

California Early Educator Experience and Interest in Teaching Birth to Three

California will soon offer transitional kindergarten (TK) to all four-year-olds, a school-based option for early care and education (ECE). According to the state Master Plan for Early Learning and Care, universal TK for four-year-olds should enable more children age three and younger to be served in other settings like child care centers and family child care homes. To investigate how this transition is impacting the ECE workforce, the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (CSCCE) conducted an early educator survey in the spring of 2024. The survey asked how early educators were faring during this transition, because California's TK expansion strategy asks current teachers of four-year-olds to make a grand pivot. It's not just a matter of getting the right curricula, books, and furniture for the classroom—many educators who have built a career on teaching four-year-olds will have to adapt their teaching practice for a younger age group.

In this snapshot, we share data from the 2024 [California ECE Workforce Study](#) on early educators' readiness to teach children under four years old. We also look at whether early educators are thinking about changing jobs or leaving the field, and we explore how they might react if they could no longer teach four-year-olds in their current classroom.

945 educators responded

508 family child care providers

437 center teaching staff

Key Findings

- ① The ECE workforce, including pre-K teachers, typically has experience with children birth through age three, and many educators hold degrees with coursework covering this age group.
- ② Family child care (FCC) providers typically already serve young children in a mixed-age setting. Center teaching staff, meanwhile, are sometimes more accustomed to teaching four-year-olds.
- ③ Nearly 60% of center teachers would consider switching to teaching three-year-olds if their programs stopped serving four-year-olds, but only 20% would want to teach infants or toddlers (e.g., birth to age two and a half). Simultaneously, 45% of center teachers would want the option to become a TK teacher.

In 2024, we surveyed early educators regarding their knowledge about and experience working with children from birth through age three.

The majority of FCC providers in our sample had an infant or toddler as the youngest child in their program.

88% of FCC educators work with at least one child age two or younger, and 93% work with at least one child age three or younger

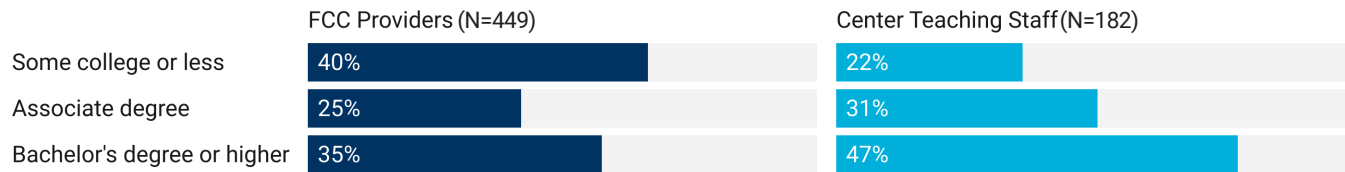
42% of center-based educators work with at least one child age two or younger, and 85% work with at least one child age three or younger

FCC providers caring for the youngest children were slightly more likely to hold a bachelor's degree than providers who only care for older children, but center teaching staff were less likely to have a bachelor's degree.

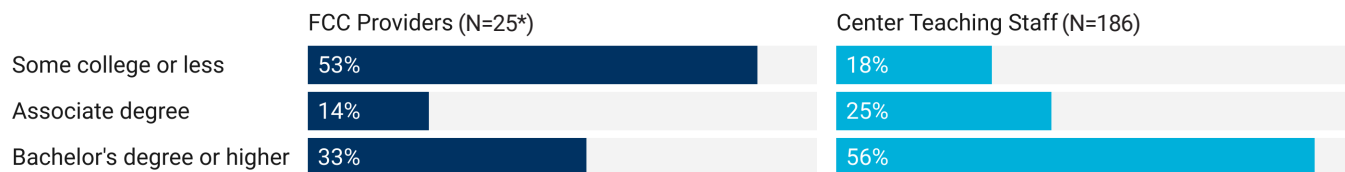
Educational Attainment of Early Educators

California Early Care and Education Workforce Study, 2024

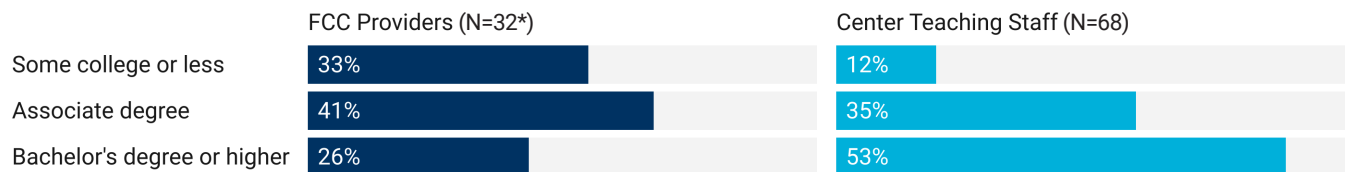
Youngest child under age 3



Youngest child age 3



Youngest child age 4 or 5



Source: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley

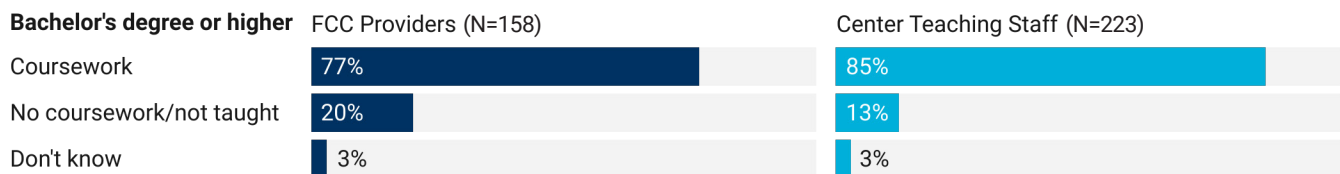
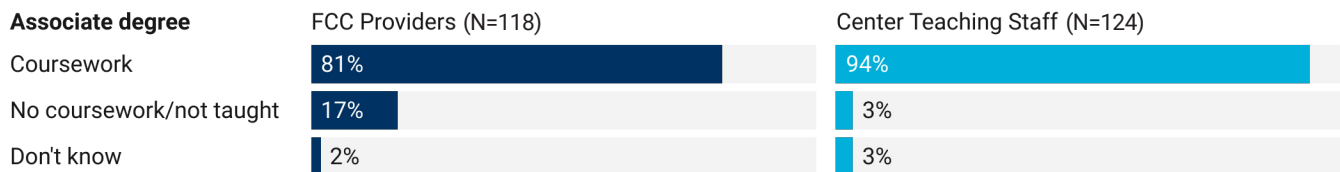
*Interpret with caution (N<50)

Degree holders usually have completed coursework on teaching children under age three.

Center teaching staff with degrees are particularly likely to have completed coursework on social-emotional learning for children under age three.

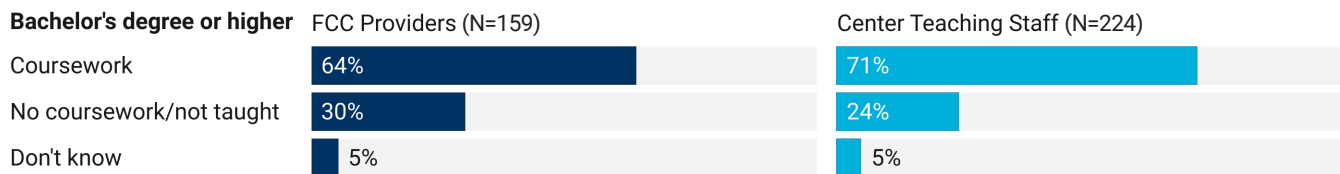
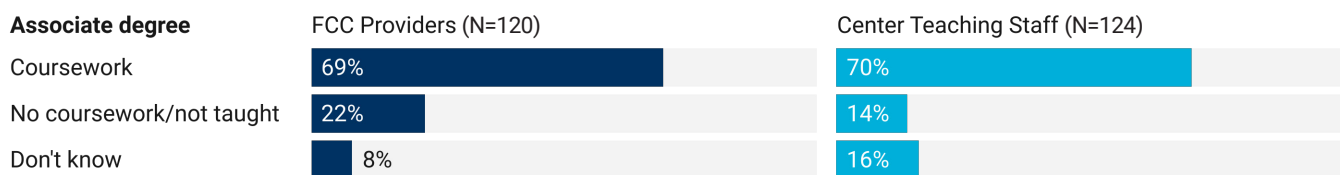
Early Educators With Coursework on Social-Emotional Learning for Children Under Age Three

California Early Care and Education Workforce Study, 2024



Early Educators With Coursework on Literacy for Children Under Age Three

California Early Care and Education Workforce Study, 2024



Source: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley

Additionally, we estimate that about two thirds of FCC providers and about one half of center-based teachers have participated in professional development opportunities focused on infants and toddlers. Center-based teachers working with children under age three were more likely than their peers working in pre-K to have training related to infants and toddlers.

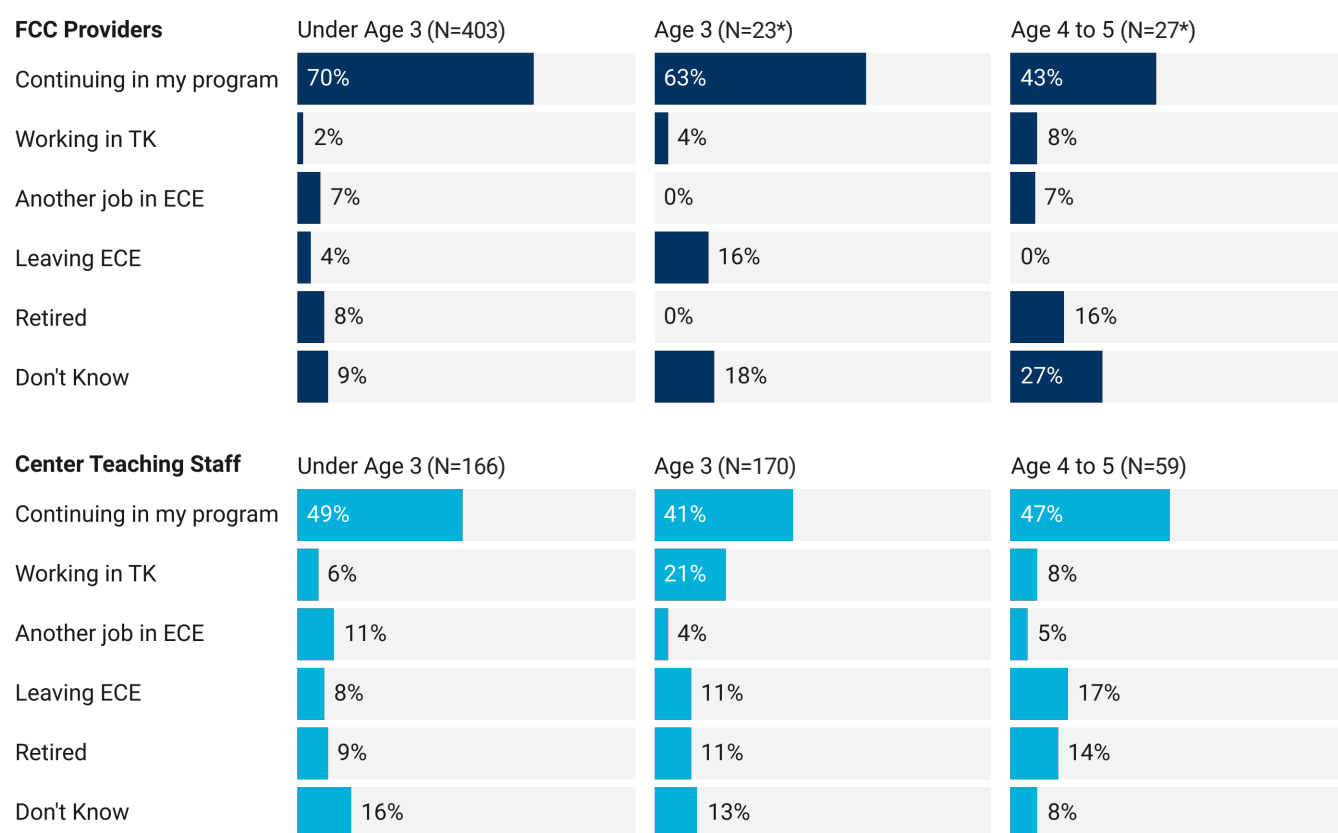
Early educators typically want to keep working in their current program, but some are weighing other options.

FCC providers who now care for children from birth to age three are more confident they'll still be operating in three years: 70% plan to continue their current program.

Center teachers currently working with children age three and older were particularly likely to see themselves working in TK (21%). Notably, most teachers in our sample who worked with three-year-olds also worked with four-year-olds (TK age).

Early Educators' Plans in Three Years, By Age of Youngest Child in the Classroom

California Early Care and Education Workforce Study, 2024



Source: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley

*Interpret with caution (N<50)

Without public funding, providers' financial health is increasingly dire, and some are looking for new work.

While only 14% of FCC providers have looked for work in the past three months, providers who currently cater to TK-age children were twice as likely to have looked for another job (24%, compared to 12% who serve the infant-toddler age group).

Meanwhile, approximately 26% of center teaching staff have looked for other work in the last three months (though not necessarily a job in early care and education). Interestingly, there wasn't much difference among teachers based on the age of children in their group: rather, educators with a bachelor's degree were particularly likely to be job hunting.

Additionally, 112 center-based educators gave a follow-up description about why they had been looking for other work. In this group, there were common themes:

- 39%** reported they needed to make more money
- 22%** were seeking a specific classroom environment or job opportunity
- 17%** referenced challenges with their current employer or working conditions

FCC educators speak:

“Family child care is not recognized as essential and is not treated with respect. It also barely pays the bills I have now, let alone when my child is going to high school or college. I need more stability and—heaven forbid—some benefits like health care and unemployment.”

— Family child care provider, Contra Costa County

“This job means hard work and little reward. The kids make me happy. But the amount of time, energy, and sacrifice doesn't add up.”

— Family child care provider, Sacramento County

Center teaching staff speak:

“There is not much support within the pre-K classrooms. There are more and more demands along with behavioral, physical, mental issues with the children and very little resources to assist teachers.”

— Assistant teacher, Orange County

“I feel overworked and underpaid in my current position.”

— Lead teacher, Alameda County

While many center teachers and assistants have experience with younger children, they may not want to work with them in the future.

We asked the full sample of center teaching staff about working with two groups of young children: infants and toddlers (birth to age two and a half) or early preschool (age two and a half through three).

67% of our center teaching staff sample had current or past experience working with young preschoolers

52% of our center teaching staff sample had current or past experience working with infants and toddlers

When looking more closely at the data on infant-toddler teaching experience, we find educators in Head Start or Title 5 centers were less likely to have experience with this age group (45%, compared with 61% of staff at other centers).

Among those with previous experience working with infants and toddlers, around one half felt they would enjoy returning to that age group. Among those with no experience, only one quarter thought they would enjoy it.

We asked center teachers specifically working with TK-age children what they would do if they could no longer work with four-year-olds in a preschool setting. Educators could select multiple options for their next move. Fortunately, very few (7%) said this would cause them to stop working in early care and education.

57% would pursue a job in a three-year-old classroom

20% would pursue a job in an infant-toddler classroom

45% would pursue a job in TK, including possibly enrolling in a teacher prep program

California has invested substantially in expanding transitional kindergarten for four-year-olds, in the hope that more children age three and younger can be served in other settings.

Fortunately, the ECE workforce possesses both knowledge and experience working with children birth through age three.

- Most FCC educators already work with infants and toddlers.
- Many early educators have professional experience in working with infants, toddlers, and younger preschool children, as well as related degrees.

At the same time, shifting enrollment trends are taking place in the context of an unstable profession: wages for center- and home-based educators are near the minimum wage, and some early educators are not sure they will remain in the field.

- FCC providers who have built a program around serving preschool-age children are worried about going out of business.
- About one half of center teaching staff expect to still be working in a center in three years.
- Some educators in both settings are already looking into other job opportunities, with the most common reason being insufficient pay.

More than one half of preschool teachers would consider pivoting to teach three-year-olds, but only one in five are interested in teaching infants or toddlers. Instead, those educators would rather become TK teachers.

To align career opportunities with educators' aspirations, California should facilitate pathways for teaching birth to three AND teaching TK.

Based on their previous experiences and coursework, center teaching staff are largely prepared to teach children from birth through age three. However, without resources to increase teacher pay, centers will struggle to staff classrooms. Some educators may not want to teach children under age four, and some programs serving younger children may struggle with funding: young children have smaller group sizes by law, and programs may not be able to raise prices enough to offset the reduction in enrollment. At the same time, preschool teachers are only eligible to be aides in TK classrooms if they enroll in a credential program. Clearly, California needs a fast-track pathway to help experienced preschool teachers follow their students into TK classrooms.

Suggested Citation

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Editor: Deborah Meacham

About CSCCE

The Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (CSCCE), founded in 1999, is the national leader in early care and education workforce research and policy. CSCCE provides research and analysis on the preparation, working conditions, and compensation of the early care and education workforce. We develop policy solutions and create spaces for teaching, learning, and educator activism. Our vision is an effective public early care and education system that secures racial, gender, and economic justice for the women whose labor is the linchpin of stable, quality services.

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