



Strengthening the Early Childhood (EC) Workforce must be a top priority for Hawai'i.

THE ISSUE

A targeted state investment will stabilize EC programs, expand access for keiki and families, and ensure a qualified EC workforce.

Hawai'i needs a larger, more stable, better-prepared, and better-compensated EC workforce. The issue is not only vacancies; it is the workforce system needed to keep programs fully staffed, inclusive, culturally grounded, and responsive across islands.

Why It Matters

Workforce shortages limit access to critical EC services. Low wages, limited benefits, high living costs, workload strain, and uneven career pathways make recruitment and retention difficult.

EC workforce includes

- early care and learning
- family support
- early intervention
- early childhood special education
- infant/early childhood behavioral health

NEEDS

Evidence and Policy Implication



Competitive wages and benefits

Median early educator wages were estimated at about \$16–\$19/hr, far below a living wage estimate of at least \$31/hr. **Compensation is foundational to stabilization.**



Recruitment and retention

Nearly 30% of center directors reported retention challenges; 50% said qualified applicants turned down offers. **Hiring barriers are system-level, not just employer-level.**



Working conditions and wellness

Long hours, workload strain, limited planning time, and administrative burden contribute to turnover. **Retention strategies should include wellness, supervision, mentoring, and workload relief.**



Preparation and advancement

The state needs expanded pre-service/in-service learning, coaching, consultation, career ladders, scholarships, apprenticeships, and paid release time tied to advancement.

Sources: Hawai'i Early Childhood State Plan 2025–2030; RAND Report, Early Childhood Educators in Hawai'i; Hawai'i Early Learning Needs Assessment; Hawai'i Integrated Infant and Early Childhood Behavioral Health Plan; Hawai'i CSPD Recruitment & Retention Survey.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS



Fund a statewide EC workforce package that combines compensation supports, preparation pathways, coaching/consultation, behavioral health capacity, and shared workforce data.

Priority Investments

- Wage supplements, salary scales, benefit supports, or compensation parity strategies.
- Scholarships, apprenticeships, paid release time, and career ladders tied to compensation.
- Coaching, mentoring, reflective supervision, and wellness supports to reduce turnover.
- Inclusion, positive behavior support, infant-toddler, and culturally grounded training.
- Infant and early childhood mental health consultation and reimbursable services.
- Shared workforce data and measures to reduce duplication.



Direct agencies and partners to align funding, define measurable outcomes, and report annually on workforce supply, retention, compensation, preparation, and access.

Accountability Measures

- Vacancy and turnover rates
- Wage and benefit benchmarks
- Credential/degree progress
- Participation in coaching and training
- Access to services by island and sector
- Inclusion and behavioral health capacity

BOTTOM LINE



Hawai'i can improve access and outcomes for our youngest keiki by treating EC workforce development as core public infrastructure – supported by compensation, pathways, working conditions, specialized training, and statewide data.



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ACTION STRATEGY

Commit to Keiki is a statewide, non-partisan collaborative designed to ensure a brighter start for Hawai'i's youngest keiki and their families. [CommitToKeiki.org](https://www.committokeiki.org)

Early Childhood Action Strategy (ECAS) takes action for Hawai'i's youngest keiki by bringing together government and non-government stakeholders to implement systems-level strategies. [HawaiiActionStrategy.org](https://www.hawaiiactionstrategy.org)

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