

# Strengthening the Early Learning Workforce through Apprenticeships

As understanding about the importance of early learning has grown, so too have expectations about the quality of care that young children receive in their earliest and most developmentally consequential years. Well-qualified early childhood educators are vital to providing quality early learning and care opportunities for children from birth through age five. In the midst of ongoing early learning workforce shortages, however, it can be hard to fill existing vacancies with educators who have earned the necessary credentials or degrees, particularly in underserved and rural areas. Additionally, **nearly 180,000 openings for child care workers** are projected each year over the next decade due to retirements or changing occupations. Early Childhood Education (ECE) Apprenticeships offer tremendous potential for helping to address this issue by allowing early educators to pursue on-the-job learning opportunities that help them acquire the knowledge and skills they need, along a pathway to the credential or degree they desire to advance their career. By dedicating federal funding for this promising practice, the Early Educators Apprenticeship Act would bolster the efforts that already exist in states to utilize ECE apprenticeships to address this critical need.

## The Early Educators Apprenticeship Act

Introduced by Senator Shelley Moore Capito (R-WV), Senator Bob Casey (D-PA), and Senator Todd Young (R-IN), the bipartisan Early Educators Apprenticeship Act supports and expands states' efforts to establish ECE apprenticeships programs to address the growing need for qualified early educators. The bill establishes a three-year grant program through The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) for states to develop, administer, and evaluate a registered apprenticeships (RA) program that provides early educators with the knowledge and skills required to deliver high-quality early learning and care to our nation's youngest learners. The program seeks to increase the number of qualified early educators, particularly in underserved and rural areas, addressing the critical shortage of early learning professionals in our country.

Specifically, the bill empowers states to:

- Promote recruitment and retention of apprentices;
- Evaluate and collect data on the career paths of individuals who complete an apprenticeship;
- Support partnerships with institutions of higher education (IHEs), businesses, and other participating entities to provide academic credit for instruction related to the apprenticeship and apply such credit toward a degree at an IHE; and
- Develop strategies to hire and retain qualified supervisors who provide professional development, mentorship, evaluation, and training to apprentices.

Each year over the next decade, there will be a projected

**180,000**

child care worker openings.

**16**

states have a local or state-wide ECE registered apprenticeship program.



High-quality early learning and care programs play an essential role in laying the foundation for children’s school readiness and long-term success, while providing a safe, healthy, and nurturing environment for children while their parents work or attend school. In order to ensure more children and working families have access to these high-quality opportunities, we must ensure child care providers have access to pathways for career development and professional advancement to meet the growing demand.

### **Overview of Registered Apprenticeships**

Apprenticeship programs provide flexibility for those already in the workforce by offering “earn as you learn” opportunities to individuals, while also allowing employers to improve the quality and effectiveness of their workforce. Registered apprenticeships (RAs) provide paid on-the-job training, related classroom-based instruction, and wage increases for skill gains, culminating in a nationally recognized credential and, in degree apprenticeship models, an associate or bachelor’s degree. RAs typically last 2-3 years and include around 2,000 hours of on-the-job training and a minimum of 144 hours of classroom-based instruction each year. Long a favored model in industrial and technical fields, apprenticeship programs are now expanding into education and other industries.

### **Federal Support for ECE Apprenticeships**

Federal lawmakers agree on the importance of quality in child care and early learning, as demonstrated by the bipartisan reauthorization of the Child Care and Development Block Grant Act, which called for significant improvements in the quality of care provided across the country. Some states and communities are utilizing RAs to help early childhood educators meet those quality standards.

Currently, states can access federal Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act (WIOA) funds available through the Department of Labor to implement an apprenticeship program as part of a career pathway. These apprenticeship programs are geared toward a variety of sectors, but are most commonly used by the health and labor industries. Unfortunately, WIOA state plans tend to look at child care as a workforce support, rather than as a workforce sector. As a result, states generally fail to leverage WIOA funding to grow the quality and quantity of ECE professionals. Additionally, sponsoring employers typically bear the administrative and financial burdens associated with RAs, making them cost prohibitive for most early learning and care providers who are often independent small businesses or nonprofits organizations. Due to these unique financial barriers, and because child care workers are historically overlooked in other workforce development programs, ECE apprenticeships require designated funding and support services to get off the ground. To build on states’ efforts to utilize ECE apprenticeships, federal funding should target this promising practice to address urgent ECE workforce shortages.

