



# Understanding Indigenous Early Care and Education System and Workforce Challenges and Strengths: Priorities and Recommendations to Address Equity

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## Background

The early care and education (ECE) workforce engages in work that requires highly developed skills in child development and practices within classroom and home-based settings that support child development.<sup>1</sup> This work is demanding and essential to the health and wellbeing of young children, families, and society at large.<sup>2</sup> Despite its critical importance, societal investments in ECE are insufficient, leaving the workforce undervalued and families overburdened.<sup>3</sup> These conditions may be even more acutely felt by Indigenous (here, American Indian and Alaska Native) communities who are disproportionately burdened by poverty and other social determinants of health related to the impact of settler colonialism,<sup>4</sup> but who are also uniquely resourced with enduring cultural ways of knowing and being that center children's health, wellbeing, and thriving.<sup>5</sup>

## Objectives

The current study is designed to understand the current state of the Indigenous ECE workforce, including the unique cultural and community contexts that shape workforce experiences, workforce challenges and successes, and priorities and recommendations for supporting ECE workforce health, wellbeing, and thriving.

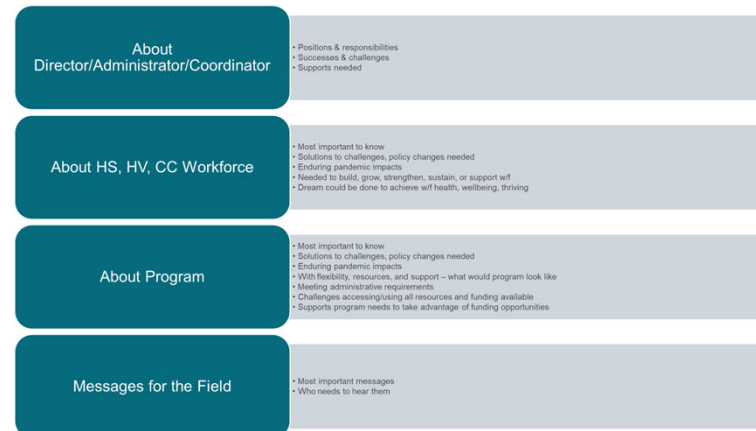
## Methods

Focus group and key informant interviews are currently underway with program directors, administrators, and coordinators of tribal Head Start (HS), Child Care Development Fund (CC), and Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (HV) programs across the country. Prospective participants are recruited based on recommendations of colleagues, through listserv e-blasts, and in-person at national meetings. The final sample will include individuals who are more (> 5 years) and less (<=5 years) experienced in their role and from geographic regions across the country as depicted in Figure 1. Individuals working in tribal CCDF programs are being oversampled to ensure additional subgroups of medium/large and small allocation are included in the final sample. Interviews are conducted remotely via audio- or videoconference and in-person as opportunities permit. Interviews are recorded, transcribed, and coded using both inductive and deductive approaches to ascertain themes. The study protocol – including recruitment plans, semi-structured interview guide (see Figure 2), and implementation and dissemination plans – were developed with guidance from tribal HS, CC, and HV program leaders, researchers with experience partnering with Indigenous ECE programs and communities, and Indigenous ECE training and technical assistance providers.

Figure 1.

Experience Geographic Region	HS (Program Directors)		HV (Program Directors/Coordinators)		CC (Administrators)			
	5+ Years	<5 Years	5+ Years	<5 Years	5+ Years		<5 Years	
					Med/Large Allocation	Small Allocation	Med/Large Allocation	Small Allocation
N+E	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
S+E	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
N+W	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
S+W	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
AK	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>

Figure 2.



## References

<sup>1</sup> Manning et al. (2019). Is teacher qualification associated with the quality of the early childhood education and care environment? A meta-analytic review. *Review of Educational Research*, 89(3), 370-415. <sup>2</sup> Lloyd, C.M. et al. (2021). Mary Pauper: A historical exploration of early care and education compensation, policy, and solutions. *Child Trends*. <sup>3</sup> Wladetok, M., Phillips, D., Y Howes, C. (2014). Worth work, STILL unlivable wages: The early childhood workforce 25 years after the National Child Care Staffing Study. Berkeley, CA: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley. <sup>4</sup> Sarche, M., & Spicer, P. (2008). Poverty and health disparities for American Indian and Alaska Native children. *Annals of the NY Academy of Science*, 1135: 126-136. <sup>5</sup> Sarche, M., Tafuya, G., & Croy, C.D., & Hill, K. (2016). American Indian and Alaska Native boys: Early childhood risk and resilience amidst context and culture. *Infant Mental Health Journal* 38(1), 115-127.

## Emergent Findings

Interviews are underway and ongoing through fall. To date, 5 interviews have been conducted with 2 Head Start Directors and 3 Child Care Administrators. Following are examples of emergent findings that will be updated based on analyses of additional interviews when completed.

### About Director/Administrator/Coordinator

- Often oversee centers/locations that are spread across a large geographic expanse which makes it a challenge to visit/be physically present
- When understaffed, called to be hands-on in the classroom and other program areas (e.g. kitchen) – described as “filling all the holes – if a leak springs, there we are with the mop and bucket”
- Deeply committed – driven by understanding they are building the next generation of community leaders and keepers
- New directors (< 5 years) started during pandemic

### About the Workforce

- Better salaries and benefits needed to attract workers
- Struggle to get staff with the necessary qualifications
- There are no extra people to help – there are not even enough people so existing workforce has to fill in and gets stretched thin – can lead to burnout
- Would like to use more funds toward staff wellbeing, including individual wellbeing but it can be hard to do within existing rules/policies

### About the Program

- Have waiting list because there is not enough staff to be fully open
- Pandemic opened up more virtual options – for example for professional development – but internet/mobile access is still a challenge in some places
- Wish that people would see value of ECE – many people have mentality of just “dropping off kids” without understanding full impact of ECE on development
- There are many regulations that conflict with reality so it can be hard to follow them all (e.g. collaboration, parent participation)
- Used supplemental funds from pandemic to improve overall physical space/environment, including health and safety (e.g. air filtration, playgrounds)

### Messages for the field

- Messages need to go to the top – to congress who makes the rules, to help them understand what programs actually face
- Still fighting the same issues regarding income guidelines and tribal set aside
- Culture and language need to be at forefront
- Tribes need more control and say over how programs are run

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