



April 6, 2021

The Honorable Patty Murray  
Chairwoman, Health, Education, Labor, and  
Pensions Committee  
United States Senate  
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Richard Burr  
Ranking Member, Health, Education, Labor, and  
Pensions Committee  
United States Senate  
Washington, D.C. 20510

*Submitted via email:* [HELPWorkforceComments@help.senate.gov](mailto:HELPWorkforceComments@help.senate.gov)

Re: Comments on Workforce Development

Dear Chairwoman Murray and Ranking Member Burr,

On behalf of the First Five Years Fund (FFYF), thank you for this opportunity to provide input ahead of the Committee's consideration of the National Apprenticeship Act (NAA). FFYF's mission is to ensure all children from birth through age five have equal access to affordable, comprehensive, high-quality care and education to support their healthy development and help them achieve their full potential in school and life. Early learning and care is a fulcrum for the workforce given the necessity of safe child care environments for parents to work or attend school, and its proven long-term benefits mean a more robust workforce in the future. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought the vital role of child care to the forefront of our national consciousness, while also revealing profound flaws in a system that provides foundational support to the American economy.

Prior to the pandemic, 160,000 openings for child care workers were projected annually,<sup>i</sup> and in the last year, an additional 164,000 child care sector jobs were lost and still have not been recovered.<sup>ii</sup> In this critical moment, the early learning workforce needs significant support to ensure the supply of care meets the needs of American families. Early Childhood Education (ECE) registered apprenticeships have demonstrated significant potential for cultivating the child care workforce, and FFYF strongly supports their inclusion and prioritization in the NAA reauthorization to help bolster the existing child care workforce and bring new ECE teachers into the fold.

## I. The Impact of COVID-19 on the Child Care Workforce and Access to Care

Like many sectors of our economy, the child care workforce was enormously impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Many providers, who under normal circumstances operated on razor-thin margins, were required to close, or significantly change their capacity, for health and safety reasons, placing tremendous strain on their budgets. Many were forced to lay off staff or acquire personal debt to stay afloat. Given the demographics of the child care workforce,<sup>iii</sup> these effects have mostly been shouldered by women, specifically women of color. The dire effects of the pandemic will be felt for months to come, and the early learning and care sector will need sustained support to address these employment losses and the wider disruption of services they have caused.

Now, more than ever, access to care remains a barrier for many parents who wish to enter and remain in the workforce, sending ripples throughout our economy. Lack of child care has been the [third most frequent reason](#) given by those who are not currently participating in the labor market. This is significant because, in addition to providing greater job stability and overall economic security, high-quality care and education offers wide-ranging short- and long-term benefits for children socially, emotionally, and academically, ensuring children enter kindergarten prepared to learn and succeed. Well-qualified early childhood educators are integral to ensuring quality care, and education and training are key to an educator's success. As such, earning a credential or degree is increasingly valued, but attaining the education required presents challenges. Course work can be expensive and time consuming, and for those already working with children, it may be financially and logistically impossible to step away from work to do so.

To address these barriers, some states and localities have started ECE apprenticeship programs, which offer “earn while you learn” opportunities to individuals, whether they’re new to the field or seeking additional training, while also allowing providers to improve the quality and effectiveness of their staff. As the Committee looks for proposals to enhance workforce training in direct relation to economic recovery; “to develop, modernize, and diversify the national apprenticeship system;” and “to encourage innovation to address worker and industry needs,” we believe ECE apprenticeships provide a path forward in all these respects. Expanded opportunities for ECE apprenticeships within the NAA would not only strengthen the talent pipeline for the ECE workforce, but also help further spur our ongoing national recovery by allowing more parents to return to work.

## II. The Early Educators Apprenticeship Act

One promising proposal to realize this vision for ECE apprenticeship has already been introduced this Congress. In February, a bipartisan group of Senators, including your Committee colleague Senator Casey, introduced the Early Educators Apprenticeship Act ([S. 186](#)). This bill would establish a grant program to support states to develop, administer, and evaluate registered apprenticeship programs that provide early educators with the requisite knowledge and skills to deliver high-quality early learning to our nation's youngest learners. The proposal goes further by prioritizing these efforts within underserved and rural communities, helping to target expansion efforts in areas that need it most.

The Early Educators Apprenticeship Act would also promote efforts to integrate ECE registered apprenticeship programs with existing systems of higher education, allowing apprentices to earn academic credits while completing a program. The increased availability of these innovative programs would begin to alleviate many of the workforce challenges facing the child care community. Further, such an investment would help to establish a more integrated system of education, training, and related supports. This would not only help prepare the next generation of early educators at a crucial time in our nation's history—it would also ensure that the registered apprenticeship model can be expanded and used in more sectors of our economy. Moreover, the “work-and-learn” aspect of a registered apprenticeship program is extremely conducive to the needs of the ECE workforce, who often must balance educational and career ambitions with the need for a steady paycheck.

The need for designated funding for ECE apprenticeship programs within a newly reauthorized NAA is significant. Many early learning and care providers, if not most, are small businesses or nonprofits who often lack the capacity or resources necessary to sponsor a registered apprenticeship program. Additionally, child care has historically been viewed and treated as a workforce support rather than as a workforce sector of its own as reflected in many Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) state plans. Due to these unique challenges, ECE apprenticeships require dedicated funding and support services to fully take root and bear fruit. As part of your Committee's consideration of the NAA, we therefore encourage you to focus specific support for ECE apprenticeships—modeled on the approach of the Early Educators Apprenticeship Act—to help meet these urgent workforce challenges.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide input ahead of your Committee's consideration of the NAA. We look forward to working with you and your colleagues on the Committee in the coming months to ensure our nation's early learning and care needs can be met through a reinvigorated and modernized registered apprenticeship system. If we can provide any further comments, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Sincerely,



Sarah Rittling  
Executive Director  
First Five Years Fund

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<sup>i</sup> The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) projects 160,200 openings for child care workers each year over the next decade due to retirements or changing occupations. (<https://www.bls.gov/ooh/personal-care-and-service/childcare-workers.htm#tab-6>)

<sup>ii</sup> In February 2020, BLS reported 1,046,500 employed in the child care sector. That number dropped dramatically to 673,200 in April, and preliminary data indicates it has rebounded somewhat to 882,500 in March 2021. ("Child Day Care Services" seasonally adjusted – <https://www.bls.gov/webapps/legacy/cesbtab1.htm>)

<sup>iii</sup> According to BLS, 93% of child care workers are women, and nearly 45% are Black, Asian, or Latino. (<https://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat11.htm>)