



# RESEARCH AGENDA

EEC Policy, Strategy and Research (PSR) Division

Originally published: October 2024

Last updated: February 2026

# Table of Contents

Overview .....	3
Family Access and Affordability .....	4
Program Quality .....	5
Program Stability .....	6
Workforce Supports .....	7
Cross-Cutting Research Questions .....	8

# Overview

The Department of Early Education and Care (EEC) is committed to building research and evaluation capacity to inform policy and resource decisions and continuous improvement. EEC has identified research priorities aligned with the agency's strategic objectives to support progress:



## 1. FAMILY ACCESS AND AFFORDABILITY

Families have equitable access to quality and affordable early education and care in the communities in which they live, learn, and work.



## 2. PROGRAM QUALITY

Programs licensed or funded by EEC support children's health and safety and provide high-quality environments that are culturally responsive, inclusive, and support children's learning and development in partnership with families.



## 3. PROGRAM STABILITY

Programs licensed or funded by EEC are operationally stable and financially sustainable.



## 4. WORKFORCE SUPPORTS

A diverse field of educators, leaders, and program staff is competitively compensated and supported by clear professional pathways that promote quality, retention, and advancement.

The goal of documenting and publicly sharing these research priorities is to focus and align researchers and other interested stakeholders behind some of the most pressing questions, efforts, and challenges facing the system and field. EEC's Research Agenda is not meant to be exhaustive, and the agency recognizes that there are other areas of inquiry worthy of attention and consideration that are not included in this document. These priorities are designed to help guide and inform state policy-making and future resource allocation by bringing greater transparency to gaps in knowledge and promoting collective understanding of the implementation and effects of key investments and policies.

These research priorities reflect both existing research and evaluation efforts and future research priorities. EEC is committed to prioritizing sub-group analyses by key characteristics of interest such as geography, program type, age group served, and community characteristics, wherever appropriate. Research partnerships that promote a shared understanding of the needs and lived experiences of communities, families, educators, and programs that are furthest from opportunity are also a priority. This research agenda is a living document that reflects the agency's current priorities. As such, it will be updated regularly as the policy context evolves.

### More on the [Research and Data](#) webpage:

- [EEC'S Public Data Guide](#)
- [Publicly Available Data Sets](#)
- [C3 Survey Instruments](#)
- [MA Research Projects and Reports](#)
- [EEC Data Briefs](#)

*For questions about EEC's research priorities or to share research relevant to the field, please contact the EEC research team at [EECResearchData@mass.gov](mailto:EECResearchData@mass.gov).*

*The remainder of this document includes EEC research questions by strategic priority and focus area. Questions that are designated as near-term priorities within each section include ongoing research that EEC is already engaged in (denoted by asterisks) and that is likely to be more feasible to execute in the short-term. This categorization is not intended to discourage potential research on other questions.*



## Family Access and Affordability

### Supporting and Expanding Access to Early Education and Out-of-School Time Care

#### NEAR-TERM PRIORITIES

- What areas of the state have seen the most growth in child care supply and what factors are contributing to growth? Where are the biggest child care access gaps by age group and geography, and what factors are contributing to these gaps? To what extent is care available during non-traditional hours and how is this changing over time?
- What motivates communities to participate in the Commonwealth Preschool Partnership Initiative (CPPI)? What are the characteristics of the partnerships between school districts and community-based programs serving preschool children in CPPI communities, including successes, challenges, and opportunities? How have patterns of access, programming, and outcomes for families and children changed in communities receiving CPPI funds?
- To what extent does the Employer Pilot program improve access to affordable, high quality child care and expand capacity in the early education and care sector? What lessons can be applied to inform scaling or replicating the model? What modifications are needed for scaling?\*

#### LONGER-TERM PRIORITIES

- How and to what extent are communities and programs braiding funding to expand access to early education and out-of-school time care? In what ways are different funding streams supporting children and allowing programs to invest in different aspects of their operations?
- How are Coordinated Family and Community Engagement programs (CFCEs) supporting parent education, child development, and access to other family assistance resources and services? What are families' experiences with CFCEs and how do these experiences vary across Massachusetts?

### Improving Child Care Affordability

#### NEAR-TERM PRIORITIES

- To what extent have EEC's recent reimbursement rate adjustments increased provider participation in the Child Care Financial Assistance (CCFA) System? Do process and policy changes among family access administrators increase the likelihood that programs accept and enroll children utilizing CCFA?\*
- How are private tuition rates for early education and care changing over time and what has that meant for family affordability by different household characteristics such as income level and geography? What is the nature of the relationship between changes in CCFA rates and private tuition rates?

#### LONGER-TERM PRIORITIES

- To what extent have CCFA reforms (including technology modernization and regulation and policy changes) altered and improved family experiences with the system?



## Program Quality

### Understanding Existing Program Practices that Promote Quality

#### NEAR-TERM PRIORITIES

- How are programs supporting continuous quality improvement, staff professional development and planning time? What are the characteristics of the programs that have these supports in place? What are the barriers for programs to engage in these practices and how can EEC better direct/design resources to address these challenges?
- How are programs supporting the behavioral health of children, promoting social-emotional learning, and supporting educator wellness? What is the incidence of exclusionary practices across programs?

#### LONGER-TERM PRIORITIES

- To what extent are programs using high-quality curriculum and assessment? What is the nature of interactions between educators and children within programs according to formal observational measures and other data sources?
- To what extent are programs engaging with families and providing or coordinating family supports and resources? What types of services do families value and need and to what extent are existing programs meeting that need?

### Promoting Professional Learning & Improving Educator Effectiveness

#### NEAR-TERM PRIORITIES

- To what extent are EEC funded supports such as the Statewide Professional Development Academy, Professional Development Centers, Early Childhood Support Organizations, CPPI, and PRISM grants impacting programs in key quality areas (e.g., leadership and educator support, high quality curriculum and assessment implementation, classroom interactions and instruction, and family engagement)?
- To what extent are continuous quality improvement, staffing and educator training/support-focused expectations in EEC's child care financial assistance contracts leading to higher quality of care?\*

#### LONGER-TERM PRIORITIES

- To what extent are behavioral health supports (e.g., Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation Program (ECMHC), Pyramid Model) improving program processes, supporting educator wellness and building educator skills to support the social-emotional development and behavioral health of children? What impact is the program having on reducing the incidence of exclusionary discipline and promoting inclusion?



# Program Stability

## Strengthening Program's Financial and Operational Stability

### NEAR-TERM PRIORITIES

- 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, operational funding, and other state investments?\*
- 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 are remaining program needs?

### LONGER-TERM PRIORITIES

- To what extent does pre-licensing and/or early licensing support for family child care programs improve licensing compliance and program sustainability? What additional early supports are needed to support family child care programs and promote program longevity and quality?
- To what extent have EEC's capital investments for programs improved program operations and created fiscal stability through facility upgrades? How have these investments been used? What are some of the limitations of existing capital improvement programs and how can these inform any future policy and program design efforts?
- What promising strategies exist to provide business support to early education programs in Massachusetts and to what extent are they having an impact on programs' financial and operational stability? What lessons can we learn from innovative approaches in other states?
- What are the most common reasons Family Child Care (FCC) programs close? What are the characteristics of recently closed FCCs? To what extent does the family child care closure rate and reasons for closure differ from small business closures in other sectors? How can any identified trends inform potential policy and program solutions?



# Workforce Supports

## Understanding Early Educator Characteristics and Experiences

### NEAR-TERM PRIORITIES

- What is the current size, composition, and distribution of early educators across Massachusetts? How do educator characteristics, qualifications, and years of experience vary by region, program type, and role (teachers, directors, family child care providers)?\*
- What are the common entry points and career pathways for early educators? To what extent do participants in different pathways enter and stay in the ECE workforce? Does turnover and tenure vary by pathway?\*

### LONGER-TERM PRIORITIES

- What are the rates and patterns of entry, mobility, turnover, and attrition in the ECE workforce? What is the relationship between program characteristics and support and educator turnover/retention? What are the characteristics, experiences, and backgrounds of ECE educators with long-term retention?

## Investing in Workforce Strategies and Early Educator Outcomes

### NEAR-TERM PRIORITIES

- How do program leaders (including FCC owners, directors, and other program leaders and administrators) support educator retention and development, and what supports do leaders need to continue to grow and stay in the field?
- What elements of a supportive work environment are most important to educators and how does this differ by educator characteristics, professional experience, and role? To what extent do educators work in supportive environments (staff support, paid planning time, support for PD including curriculum, leadership, compensation and benefits)? How do working conditions affect retention and advancement?

### LONGER-TERM PRIORITIES

- How are EEC workforce investments and programs shaping the composition and experience of the ECE workforce and which ones are having the most substantial impact in terms of recruitment, retention, career advancement, and educator well-being?
- As the new credentialing system is implemented, to what extent does it alter trends and patterns around recruitment, retention, and advancement?
- In what ways is compensation (wages and benefits) shaping the supply, characteristics and sustainability of the ECE workforce? How are those trends impacted by and/or connected to the broader economic context?
- How do apprenticeship programs impact recruitment, retention, and career advancement and outcomes among their participants over time?

# Cross-Cutting Research Questions

## NEAR-TERM PRIORITIES

- What supply of early educators is needed to meet current and projected demand for care? To what extent is the current supply of early educators influencing family access to child care?\*
- What is the relationship between early educator wages and tuition rates? How does the relationship differ based on program characteristics?
- What are elementary school outcomes (e.g., 3rd grade MCAS scores, grade promotion, special education, attendance and discipline incidents) for children who participated in child care financial assistance (CCFA) and/or CPPI?

## LONGER-TERM PRIORITIES

- What are employment patterns among families with young children over time, and what economic, social, and policy factors have contributed to these changes?
- What is the impact of increased investment in educator compensation on programs, educators, and family access/affordability?
- How does expanding publicly funded preschool impact program stability and family access and affordability for other age groups, including infants and toddlers? What are some implementation strategies for expanding access for certain age groups that mitigate potential disruptions in access and program sustainability?