



MASSACHUSETTS
**Department of
Early Education and Care**

EEC Research Priorities

Policy, Research, and Data Analytics Division

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Introduction

The Department of Early Education and Care (EEC) is committed to building research and evaluation capacity to inform policy decisions and program/service improvement. EEC has identified research priorities aligned with four of the agency's strategic objectives: 1) Family Access, 2) Program Quality, 3) Program Stability, and 4) Workforce Supports.

The goal of documenting and publicly sharing these priorities is to spread awareness and align researchers and other interested stakeholders behind some of the most pressing questions, efforts, and challenges facing the field. These priorities bring greater transparency to gaps in knowledge and highlight opportunities for further research to promote continuous learning and improvement within and outside of EEC.

These research priorities are designed to both reflect existing research and evaluation efforts at the agency and future research priorities that could be answered through external research partnerships. Research partnerships that promote a shared understanding of the needs and experiences of communities furthest from opportunity are of particular interest. The research agenda is a living document that reflects, and is responsive to, the agency's priorities, and will be updated regularly as the field and policy context evolves.

Please contact Ashley White, Director of Research, at Ashley.A.White@mass.gov if you have any questions or would like to discuss this further.

Family Access

Reforming the Child Care Financial Assistance (CCFA) System

How have changes to the CCFA system improved family experiences and access?

- To what extent have EEC's recent CCFA reforms (including technology and policy changes) altered and improved family experiences with the system (e.g., time to completion for different steps in the eligibility and placement process, customer satisfaction)?
- To what extent have EEC's recent reimbursement rate increases increased provider participation in the Child Care Financial Assistance (CCFA) System? How are private tuition rates changing over time and what is the nature of the relationship between CCFA rates and tuition rates?*
- To what extent does the 2024 CCDF rule limiting family co-payments and requiring prospective payments to programs improve family affordability within the child care financial assistance system? What are the characteristics of the families most impacted by the change?

Family Access to Early Education and Out-of-School Time Care

How has the supply and demand of child care changed over time?

- How have patterns of program enrollment changed over time? What are families' preferences and how do they vary by family characteristics and geography?*
- Where are the biggest gaps in access to care across Massachusetts by age group and geography? What are the characteristics of communities where there are access gaps?*
- What regions, if any, have seen the most recent growth in child care supply? How does this compare to what we know about current gaps in supply?
- What does the Family Friend and Neighbor Care landscape look like in Massachusetts? What are the needs and experiences of Family Friend and Neighbor Care providers? What are the characteristics of families that use Family, Friend, and Neighbor Care?
- Do the CCFA contracts repurchased in 2024 improve the equitable distribution of the supply of care?*

How have patterns of access for 3- and 4-year-olds changed over time in Massachusetts?

- How has the availability of care for 3- and 4-year-olds changed over time in communities across Massachusetts? How have patterns of access for 3- and 4-year-olds changed in communities receiving CPPI funds?
- As access to preschool increases, how can we ensure that programs serving infants and toddlers are adequately supported?
- How and to what extent are programs braiding funding to expand preschool access? In what ways are different funding streams supporting children and allowing programs to invest in different aspects of their operations?
- How can CCFA contracts be used as a mechanism to promote greater access to high-quality preschool programs?

***These questions are currently being addressed by existing EEC partnerships with external research teams, though EEC may still be interested in further research on these topics.

Program Quality

Measuring and Improving Program Quality

To what extent are programs providing high quality care and engaging in continuous quality improvement?

- To what extent is the state licensing system effectively supporting health and safety and program quality?
- To what extent are programs using formal evidence-based curriculum? What is the nature of interactions between educators and children within programs according to formal observational measures? To what extent and how are programs engaging with families?
- To what extent are EEC-funded quality supports leading to changes in program quality and leader and educator skill development?**
- To what extent do Early Education and Out of School Time (EEOST) grants improve program capacity and quality?
- To what extent do child care financial assistance contracts improve the quality of care?**
- To what extent is the Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation Program (ECMHC) supporting the social-emotional development and behavioral health of children? What are the effects of this program on suspensions and/or expulsions?

What are elementary school outcomes for children who received child care financial assistance?**

- What are early academic outcomes for children who received child care financial assistance prior to enrolling in the public school system? How do elementary school outcomes differ for children who did not receive CCFA and/or did not participate in formal care?
- What proportion of children who receive CCFA are retained by third grade compared to the state average? What proportion of children who received CCFA prior to enrollment in the public school system also received special education services in preschool through third grade?

Program Stability

Supporting Broader System Financing

To what extent are programs across the Commonwealth financially stable?

- How does the cost of operating an early education program vary by region, program characteristics, and compensation levels? How can our understanding of program costs inform CCFA rates, preschool expansion efforts, and operational funding?**
- What investments do operational funding allow programs to make? To what extent is operational funding stabilizing programs, building program capacity, improving recruitment and retention of the workforce, and bolstering program quality?
- What promising strategies exist to provide business support (shared services, tax support, etc.) to early education programs in Massachusetts and to what extent are they having an impact on programs' financial stability? What lessons can we learn from innovative approaches in other states?

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Workforce Support

Understanding the Early Educator Landscape

*What are the characteristics and experiences of the early education workforce?***

- What is the current supply and distribution of early educators in Massachusetts? What is the size, characteristics, and motivations of the early educator pipeline?
- What are the common entry points and career pathways for the early education field? What are the common exit pathways? To what extent are educators leaving the profession entirely?

Workforce Strategies and Early Educator Outcomes

How are various workforce interventions impacting the recruitment, retention, and career progression of early educators?

- Has the early education and care staff financial assistance pilot had an impact on recruitment and retention? How has the program addressed educators' own child care needs and well being?**
- How do apprenticeship programs impact recruitment, retention, and career outcomes among their participants? What are some outcomes of interest that may indicate program efficacy?
- What are key early implementation lessons and experiences related to the rollout of the new credentialing system? What are the effects of the credentialing system on educator progression, recruitment and retention, and skill building?
- What additional workforce strategies are needed to further support recruitment, retention, and career progression?

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Appendix A: Example Research Partnerships

[Abt Associates](#)

- Conducting a multi-year evaluation of Early Childhood Support Organizations (ECSO) in partnership with New Profit.
- Supporting CPPI districts in conducting local needs assessments to inform their preschool expansion efforts.

[American Institutes for Research \(AIR\)](#)

- Updating and refining EEC's cost estimation models to inform financial assistance rates and other EEC investments.

[Boston University Wheelock Educational Policy Center \(WEPC\)](#)

- Using a federal data and research capacity grant from the Office of the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) to build upon data and research efforts at EEC to support the early educator workforce.

[Boston University School of Social Work and Brandeis Heller School for Social Policy and Management](#)

- Through two federal grants from the ACF, examining the effectiveness of child care financial assistance rates and contract requirements on families' access to quality child care.

[MEF Associates & Tufts Interdisciplinary Evaluation Research \(TIER\)](#)

- Conducting a needs assessment for Massachusetts as a part of the federal Preschool Development Grant (PDG).

Appendix B: Data Resources

[EEC's Public Data Guide](#)

[Data on Licensed and Funded Child Care Programs](#)

[C3 Survey Instruments](#)