impact:

- Physical exhaustion and time constraints
- Difficulty balancing work, personal, and educational commitments
- Reduced likelihood of consistent program participation

Safety Concerns

Driving home at night after class, particularly for rural participants, can pose safety risks due to fatigue, poor visibility, and road conditions.

Impact:

- Increased risk of accidents
- Additional deterrent to program participation
- Potential safety hazards impacting overall well-being

Limited Stipend Funds

The program's stipend funds are limited and allocated on a first-come, first-served basis. This can create inequities and financial barriers for those who are unable to secure funding promptly.

Impact:

- Financial strain on participants
- Inequitable access to financial assistance
- Increased dropout rates due to lack of funds

Inconvenient Class Timing

For some rural participants, the closest accessible TECTA classes are scheduled during work hours, making it challenging for participants to attend in-person classes without taking time off from their jobs.

Impact:

- Conflict with work schedules
- Loss of income or need to use leave time
- Reduced accessibility for full-time workers and caregivers

Access to Technology

Many rural participants described barriers with regards to technology access. Some did not have access to reliable internet at their home, meaning that they had to do coursework or attend zoom classes from a local library or coffee shop. Others didn't have a home computer or have a high level of digital literacy.

Impact:

- Difficulty completing coursework
- Lack of confidence with regards to ability to complete the program
- Inability to follow up with asynchronous professors / instructors

Unclear Registration Process

The registration process at colleges where TECTA operates can be unclear, causing frustration and confusion for participants.

Impact:

- Administrative barriers to enrollment
- Increased frustration and potential deterrence from accessing the program
- Reduced participation due to registration difficulties

Benefits Described by Rural Participants

Access to Education and Career Advancement

TECTA has been instrumental in providing access to education and career advancement opportunities for individuals in rural communities. Many participants from these areas emphasize the program's crucial role in helping them achieve their educational and professional goals.

> *"I live in Clarkrange, Tennessee, so I'm kind of out in the boonies. And TECTA has always helped. I did the orientation, I got my CDA, now I'm about to graduate with my technical certificate, and I'm fixing to go towards my associate's when I get that done. And they have always been so helpful and kind, um, provided me the books that I need... they are always there to try to help my education follow through."*
> *—Participant F046*

Supportive Resources

TECTA goes above and beyond to ensure that participants have the necessary resources to succeed. This includes providing textbooks, guidance, and support throughout their educational journey. The program's commitment to supporting rural learners is a recurring theme in participant feedback.

Program Flexibility

TECTA service providers from rural areas often cited the benefits of flexibility with regards to class timing and modality. While some preferred the collaborative and interactive aspects of in-person courses, many cited the value of on-line courses in providing a pathway that didn't involve long travel times or courses during working hours.

Identity Impact on Professional Development

While the current study places a large emphasis on the experiences of rural early childhood educators, there were a number of additional intersecting identities and experiences discussed by service providers when considering their professional and educational pathways. Below, we discuss some of the key findings with regards to service providers' personal identities and their impact on their professional pathways.

Learning While Parenting

The learning and development climate is such that parents often silently struggle to succeed in their own education whilst focusing on and supporting the education of their own children. A significant gap for participants in the TECTA program, and education in general, is the lack of childcare coverage. Many participants, particularly parents and caregivers, face challenges in managing their educational pursuits alongside their parenting responsibilities due to the absence of childcare support within the program.

> 1. Expense Management: Paying for childcare adds a significant expense that can strain an already tight budget. This often means that funds that could be allocated toward educational materials, transportation, or other essential needs are instead diverted to childcare costs.
>
> 2. Opportunity Costs: For some participants, the cost of childcare might outweigh the benefits of attending the program, leading them to forego further education and professional development opportunities.

Parents and caregivers enrolled in the TECTA program often struggle with the high costs associated with securing reliable childcare. Without program-provided childcare, these participants must find and fund their own childcare solutions. This financial burden can be substantial, particularly for those already facing economic challenges.

> 3. Accessibility: Without accessible and affordable childcare options, many parents are unable to attend classes consistently, if at all. This limits their ability to take full advantage of the program's offerings.
>
> 4. Retention Rates: The lack of childcare support can contribute to higher dropout rates, as participants may be forced to choose between their educational goals and their responsibilities as parents and caregivers.

The financial and logistical challenges associated with finding adequate childcare can lead to decreased participation in the TECTA program. This issue disproportionately affects those with limited resources, exacerbating existing inequalities.

5. Time Management: Coordinating class schedules, work hours, and childcare arrangements requires significant effort and meticulous planning. This can be particularly challenging for single parents or those without a robust support network.

6. Emotional Toll: The stress of managing these competing demands can take a toll on participants' mental health, potentially affecting their academic performance and overall well-being. The constant juggling act can lead to feelings of frustration, exhaustion, and diminished motivation.

Balancing educational commitments with parenting duties can be overwhelming, and the absence of child-care support intensifies this struggle. Participants must navigate complex schedules and logistical challenges, often leading to increased stress and burnout.

Language Barriers: The Need to Understand

For some non-native English speakers, navigating the TECTA program can be particularly challenging. The language barrier can hinder their ability to fully understand course materials, participate in class discussions, and complete assignments. The language barrier also impacts the professional development aspect of the TECTA program. Non-native English speakers may face challenges in the following:

- Networking: Building professional relationships and networks can be challenging due to communication difficulties, limiting opportunities for collaboration and mentorship.

- Certifications and Exams: Successfully completing certification exams and other assessments required for professional advancement can be more difficult for those struggling with English proficiency.

Recognition of International Degrees

Participants who obtained their degrees outside of the United States often face difficulties in having their credentials recognized and accepted by U.S. educational institutions and employers.

- Degree Equivalency: Many immigrant participants find that their foreign degrees and qualifications are not considered equivalent to U.S. standards. This can require them to retake courses or obtain additional certifications to meet TECTA program requirements.

- Transcript Issues: As highlighted in the testimonial below, discrepancies in transcript formats and course descriptions can prevent participants from receiving credit for previously completed coursework.

Testimonial:

"I did my master's and I got—uh, you know, like, I have the transcripts as well for that, but since the transcript doesn't show that there is a class that I already took it. So if, if, if I have to, I have to take this classes again for those things."
—Participant F032

The lack of recognition results in additional burdens for immigrant participants including:

- Time: Participants must spend extra time retaking courses they have already completed, delaying their educational and professional advancement.
- Financial Costs: Retaking courses and obtaining additional certifications incur extra costs, adding to the financial burden on participants who may already be facing economic challenges.

Overlooked in ECE: Mens Experience

Men's experiences in ECE as providers often involve navigating unique challenges and opportunities. Traditionally, ECE has been a female-dominated field, and male educators sometimes face skepticism or bias regarding their roles. However, their presence is crucial as they bring diverse perspectives and contribute to a more balanced and inclusive learning environment for young children. For instance, one male educator shared his journey of working with children since high school, from summer camps to after-school programs, before settling into a stable position in Tennessee. Despite initial hurdles, such as difficulty finding a supportive work environment and facing administrative challenges like paperwork delays in TECTA classes, he found that the TECTA program significantly benefited his professional development. The practical, real-life application of TECTA's teachings allowed him to translate textbook knowledge into effective classroom practices, enhancing his job performance and satisfaction. This highlights that while men in ECE may encounter specific obstacles, the support and training provided by programs like TECTA can be instrumental in their professional growth and success, ultimately benefiting the educational field as a whole.

Testimonial:

> "I know there can be a bit of a stigma sometimes, um, when it comes to men and small children. It's probably worth noting, you know, that this is an overwhelmingly, you know, female industry."
> —Participant F098

Additional Barriers

Increased Anxiety, Depression, and Other Mental Health Issues

The demands of managing work, family, and educational responsibilities can lead to heightened levels of stress among TECTA participants. The constant pressure to meet various obligations can contribute to mental health issues such as anxiety and depression.

- Stress Factors: The need to excel in multiple areas simultaneously can create overwhelming stress. Participants may feel pressured to perform well at work, succeed academically, and fulfill family responsibilities, all of which can lead to burnout.
- Mental Health Concerns: Prolonged stress can result in mental health problems, including anxiety and depression. These conditions can further hinder participants' ability to focus on their studies and maintain their work and family commitments.

Financial Strain

TECTA participants often face significant financial challenges, including covering tuition and books, transportation, and childcare expenses. The cumulative cost of these expenses can place a considerable financial burden on participants, particularly those with limited financial resources.

- Educational Costs: Even with financial aid, tuition fees can be a significant expense for many participants. Finding the funds to pay for classes can be a source of ongoing stress. Furthermore, many classes require students to purchase additional books or supplies.
- Transportation Expenses: Commuting to classes, especially for those living in rural areas, adds to the financial strain. Travel costs, including fuel and vehicle maintenance, can quickly accumulate.
- Childcare Costs: For participants with children, securing reliable childcare is essential but often expensive. The lack of program-provided childcare exacerbates this financial burden.

Reduced Overall Well-Being and Academic Performance

The combined effects of mental health issues and financial strain can negatively impact participants' overall well-being and academic performance.

- Health Implications: Chronic stress and financial insecurity can lead to physical health problems, further diminishing participants' quality of life.
- Academic Challenges: Mental health issues and financial stress can detract from participants' ability to concentrate on their studies, resulting in lower academic performance and increased risk of dropping out.

Challenges for Returning Students

Returning students may struggle with self-confidence and feel uncertain about their ability to succeed in an academic environment after a prolonged absence.

- Self-Doubt: Concerns about their academic abilities can lead to reduced confidence, making it difficult for returning students to engage fully in their studies.
- Performance Issues: The lack of confidence and potential gaps in knowledge or skills can result in academic underperformance, further discouraging participants.

Adjustment Difficulties and Higher Dropout Rates

Adjusting to the academic environment after a break can be challenging, leading to higher dropout rates among returning students.

- Academic Readjustment: Returning students may find it difficult to meet the academic expectations of the program, including managing coursework and keeping up with new learning methodologies.
- Technological Challenges: The increasing reliance on technology in education can be a significant barrier for returning students who may not be familiar with the latest digital tools and platforms.

Need for Additional Academic and Technological Support

To succeed, returning students often require additional support in both academic and technological areas.

- Academic Support: Providing tutoring, study groups, and academic advising can help returning students build their skills and confidence.
- Technological Training: Offering training sessions on using educational technology can equip returning students with the necessary skills to navigate online learning environments and digital resources effectively.
- Access to Technology: Many participants, particularly those in rural areas, reported having little or no access to reliable internet connection and/or computers. In order for these students to succeed, they need access to dependable internet and technology.

Opportunities for Social and Economic Mobility

Free Education and Reduced Financial Barriers

Access to Higher Education

TECTA provides free education and training for ECE providers, eliminating the financial barriers that often prevent individuals from pursuing higher education. This enables participants to access valuable educational opportunities that can lead to better job prospects and higher earnings.

Impact:

- Increased Educational Attainment: Participants can earn certificates, associate degrees, and other qualifications without incurring significant debt.
- Higher Earnings Potential: With higher educational qualifications, participants are more likely to secure higher-paying positions in the field of early childhood education.

Skill Development, Professional Growth, and Job Satisfaction

Enhanced Skill Sets

Through TECTA, ECE providers develop a wide range of skills, including digital literacy, classroom management, time management, and professionalism. These skills are essential for success in the workplace and contribute to overall career advancement.

Impact:

- Improved Job Performance: Enhanced skills lead to better job performance, making participants more valuable to their employers and more likely to receive promotions and raises.
- Career Advancement: Skill development opens up opportunities for participants to take on leadership roles and higher-level positions within their organizations.

Personal Fulfillment and Job Satisfaction

Engaging in the TECTA program can bring personal fulfillment and job satisfaction to ECE providers. As they gain new knowledge and skills, participants often experience increased confidence and a greater sense of accomplishment in their roles.

Impact:

- Increased Retention: Higher job satisfaction leads to increased retention rates, reducing turnover and providing more stability for participants.
- Positive Work Environment: Fulfilled and satisfied employees contribute to a more positive and productive work environment.

Financial Incentives and Economic Stability

Bonuses and Raises

Employers often recognize and reward the commitment to professional growth and development demonstrated by TECTA participants. This can result in bonuses and raises, providing immediate financial benefits to participants.

Impact:

- Increased Income: Financial incentives directly increase participants' income, improving their economic stability and quality of life.
- Long-Term Financial Security: Consistent raises and bonuses contribute to long-term financial security and the ability to plan for the future.

Reduced Financial Strain

By providing free education and resources, TECTA helps reduce the financial strain on participants. This allows them to allocate their financial resources more effectively and achieve greater economic stability.

Impact:

- Decreased Debt: Participants can pursue education without incurring debt, reducing financial stress and improving overall financial health.
- Improved Economic Mobility: Reduced financial strain enables participants to save money, invest in their future, and achieve greater economic mobility.

Networking and Mentorship

Access to Resources and Networking Opportunities

TECTA provides access to a wide range of resources and networking opportunities, supporting professional development and collaboration among ECE providers. This fosters a sense of community and allows participants to learn from one another and share best practices.

Impact:

- Professional Networking: Building a strong professional network can lead to new job opportunities, collaborations, and career advancement.
- Shared Knowledge and Support: Access to resources and peer support enhances participants' ability to succeed in their roles and advance their careers.

Guidance and Mentorship

ECE providers enrolled in the TECTA program receive guidance and mentorship from experienced educators and administrators. This support helps participants navigate their professional development journey and overcome challenges.

Impact:

- Increased Confidence: Mentorship boosts participants' confidence and helps them set and achieve career goals.
- Career Development: Guidance from mentors helps participants make informed decisions about their career paths and pursue opportunities for advancement.

Social Mobility, Accessibility, and Professional Legitimacy

Changing the Perception of ECE Providers

TECTA plays a crucial role in changing the perception of early childhood education providers. By offering high-quality training and support, TECTA elevates the status of the profession and promotes respect for the important work that ECE providers do.

Impact:

- Enhanced Professional Status: Elevating the status of ECE providers leads to greater recognition and respect, both within the profession and in the broader community.
- Empowerment: Empowering ECE providers enhances their social mobility, providing opportunities for greater influence and leadership within their field.

Accessibility and Flexibility

TECTA offers flexible learning options, including Flex Lessons and the ability to complete courses from home. This accessibility accommodates the busy schedules of ECE providers and allows them to balance their professional development with their work and personal commitments.

Impact:

- Inclusive Access: Flexible learning options make it easier for a diverse range of participants to access TECTA's benefits, promoting inclusivity and equity.
- Balanced Commitments: Participants can balance their educational pursuits with their work and family responsibilities, reducing stress and promoting overall well-being.

Shifting Perspectives of TECTA Administrators

How to Measure Program Success

Administrators identified several indicators to measure the success and effectiveness of the TECTA program:

1. Program Retention and Completion: Administrators emphasized the importance of tracking both the retention and completion rates of the program.
2. Number of Returning Students: Success is also measured by the number of students who continue along the TECTA lattice, demonstrating ongoing engagement.
3. Engagement of New Students: The influx of new students into the program is seen as a critical measure of success, indicating the program's reach and appeal.

Factors that Influence Student Participation
• Career Progression Support
• Success Stories of Past Participants
• Ongoing Support and Mentorship
• Tailored Resources

An administrator highlighted the importance of returning students:

"Measuring some of the progress and success is when the candidates who've successfully taken the courses, earned their credential, return back to us to then renew. For us, that's measurable progress."

Additionally, another administrator stressed the need for new student engagement:

"Having the same students is great. But how many new students are we getting? How many new people are we reaching? Because we can help up to a certain point, but then we're going to die out if we don't find some new people."

Administrators also noted the importance of observing the practical application of lessons learned:

"The progress that each of these individuals are making in the classroom. We may not be able to measure that at this point as well as we probably could. But hearing from the individual going through the program or visiting their classrooms and seeing the improvements… would be another measure of success."

Improving the Program for Rural Participants

Administrators proposed various approaches to enhance the program for rural participants:

1. Orientation in Smaller Groups and Online Courses: Some advocated for smaller group orientations and online courses, while others debated the need to maintain in-person classes due to limited internet access in rural areas.
   - One administrator remarked on the importance of in-person options:
     "We need to make sure that we continue that face-to-face option because we have areas that don't have internet access… keeping that face-to-face option is very important for our area."

2. Direct Outreach to Childcare Centers in Rural Areas: Administrators discussed the need for direct outreach efforts to childcare centers, including holding orientations in accessible community centers or libraries.

Program Benefits	Program Challenges
• Career Advancement: Education and support lead to higher wages and job satisfaction. • Networking Opportunities: Participants benefit from networking and resource sharing. • Support System: TECTA offers mentorship and guidance throughout participants' journeys. • Economic and Social Mobility: The program aids in breaking barriers to education and career advancement. • Student Testimonials: Testimonials highlight the program's positive impact.	• Limited Resources: Funding constraints hinder program expansion and improvement. • Communication Gaps: Improving communication and program flexibility is essential. • Systemic Barriers: Addressing disparities in access to education and resources is critical. • Service Duplication: Better coordination is needed to avoid inefficiencies. • Recruitment and Retention: Attracting and retaining qualified staff is challenging due to low compensation.

The Need for Better Marketing and Program Promotion

Administrators recognized a significant need for improved marketing and promotion of the TECTA program:

1. Increased Visibility: There is a need to raise awareness about TECTA beyond word of mouth and ensure its presence in various media and public forums.

   ▪ One administrator shared the following:
   "I don't hear us on the radio. I don't hear a TV commercial. When you go to some of the colleges that we have partnerships with, their education department will tell you. But what about other colleges?" *—Administrator F02*

2. Conference Participation: Increased presence at regional and state conferences was suggested as a way to enhance visibility and engagement.

   ▪ One administrator noted the following:
   "We used to always present at conferences… We had a strong presence. And I think that has kind of not been as much." *—Administrator F06*

The Need for TECTA Presence in the Political Arena

Administrators emphasized the importance of TECTA's involvement in the political arena:

1. Local Level Involvement: Ensuring TECTA's presence on local boards and in political discussions was seen as crucial for advocacy and visibility.

   ▪ One administrator made a statement:
   "We do have people that are involved on the local level… But I think that makes a big difference to be out there where those providers are." *—Administrator F04*

2. Face-to-Face Engagement: The importance of personal interaction over financial contributions was highlighted to strengthen community ties and recognition.

TECTA Presence at Community Events

Engaging in community events was seen as an effective way to promote the program and connect with potential participants:

1. Community Engagement: Administrators suggested hosting events with interactive and engaging activities to attract and inform participants about TECTA.

   - One comment was:
     "I want the fun stuff. I want some snacks. I want some activities. That's how you get me is snacks."
     –Administrator F02

Program Expansion to High School Students

Administrators discussed the potential benefits of introducing TECTA to high school students:

1. Early Engagement: Targeting high school students to take the orientation and consider future involvement in early childhood education was suggested as a long-term strategy for program growth.

   - As one administrator explained:
     "We are heavily involved with high school participants... letting them know, 'Hey, you take the orientation in high school... we're here and available.'" *–Administrator F04*

Offering Extension/Add-On Courses for Professional Development

The idea of offering additional courses for professional development was raised as a means to support ongoing education and career advancement for participants.

Where Do We Go From Here? Actionable Recommendations for Social Change

The stories and experiences described by early childhood educators and TECTA administrators have powerful implications for our body of knowledge on lifelong learning and adult education. Drawing from these stories, we outline a number of recommendations below. Recognizing the nested and layered factors that impact individuals' pursuit of lifelong learning opportunities, we have targeted the recommendations to specific audiences according to their sphere of influence.

Policy Level Changes

Higher Education Subsidies

Access to affordable postsecondary education and lifelong learning opportunities is heavily influenced by individuals' socioeconomic status and financial realities. In countries that provide subsidized higher education, there are significantly higher levels of engagement with postsecondary and career training opportunities (OECD, 2023). State and federal policies that provide funding to institutions of higher education and community colleges can offset the cost of tuition that serves as a hindrance to many rural workers and learners.

Increased Minimum Wage

Despite performing critical work that influences the lives and well-being of families throughout the country, early childhood educators remain on the lower end of the pay scale relative to other professions. Financial constraints were a common barrier among rural early childhood educators. One's ability to access lifelong learning opportunities, even those that are subsidized, is influenced by one's financial reality. Transportation, childcare, books, and technology all cost money and were cited as barriers to accessing education and, ultimately, the professional and financial growth that comes with it. An increased minimum wage would reduce some of the financial strain that keeps many early childhood educators from accessing opportunities for further education and professional development.

Universal Benefits

As underscored throughout the qualitative findings, financial considerations were instrumental in deciding whether or not early childhood educators could pursue professional development opportunities. Some service providers couldn't afford childcare for their own children at home while they attended class. Others were caring for sick or elderly family members. Across the field, many early childcare workers earn low wages and do not receive healthcare benefits or paid time off. State or federal level policies mandating subsidized child care, universal healthcare coverage, and guaranteed paid time off under the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) could remove barriers that many early childhood educators face when considering professional advancement and education.

Education and Training Institution Level Changes

The Need for Wrap-Around Supports

To better support parents and caregivers in early childhood education, the following strategies
are recommended:

Wrap-Around Supports

Provision of Childcare Services

- On-site childcare would allow parents to focus on their studies without the added stress of coordinating off-site childcare arrangements and would likely lead to higher enrollment and retention rates, as more parents would be able to commit to the program.

- Childcare Subsidies: For locations where on-site childcare is not feasible, offering subsidies or financial assistance for childcare would help mitigate the financial strain on participants and would reduce the out-of-pocket expenses for parents, making it more affordable for them to pursue their educational goals.

- Equitable Access: Providing financial support for childcare would promote equity by ensuring that all participants, regardless of their financial situation, have the opportunity to benefit from the program.

Flexible Scheduling

- Adaptability: Flexible scheduling allows parents to attend classes at times that do not conflict with their childcare responsibilities.

- Work-Life Balance: This approach can help participants better balance their educational, work, and family commitments, reducing stress and improving overall well-being.

Support Networks

- Peer Support: Facilitating connections among parents in the program can help them share childcare solutions, study resources, and emotional support.

- Resource Sharing: Providing information on local childcare providers, financial assistance programs, and other relevant resources can help parents navigate their options more effectively.

Language Support Services

- Bilingual Resources: Provide bilingual instructional materials and support from bilingual staff to help non-native speakers better understand course content.

- Tutoring and Mentoring: Establish tutoring and mentoring programs to offer additional language support and academic assistance to non-native English speakers.

Recognition and Support for International Degrees

- Credential Evaluation Services: Partner with credential evaluation services to help immigrant participants have their degrees and transcripts accurately assessed and recognized.

- Flexible Course Requirements: Allow for greater flexibility in course requirements by recognizing prior learning and experience, reducing the need for redundant coursework.

- Advising Services: Provide dedicated advising services to assist immigrant participants in navigating the complexities of degree transferability and meeting program requirements.

To effectively support ECE providers and enhance their professional development, other training programs can adopt and adapt several strategies from TECTA. These recommendations aim to address common challenges faced by ECE providers, promote equitable access to education, and support career advancement within the field.

1. Improving Access to Educational and Training Opportunities

Offer Free or Subsidized Education

- Secure funding from government sources, grants, or partnerships with private organizations.
- Ensure transparency in the allocation of funds to maximize accessibility and fairness.
- Promote awareness of the availability of free or subsidized education to potential participants.

Provide Flexible Learning Options

- Offer online courses and hybrid learning models to provide greater flexibility.
- Schedule classes during evenings and weekends to accommodate those who work full time.
- Develop asynchronous learning modules that allow participants to learn at their own pace.

Establish Childcare Support

- Partner with local childcare centers to provide free or subsidized childcare for participants.
- Offer on-site childcare services during training sessions.
- Provide financial stipends specifically for childcare expenses.

Enhance Stipend and Financial Aid Programs

- Increase the availability of stipends and ensure they are distributed equitably.
- Implement a needs-based assessment to prioritize financial aid for those with the greatest need.
- Simplify the application process for financial aid to make it more accessible.

Improve Registration Processes

- Develop user-friendly online registration platforms.
- Provide clear and detailed instructions for the registration process.
- Offer assistance through help desks or dedicated support staff to address any questions or issues.

Offer Guidance and Mentorship

- Pair participants with experienced mentors who can provide personalized support and advice.
- Establish regular check-ins and progress assessments to ensure ongoing support.
- Create peer support groups to foster a sense of community and shared learning.

Address Language Barriers

- Offer courses and materials in multiple languages.
- Provide language support services, such as translation and interpretation.
- Develop language-specific cohorts to create supportive learning environments.

Facilitate Transferability of Credentials

- Collaborate with accrediting bodies to facilitate the recognition of foreign credentials.

- Offer bridging programs to help participants meet local requirements.

- Provide clear information and support for the credential evaluation process.

Promote Professionalism and Legitimacy

- Advocate for policies that recognize and reward professional development and qualifications.

- Highlight success stories and achievements of ECE providers.

- Foster partnerships with higher education institutions and professional organizations.

Support Mental Health and Well-Being

- Provide access to mental health resources and counseling services.

- Offer workshops and training on stress management and self-care.

- Create a supportive work environment that prioritizes the well-being of educators.

Employer Level Changes

Early childhood education providers play a crucial role in the development and well-being of young children. Employers, including schools, daycares, institutions, and care facilities, can take several steps to support ECE providers and enhance their professional growth and job satisfaction.

2. Implementing Equitable Employment Practices

Offer Flexible Scheduling

- Improved Work-Life Balance: Flexibility helps ECE providers balance their work with personal responsibilities, reducing stress and increasing job satisfaction.

- Increased Retention: Flexible scheduling can lead to higher retention rates as employees are more likely to stay with an employer that accommodates their needs.

Provide Financial Support for Professional Development

- Enhanced Skills and Knowledge: Financial support enables ECE providers to enhance their skills and knowledge, leading to improved quality of care and education for children.

- Career Advancement: Supporting professional development helps providers advance their careers, increasing their motivation and commitment to their roles.

Establish On-Site Childcare

- Reduced Stress: Access to on-site childcare reduces the stress and logistical challenges associated with finding and paying for childcare.

- Increased Productivity: Knowing their children are in a safe and convenient location allows ECE providers to focus better on their work, enhancing productivity.

Facilitate Access to Mental Health Resources

- Improved Mental Health: Providing mental health resources helps ECE providers manage stress and maintain good mental health, leading to better overall well-being.

- Enhanced Job Performance: Mentally healthy employees are more likely to perform well in their roles and provide high-quality care and education to children.

Implement Mentorship Programs

- Skill Development: Mentorship programs facilitate the transfer of knowledge and skills from experienced providers to newer staff.

- Increased Confidence: Mentorship provides support and encouragement, boosting the confidence of less experienced providers and helping them navigate their careers.

Recognize and Reward Achievements

- Increased Motivation: Recognition and rewards motivate ECE providers to continue performing at a high level and striving for excellence.

- Enhanced Job Satisfaction: Feeling valued and appreciated leads to higher job satisfaction and a stronger commitment to the organization.

Provide Opportunities for Career Advancement

- Professional Growth: Clear advancement opportunities encourage ECE providers to develop their skills and pursue long-term careers in the field.

- Employee Retention: Providing a roadmap for career growth helps retain talented employees who see a future with the organization.

Foster a Collaborative Work Environment

- Improved Team Dynamics: Collaboration fosters a sense of community and teamwork, leading to a more positive and productive work environment.

- Enhanced Learning: Sharing ideas and collaborating allows ECE providers to learn from one another and continuously improve their practices.

Ensure Competitive Compensation

- Attracting Talent: Competitive compensation packages help attract skilled and dedicated ECE providers to the organization.

- Retaining Employees: Fair and competitive pay leads to higher job satisfaction and retention rates, reducing turnover and associated costs.

Legislator Level Changes

Providing on-ramps for early childhood educators to access higher education, training, and lifelong learning opportunities is advantageous for all members of society. As such, state and federal policymakers should take meaningful steps to ensure that early childhood educators can more easily access opportunities that will provide them with professional, financial, and personal gains. In addition to tangible educational and financial policy changes, policymakers must also engage with, and give weight to, local communities of educators, families, and key collaborators whose lived experiences provide valuable insight into the impact of workforce challenges on the quality of care, educational outcomes, and family dynamics. By engaging with policymakers, collaborators can advocate for reforms that address systemic inequities and promote policies supporting fair wages, professional development, and workplace support for ECE providers. Collaborative efforts across these collaborator groups are essential for fostering a more equitable and sustainable ECE workforce, ultimately benefiting children, families, educators, and the broader community.

3. Changing State and Federal Policy

Higher Education Funding

- State and community colleges provide tremendous opportunities for early childhood educators and other working adults to access education and training. By providing additional funding to these individuals, more workers and learners will be able to benefit from these opportunities.

Raise the Minimum Wage

- Despite performing a job that is vital to the health and well-being of all members of society, early childhood educators remain on the low end of the payscale. Raising the minimum wage would ensure that ECEs are able to make a living wage and access opportunities for professional and personal growth.

Engaging Communities and Collaborators

- Policymakers must consider, and give weight to, the unique and lived experiences of early childhood educators and families who rely upon early childhood care. By engaging local communities, policymakers can be informed as to the successes and challenges of the current early childhood education landscape.

Conclusion

The Tennessee Early Childhood Training Alliance has demonstrated a profound impact on early childhood educators, training programs, and the future of education. By providing free education and training, TECTA removes financial barriers and empowers educators to pursue higher education. This leads to increased educational attainment, enhanced skill development, and improved job performance, which are critical for the professional growth of early childhood educators.

The program fosters a sense of personal fulfillment and job satisfaction among participants, resulting in higher retention rates and a more positive work environment. The financial incentives and reduced financial strain offered by TECTA contribute to educators' economic stability and long-term financial security, which are essential for sustaining a dedicated and motivated workforce in early childhood education.

TECTA's impact extends to professional development by providing resources and networking opportunities that facilitate collaboration, mentorship, and career advancement. This support system is crucial for building confidence and promoting the professional status of early childhood educators. The program also challenges and changes societal perceptions of the early childhood education profession, contributing to its overall elevation.

However, the program faces challenges, including limited resources, communication gaps, and systemic barriers that need to be addressed to enhance its effectiveness. Improving outreach to rural participants, maintaining in-person training options, and expanding the program to high school students are critical areas for growth. Additionally, better marketing, political involvement, and community engagement are necessary to ensure the program's sustainability and expansion.

For the future of education, TECTA's model highlights the importance of removing financial and systemic barriers to professional development. Tracking retention and completion rates, engaging new students, and observing practical applications of lessons learned are essential metrics for measuring success. These efforts will ensure that early childhood educators receive the support and recognition they deserve, ultimately benefiting children, families, educators, and the broader community.

A comprehensive support system significantly impacts early childhood educators' professional, economic, and personal lives. By addressing existing challenges and expanding their reach, training programs can continue to empower educators, promote equity, and enhance the quality of early childhood education. The findings from this study underscore the importance of systemic changes and collaborative efforts to support and sustain a robust and equitable early childhood education workforce, shaping the future of education for generations to come.

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