

The Early Care and Education Workforce of Sonoma County

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Introduction

Early care and education (ECE) programs provide nurturing environments for young children—and the learning environments of children simultaneously serve as the working environments of early educators. In Sonoma County, approximately 140 child care centers serve children from birth through age five, along with more than 330 family child care providers operating in their own homes. Centers include sites funded by Head Start or State Preschool, centers enrolling children with child care subsidies, and centers enrolling children with no public funding, both as nonprofit or for-profit entities.

Building on the [California Early Care and Education Workforce Study](#), this report provides a snapshot of the state of the licensed ECE workforce in Sonoma County. **Chapter 1** offers a profile of its core members: family child care providers and center-based educators (directors, lead teachers, and assistants).¹ **Chapter 2** describes the state of educator well-being, and **Chapter 3** explores stability for center- and home-based programs and for professionals in the field.

About the Study

The Sonoma County Workforce Study was conducted by the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (CSCCE) in Spring and Summer 2023. The study sample includes 224 educators across three groups: 86 family child care (FCC) providers, 52 center directors, and 86 center teachers and assistants. The FCC sample includes 50 “large” and 36 “small” FCC providers—a distinction in licensure that corresponds to the maximum group size (up to eight children for a small license and up to 14 for a large license). The center director sample covers nearly one third of all centers in the county, and the FCC provider sample covers approximately one quarter of all providers in the county.

The survey took place online in English and Spanish. We recruited study participants through email and/or text message invitations to all program leaders (center directors and FCC providers) through contact information furnished by River to Coast Children’s Services and Sonoma 4Cs, the state-funded resource and referral agencies for child care in the county. First 5 Sonoma County and its partner organizations conducted additional waves of outreach.

¹ Transitional kindergarten (TK) is a growing offering for four-year-olds in California’s public schools. Its workforce, however, was not included in the scope of the county study. For preliminary findings on this burgeoning new arm of the ECE workforce, refer to [CSCCE’s statewide report](#) (Montoya et al., 2022b).

Site-level data from center directors are weighted by Head Start and Title 5 contract status, and FCC providers are weighted by small or large program licensure.² These adjustments allow us to align our sample with the full population of sites in the county found in the resource and referral agency data. In many tables in the report, however, we annotate tables with small subsamples using an asterisk and encourage readers to exercise caution in interpreting the results.

In some sections of the report, we compare responses from Sonoma County with responses from our statewide sample. Our statewide sample participated in the same survey in 2023 as part of the ongoing California Early Care and Education Workforce Study begun in 2020.³

In this report, we present findings by **provider type**: FCC provider, center director, and center teacher and assistant. We also disaggregate findings for a closer look in select tables, using dimensions such as **FCC size** (small or large license) and **center funding type** (Head Start and Title 5, versus all other centers). We group Head Start and Title 5 centers together for two reasons: first, many programs hold contracts, and second, our study sample size is not large enough for more granular analysis.

Core Findings

County ECE Workforce Profile

Educator Characteristics

- Latina early educators⁴ comprise close to one half of FCC providers and center teachers and assistants in Sonoma County. Most center directors (74 percent) are White. Asian and Black early educators make up 3 percent and 1 percent of the center teacher and assistant workforce, respectively.

² Title 5 funding includes the California State Preschool Program and the General Child Care and Development (CCTR) program.

³ To read about our ongoing statewide study, please visit

<https://cscce.berkeley.edu/projects/california-early-care-and-education-workforce-study/>.

⁴ Because the early care and education workforce is overwhelmingly composed of individuals who identify as women, we use the gender-specific term “Latina” to describe members of the ECE workforce who identify as part of the Latin American diaspora. However, we know that data collection has not always accounted for gender diversity beyond a male/female binary. We gratefully acknowledge the contributions of early educators who identify as men, nonbinary, or another gender identity and recognize that the gendered oppression of women in the ECE workforce is related to the gender-based oppression of nonbinary, trans, and genderqueer educators.

- About one half of FCC providers and center directors are age 50 or older, along with one quarter of center teachers and assistants.
- Approximately 20 percent of FCC providers hold a bachelor's degree or higher, along with 37 percent of center teachers and assistants. Meanwhile, 58 percent of center directors hold a bachelor's degree or higher.
- 79 percent of center directors have 15 or more years of experience in ECE, along with 53 percent of FCC providers and 36 percent of center teachers and assistants.

Compensation

- Small FCC providers earn similar annual wages in Sonoma County and statewide (\$31,000 to \$42,500), while large FCC providers in the county tend to earn less than similar providers elsewhere (\$38,000 to \$50,400).
- Center directors reported a median wage of \$62,400, which is slightly lower than the median in our statewide sample.
- Center lead teacher salaries fall in a range of \$19.75 to \$22.38 and assistant teacher salaries fall between \$17.50 to \$19.00, according to directors.
- Sonoma County centers are somewhat less likely to offer health insurance or retirement benefits compared to centers statewide. Consequently, center-based teachers and assistants in Sonoma County are less likely to have any health insurance (88 percent) or retirement savings (56 percent) than our statewide sample.

Staffing Patterns

- FCC providers are less likely to have assistants, particularly paid assistants, compared to statewide: 83 percent of small FCC providers reported working alone, and only 30 percent of large FCC providers had a paid assistant.
- By comparison, centers in Sonoma County tend to have numbers of employees similar to the statewide average, with approximately eight teachers and assistants.

Center Turnover and Vacancies

- Most centers reported turnover in at least one position between 2021 and 2023, and about one half of centers had a vacancy at the time of the survey. Our small sample of Head Start and Title 5 sites suggests that recent Sonoma County turnover and current vacancies were somewhat lower than statewide.
- Non-Head Start and Title 5 sites in Sonoma County showed similar levels of turnover to the rest of the state.
- About one half of directors reported that “low wages or benefits in ECE” were very often an issue driving turnover.

Workforce Well-Being

Professional Well-Being

- Most early educators agreed with statements about “helping children grow and develop” and “making a difference” with their work. By comparison, only around one half of educators agreed they “feel respected” for the work that they do.
- “Working with children with challenging behaviors” was the most common teaching challenge, although FCC providers were much less likely to select this option than early educators working in centers (34 percent of FCC providers, compared to 53 percent of center teachers and assistants).
- A majority of FCC providers felt there were sufficient external resources for addressing challenges with children (69 percent), while 59 percent said the same about challenges with families.
- Center teachers and assistants can almost always rely on supervisors or other co-workers for help with children (96 percent). They also were more likely to agree that outside resources were available for help with families (81 percent, compared to 59 percent of FCC providers).

Economic Well-Being

- FCC providers in Sonoma County were particularly likely to worry about their family’s bills (83 percent) and housing costs (73 percent). Center teachers and assistants in Sonoma County, meanwhile, were particularly likely to worry about their family’s bills (82 percent) and their ability to take time off (62 percent).
- Nearly one half of FCC providers (46 percent) and center teachers and assistants (43 percent) experienced food insecurity, either by not having enough food to eat or by having food of poor quality.
- Compared to our statewide sample, center teachers and assistants in Sonoma County were more likely to participate in public assistance programs. While few center directors leveraged these safety net programs, 45 percent of FCC providers and 50 percent of center teachers and assistants used at least one form of public support—most often Medi-Cal.

Physical and Mental Well-Being

- Center teachers and assistants in Sonoma County reported concern about health risks less often than our statewide sample. For instance, only 34 percent of our Sonoma County sample reported concern about exposure to infections at work,

compared to 57 percent statewide. Meanwhile, FCC providers were similarly likely to be concerned about most health risks in Sonoma County and statewide.

- Approximately 71 percent of FCC providers reported at least one physical health condition, along with 59 percent of center teachers and assistants.
- Most educators reported having enough contact with other adults at work, with positive responses fairly split between “somewhat agree,” “agree,” and “strongly agree.” Meanwhile, center-based educators selected “strongly agree” regarding strategies to cope with stress and keep healthy (29 percent) more often than our statewide sample.

Stability of the Field

Program Stability

- Maintaining sufficient revenue was a common challenge (69 percent of FCC providers and 49 percent of centers). FCC providers were also particularly likely to struggle with maintaining enrollment (60 percent).
- Recruiting qualified staff was the most common center staffing challenge (78 percent), followed by arranging coverage during staff absences (74 percent).
- As transitional kindergarten expands, 42 percent of FCC providers and 72 percent of centers were already experiencing a decline in enrollment of four-year-olds. Some program leaders reported increasing infant and toddler enrollment.
- Around 43 percent of FCC providers had to go without paying themselves at some point between January 2021 and our survey in 2023. Additionally, around one half of large FCC providers took on debt to support their business during the same period.

Career Progression

- Between 2021 and 2023, around 10 percent of current directors advanced from a lead teaching position, and 10 percent of current teachers advanced from assistant teacher positions.
- Nearly two thirds of center teachers and assistants are interested in pursuing further education, along with 39 percent of FCC providers. About one quarter of both groups selected “don’t know.”
- A majority of FCC providers intend to continue providing home-based services in three years (68 percent of small FCC providers and 80 percent of large FCC providers). Around one in ten providers planned to retire.
- 63 percent of directors and 40 percent of teachers and assistants planned to still be working in the same center in three years. Meanwhile, 25 percent of teachers and assistants selected “don’t know.”

Chapter 1. County ECE Workforce Profile



Educator Characteristics

The Sonoma County sample included 225 educators across three groups: FCC providers, center directors, and center teachers and assistants. The educators in our center-based sample work in nearly 60 different sites around the county. The specific job title of center directors in our sample varied, with 42 percent working in another administrator position such as site supervisor or teacher-director.

Demographics

Table 1.1 provides sample demographics, including age, race and ethnicity, and language fluency. The table also reports the proportion of educators born outside the United States, though some educators declined to answer this question. Among the 55 foreign-born educators who identified their specific country of birth, 37 were born in Mexico. The next most common answers were Colombia and Peru, with three respondents each.

Table 1.1. Early Educator Demographics

Sonoma County Early Care and Education Workforce Study, 2023

	FCC Providers	Center Directors	Center Teachers/ Assistants
Age	N=88	N=51	N=87
29 years or younger	2%	4%	23%
30 to 39 years	24%	20%	23%
40 to 49 years	26%	23%	29%
50 to 59 years	23%	32%	24%
60 years or older	25%	22%	1%
Gender	N=74	N=48	N=80
Woman	98%	100%	96%
Man	2%	0%	1%
All other	0%	0%	2%
Race/Ethnicity	N=69	N=46	N=79
Asian	0%	0%	3%
Black	0%	0%	1%
Latina	42%	10%	49%
White	45%	74%	41%
Multiethnic	11%	9%	6%
All other	2%	7%	0%
Language Fluency	N=74	N=49	N=85
English	84%	100%	82%
Spanish	43%	17%	52%
All other	3%	5%	5%
Additional Characteristics	N=72-74	N=47-50	N=80-85
Born in another country	40%	10%	34%
Married or living with partner	70%	64%	56%
Child in household under age 5	25%	20%	20%
Child in household age 6-17	53%	31%	41%

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

Note: All data are self-reported. Some participants opted not to disclose one or more characteristics, such as country of birth. We supply the number of respondents, or N, for each question or set of questions.

Education and Experience

In **Table 1.2**, we describe the educational attainment and years of experience of the ECE workforce. Approximately 20 percent of FCC providers hold a bachelor's degree or higher, along with 58 percent of center directors and 37 percent of center teachers and assistants. Additionally, 53 percent of FCC providers have more than 15 years of experience in the field, along with 79 percent of center directors and 36 percent of their teaching staff.

Table 1.2. Early Educator Education and Experience

Sonoma County Early Care and Education Workforce Study, 2023

	FCC Providers	Center Directors	Center Teachers/ Assistants
Educational Attainment	N=75	N=49*	N=81
High school or less	23%	0%	9%
Some college	33%	18%	21%
Associate degree	25%	24%	33%
Bachelor's degree	13%	32%	35%
Graduate degree(s)	7%	26%	2%
Major of Highest Degree	N=56	N=50	N=77
Early Childhood Education	52%	71%	55%
Child Development	33%	20%	40%
Years of Experience	N=76	N=49*	N=86
Less than 5 years	12%	4%	29%
5 to 15 years	35%	18%	35%
More than 15 years	53%	79%	36%

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

*Interpret with caution (fewer than 50 respondents).

Compensation

Poor compensation is endemic to the ECE field, driven by historical and contemporary factors. The cost of most early care and education is borne by parents, who pay at least 32 percent of their household income in California, a similar share that a family might pay for their housing (California Child Care Resource & Referral Network, 2022). Parents' inability to pay higher prices directly limits the wages that centers can offer or FCC providers can earn, a challenge that disproportionately impacts the women of color and immigrant women who work in early care and education (see **Table 1.1**). As a result, the ECE workforce effectively subsidizes the cost of early care and education through their low wages and inadequate benefits (Montoya et al., 2022a).

Wages

Table 1.3 shows the median annual earnings of FCC providers and center directors, with a statewide estimate for comparison. For FCC providers, we estimate a range of earnings; for center directors, we use self-reported earnings. For more information on our FCC earnings methodology, refer to our report on ECE compensation in California (Montoya et al., 2022a).

FCC provider wages in Sonoma County are similar to California as a whole, though large FCC providers in our statewide sample earned somewhat more than those living in Sonoma County. Center directors, meanwhile, earned slightly lower wages in Sonoma County than statewide. This trend occurred among directors working in Head Start or Title 5 centers as well as those working in other sites.

In **Table 1.3** and also **Table 1.4**, which displays center teacher and assistant wages, our sample size is smaller than in other sections of the report. For instance, only one half of FCC providers answered the survey questions that we use to calculate the wage ranges in **Table 1.3**. In all CSCCE surveys, we allow educators to skip sensitive questions, and lower participation in wage questions is typical.

Table 1.3. Program Leader Median Annual Earnings

Sonoma County Early Care and Education Workforce Study, 2023

	Sonoma County	Statewide
FCC Providers	N=39*	N=230
All respondents	\$34,000 to \$44,600	\$36,000 to \$45,000
FCC License Size		
Small	\$31,000 to \$42,500	\$32,000 to \$42,000
Large	\$38,000 to \$50,400	\$46,800 to \$58,800
Center Directors	N=46*	N=357
All respondents	\$62,400	\$63,800
Program Funding Type		
Head Start/Title 5	\$61,100	\$64,500
All other centers	\$59,800	\$63,800

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

*Interpret with caution (fewer than 50 respondents).

Table 1.4 provides median hourly wages of center teachers and assistants, expressed in two ways for Sonoma County educators: the director-reported pay range and the self-reported wage. The range estimates the median lowest and median highest wages paid at the site level, as reported by the directors and administrators who answered questions about staff at their sites. Meanwhile, the self-reported estimate comes directly from the teaching staff who took our survey.

Self-reported wages tend to fall on the high end of the director-reported pay range (or slightly above). The ranges themselves are compressed, which reflects the history of low wages in the field. For instance, the range for lead teachers is less than \$3 per hour in Sonoma County (**Table 1.4**). Contrary to our statewide sample, we do not find a higher reported pay range for Head Start and Title 5 teachers. This difference could be a feature of our small sample size, so readers should interpret with caution.

Table 1.4. Center Teaching Staff Median Hourly Wages

Sonoma County Early Care and Education Workforce Study, 2023

	Director-Reported Range (County)	Self-Reported (County)	Self-Reported (State)
Lead Teachers	N=42*	N=36*	N=281
All centers	\$19.75 to \$22.38	\$21.78	\$25.00
Program Funding Type			
Head Start/Title 5	\$19.75 to \$22.38	\$23.95	\$26.40
All other centers	\$20.00 to \$24.00	\$21.00	\$23.00
Assistant Teachers	N=29*	N=9**	N=51
All centers	\$17.50 to \$19.00	**	\$19.70
Program Funding Type			
Head Start/Title 5	**	**	\$19.50
All other centers	**	**	\$20.00

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

Note: The “director-reported range” reflects the median lowest and highest wages being paid across sites. By contrast, the “self-reported” wage comes from the teachers and assistants who took our survey and reported their earnings directly.

*Interpret with caution (fewer than 50 respondents).

**Fewer than 10 respondents.

Benefits

To supplement our discussion of wages for center-based staff, we provide an estimate of sites that offer benefits to full-time employees, as reported by center directors (**Table 1.5**). Sonoma County centers are less likely to offer health insurance or retirement benefits compared to centers statewide. The gap between our statewide sample was greater for centers offering benefits to assistant teachers, particularly health insurance (53 percent of centers in Sonoma County and 79 percent statewide). However, our sample of centers reporting benefits for assistants included only 19 sites, so readers should interpret with caution.

Table 1.5. Centers Offering Benefits to Full-Time Teaching Staff

Sonoma County Early Care and Education Workforce Study, 2023

	Sonoma County	Statewide
Lead Teachers	N=42*	N=393
Health insurance	67%	79%
Paid vacation	93%	86%
Retirement	53%	65%
Assistant Teachers	N=19*	N=196
Health insurance	53%	79%
Paid vacation	85%	83%
Retirement	52%	64%

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

*Interpret with caution (fewer than 50 respondents).

To better understand the benefits early educators ultimately use, we also asked educators directly whether they currently have health insurance (**Table 1.6**) or any retirement savings (**Table 1.7**).

For health insurance, we find that FCC providers in Sonoma County are likely to hold health insurance, similar to FCC providers statewide, with very high coverage overall (94 percent). Among center-based staff, teachers and assistants in Sonoma County are less often covered (only 88 percent), whether or not they have access to an employer-sponsored plan. We find no difference between educators working in Head Start or Title 5 and other sites. This reflects numerous challenges, including educators who fall short of qualifying for Medi-Cal but still struggle to afford the cost of health insurance.

Table 1.6. Early Educators With Health Insurance From Any Source

Sonoma County Early Care and Education Workforce Study, 2023

	Sonoma County	Statewide
FCC Providers	N=59	N=495
All respondents	94%	94%
FCC License Size		
Small	93%	94%
Large	97%	93%
Center Directors	N=44*	N=501
All respondents	94%	97%
Program Funding Type		
Head Start/Title 5	92%	98%
All other centers	97%	97%
Center Teachers/Assistants	N=66	N=425
All respondents	88%	97%
Program Funding Type		
Head Start/Title 5	88%	98%
All other centers	88%	94%

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

*Interpret with caution (fewer than 50 respondents).

When looking at retirement (**Table 1.7**), we find that large FCC providers in Sonoma are less likely to have retirement savings from any source than their peers statewide (29 percent versus 37 percent). Small FCC providers in Sonoma County are similar to our statewide sample (22 percent for both). Center teachers and assistants, meanwhile, are less likely to have retirement savings: only 56 percent in Sonoma reported any such savings, compared to 72 percent statewide. This gap appears in centers of all funding types, but educators working in non-Head Start and non-Title 5 sites in Sonoma County in particular are less likely to have retirement savings (only 45 percent).

Table 1.7. Early Educators With Retirement Savings From Any Source

Sonoma County Early Care and Education Workforce Study, 2023

	Sonoma County	Statewide
FCC Providers	N=58	N=499
All respondents	24%	28%
FCC License Size		
Small	22%	22%
Large	29%	37%
Center Directors	N=43*	N=481
All respondents	69%	74%
Head Start/Title 5	55%	81%
All other centers	75%	72%
Center Teachers/Assistants	N=61	N=406
All respondents	56%	72%
Program Funding Type		
Head Start/Title 5	67%	75%
All other centers	45%	68%

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

*Interpret with caution (fewer than 50 respondents).

Staffing Patterns

In their approach to hiring assistants (**Table 1.8**), small FCC providers in Sonoma County are more likely to be working alone (83 percent, compared to 63 percent statewide). Large FCC providers are less likely to have a paid assistant (30 percent, compared to 48 percent statewide). Large FCC providers working alone enroll an average of seven children, though they do not necessarily care for them at the same hours.

Table 1.8. Family Child Care Staffing

Sonoma County Early Care and Education Workforce Study, 2023

	Sonoma	Statewide
Small FCC Providers	N=35*	N=283
No assistants	83%	63%
Paid only	6%	17%
Unpaid only	9%	14%
Combination	3%	6%
Large FCC Providers	N=46*	N=246
No assistants	28%	19%
Paid only	30%	48%
Unpaid only	20%	10%
Combination	22%	23%
All FCC Providers	N=81	N=529
No assistants	65%	43%
Paid only	14%	31%
Unpaid only	12%	12%
Combination	9%	14%

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

*Interpret with caution (fewer than 50 respondents).

Centers in Sonoma County tend to have similar numbers of employees as the statewide average, with approximately eight teachers and assistants (**Table 1.9**). However, when looking more closely at job roles within the site, we find Head Start and Title 5 sites in Sonoma County tend to hire more assistant teachers (eight per site, compared to four per site statewide). This finding comes from a sample of only 11 sites, however, so readers should interpret with caution.

Table 1.9. Average Center Staffing, By Program Funding

Sonoma County Early Care and Education Workforce Study, 2023

	Sonoma County	Statewide
Head Start/Title 5	N=11*	N=139
Lead Teachers	4	5
Assistants	8	4
Total Teaching Staff	11	9
All Other Centers	N=33*	N=352
Lead Teachers	5	6
Assistants	2	2
Total Teaching Staff	7	8
All Centers	N=45*	N=509
Lead Teachers	5	6
Assistants	4	2
Total Teaching Staff	8	8

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

*Interpret with caution (fewer than 50 respondents).

Center Turnover and Vacancies

Our survey included additional questions for center directors regarding their site's staff turnover and current vacancies. **Table 1.10** displays the proportion of sites experiencing turnover and vacancies. From January 2021 to Summer/Fall 2023 (the period of our survey), turnover was lower in Head Start and Title 5 centers in Sonoma County than California as a whole: only 64 percent of sites had one or more positions turn over, compared to 87 percent of sites statewide. At the time of the survey, sites with a vacancy were less common in the county, as well (only 37 percent, compared to 56 percent statewide). These results, however, come from a sample of only 12 sites, so readers should interpret with caution. By comparison, non-Head Start and non-Title 5 sites in Sonoma County showed similar levels of turnover to the rest of the state: for instance, the share of sites with turnover since January 2021 was 83 percent in the county and 84 percent statewide.

Table 1.10. Centers With Turnover and Vacancies, By Program Funding
Sonoma County Early Care and Education Workforce Study, 2023

	Sonoma County	Statewide
Head Start/Title 5	N=12*	N=139
Any turnover since January 2021	64%	87%
Any vacancy now	37%	56%
All Other Centers	N=35*	N=352
Any turnover since January 2021	83%	84%
Any vacancy now	63%	54%
All Centers	N=50	N=509
Any turnover since January 2021	76%	84%
Any vacancy now	53%	54%

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

*Interpret with caution (fewer than 50 respondents).

Directors also responded to questions about the most common reasons staff left their position. **Table 1.11** reports the share of directors who indicated each reason was “very often an issue.” Four of the five most common reasons were wage-related; however, Sonoma County directors marked these items “very often an issue” slightly more often than their peers statewide. For instance, for the challenge of “low wages or benefits in ECE,” 53 percent of county directors chose “very often,” compared with 43 percent of directors statewide. Head Start and Title 5 directors in Sonoma County were also more likely to identify retirement as “very often” a reason for departures than directors statewide (13 percent, compared to 4 percent).

Table 1.11. Leading Drivers of Turnover Among Center-Based Staff
Sonoma County Early Care and Education Workforce Study, 2023

	Sonoma County	Statewide
All Respondents	N=37*	N=407
Low wages/benefits in ECE	53%	43%
High cost of housing	45%	33%
Found a job with better compensation outside of ECE	36%	32%
Found a job with better compensation within ECE	29%	35%
Left the workforce to care for family members	18%	12%
Retirement	13%	3%
Moved out of the area	12%	19%
Found a job within TK-12 public school system	12%	21%

Source: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley
Note: The table reports the proportion of directors who identified each reason as “very often an issue,” reflecting the strongest rating on a four-point scale (“never,” “rarely,” “sometimes,” and “very often” an issue).
*Interpret with caution (fewer than 50 respondents).

Discussion

In this chapter, we establish the profile of the Sonoma County ECE workforce in 2023. Early educators are predominantly women of color, and many of them hold degrees and have substantial years of experience. Despite their preparation and dedication, their wages are chronically low. FCC providers in Sonoma fall behind the statewide median, particularly large FCC providers. Among center-based educators, lead teachers in Sonoma County are also earning less than their peers in our statewide sample.

Our sample of Head Start and Title 5 sites in Sonoma County is small, so it may not provide a complete picture of wages and staffing in the county. However, we did find evidence of a buffer against staff turnover, perhaps supported by better access to employer-sponsored benefits. Unlike other parts of the state, however, we did not find a pay boost for educators working in Head Start or Title 5 sites.

With regard to program staffing, we find that FCC providers in Sonoma County hire paid assistants less often: small providers usually work alone, and large providers frequently

rely on an unpaid assistant (usually a family member). Not only do home-based providers require support in raising their own earnings, but large FCC providers would benefit from resources to pay staff.

Compensation accounts for the top four out of five reasons for center staff turnover. As rate reform begins to phase in, county programs that receive more public funding may experience lower turnover while private programs may struggle to keep up. Turnover and vacancies in non-Head Start and non-Title 5 sites will likely continue, and these challenges may become more prevalent for Head Start and Title 5 as schools staffing TK classrooms increasingly compete for early educators.

Chapter 2. Workforce Well-Being



This chapter describes aspects of well-being for the ECE workforce in several dimensions: professional, economic, physical, and mental. Our survey included many indicators in each domain, which are covered more expansively in our statewide profiles of well-being (Muruvi et al., 2023). In this report, we synthesize key findings for Sonoma County.

Professional Well-Being

Workplaces that provide a supportive environment can enhance educators' job satisfaction and mitigate some of the stresses of ECE work. Professional well-being further impacts educator turnover and retention (Curbow et al., 2000; Whitebook et al., 2016; Zinsser et al., 2016). A high-quality work environment—and corresponding reductions to turnover—are required to maintain a high-quality learning environment for children.

Job Rewards

As **Table 2.1** shows, the vast majority of early educators in Sonoma County feel they are “helping children grow and develop” and “making a difference” with the children in their care. Nonetheless, only around one half of respondents say they receive praise from parents or feel respected for their work. FCC providers were least likely to agree with the statement “I feel respected for the work that I do” (only 44 percent).

Table 2.1. Early Educators Experiencing Job Rewards

Sonoma County Early Care and Education Workforce Study, 2023

	FCC Providers (N=65)	Center Directors (N=46*)	Center Teachers/ Assistants (N=76)
I feel like I am helping the children grow and develop	87%	92%	95%
I see that my work is making a difference with a child	89%	84%	86%
I feel the satisfaction of knowing that I am helping parents	68%	76%	72%
I get praise from the parents for the work that I do	54%	59%	50%
I feel respected for the work that I do	44%	54%	50%

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

*Interpret with caution (fewer than 50 respondents).

Teaching Challenges

Our survey included a list of teaching challenges providers might experience in the classroom or program. **Table 2.2** reports on the percentage of early educators in Sonoma County who see certain aspects of their work as challenging. “Working with children with challenging behaviors” was most commonly indicated, although FCC providers were much less likely to select this option than early educators working in centers (34 percent of FCC providers, compared to 53 percent of center teachers and assistants).

Table 2.2. Teaching Challenges Reported by Early Educators

Sonoma County Early Care and Education Workforce Study, 2023

	FCC Providers (N=63)	Center Teachers/ Assistants (N=70)
Working with children with challenging behaviors	34%	53%
Finding time for planning	44%	31%
Conducting student assessments	23%	23%
Spending time with individual children	22%	21%
Finding time for observing children	14%	17%
Finding ways to communicate with families	8%	19%

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

Sufficient Support and Training

In addition to challenges in supporting children in their learning, early educators frequently encounter evidence of trauma impacting the lives of the children and their parents. To respond to these needs, early educators require support from peers, coaches, and even social services. **Tables 2.3.1** and **2.3.2** show the proportion of educators who feel they have sufficient support and training to address challenges facing children and their families.

Table 2.3.1 provides responses from FCC providers. A majority of FCC providers felt there were sufficient external resources, particularly for addressing challenges with children (69 percent) and slightly less for challenges with families (59 percent). Educators were even more likely to agree that resources specifically for addressing trauma were available (77 percent).

Table 2.3.2 shares responses from center teachers and assistants. Unlike FCC providers, center teachers and assistants can almost always rely on supervisors or other co-workers for help with children (96 percent). They also were more likely to agree that outside resources were available for help with families (81 percent, compared to 59 percent of FCC providers). Additionally, a majority of center-based early educators reported there was sufficient training available focused on children with challenging behaviors (76 percent) and children who are dual language learners (73 percent).

Table 2.3.1. Sufficient Support and Training for FCC Providers

Sonoma County Early Care and Education Workforce Study, 2023

	FCC Providers (N=59)
If I have a problem with a child , sufficient resources are available to find outside help	69%
If I have a problem with a family , sufficient resources are available to find outside help	59%
If a child or family is experiencing trauma, sufficient resources are available to find outside help (e.g., consultants and/or social services)	77%
Opportunities exist for me to work with a coach or mentor to improve my practice	52%

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

Table reports the share of educators who agreed with the statement on a six-point scale from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” Center-based educators received slightly different questions (see **Table 2.3.2**).

Table 2.3.2. Sufficient Support and Training for Center Teachers and Assistants

Sonoma County Early Care and Education Workforce Study, 2023

	Center Teachers/ Assistants (N=77)
If I have a problem with a child , I can rely on my supervisors or other co-workers for help	96%
If I have a problem with a family , sufficient resources are available to find outside help	81%
There is sufficient training available for me about teaching children with challenging behaviors	76%
There is sufficient training available for me about teaching children who are dual language learners	73%

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

Table reports the share of educators who agreed with the statement on a six-point scale from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” FCC providers received slightly different questions (see **Table 2.3.1**).

Economic Well-Being

Economic Worries

Most early educators earn low wages and have inconsistent access to benefits like health insurance or paid time off (see **Chapter 1**). These conditions may affect early educators' sense of economic well-being. **Table 2.4** shows the proportion of early educators who agreed to statements about economic worries.

Table 2.4. Early Educators Worried About Household Expenses

Sonoma County Early Care and Education Workforce Study, 2023

	FCC Providers	Center Directors	Center Teachers/ Assistants
Sonoma County	(N=64)	(N=45*)	(N=77)
I worry about having enough to pay my family's monthly bills	83%	63%	82%
I worry about paying for routine healthcare costs for myself and my family	72%	58%	68%
I worry about paying my housing costs	73%	63%	68%
I worry about being able to take time off from my job to take care of family issues	80%	64%	62%
Statewide	(N=514)	(N=489)	(N=432)
I worry about having enough to pay my family's monthly bills	69%	56%	71%
I worry about paying for routine healthcare costs for myself and my family	73%	51%	63%
I worry about paying my housing costs	63%	53%	68%
I worry about being able to take time off from my job to take care of family issues	85%	60%	70%

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

Table reports the share of educators who agreed with the statement on a six-point scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree."

*Interpret with caution (fewer than 50 respondents).

Compared to our statewide sample, FCC providers in Sonoma County were more likely to worry about their family's bills (83 percent) and housing costs (73 percent). Center directors in the county were also somewhat more likely to worry about household expenses, particularly housing costs (63 percent). Center teachers and assistants in Sonoma County, meanwhile, were more likely than early educators statewide to be worried about their family's bills (82 percent) and their ability to take time off (62 percent).

Food Security

Table 2.5 reports on food security among the ECE workforce. Our survey leveraged an item from the Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement (Flood et al., 2023), which defines food security as having “enough of the kinds of food we want to eat.” By this measure, FCC providers in Sonoma County had the lowest food security (54 percent), followed closely by center teachers and assistants (57 percent). The latter group was the most likely to run out of food: 14 percent of center teachers and assistants in the county “sometimes or often did not have enough to eat,” compared to 6 percent of our statewide sample.

Table 2.5. Food Security Among Early Educators

Sonoma County Early Care and Education Workforce Study, 2023

	FCC Providers	Center Directors	Center Teachers/ Assistants
Sonoma County	(N=62)	(N=43*)	(N=72)
We had enough of the kinds of food we wanted to eat	54%	64%	57%
We had enough but not always the kinds of food we wanted to eat	41%	31%	29%
We sometimes/often did not have enough to eat	5%	5%	14%
Statewide	(N=507)	(N=490)	(N=429)
We had enough of the kinds of food we wanted to eat	62%	75%	62%
We had enough but not always the kinds of food we wanted to eat	34%	21%	32%
We sometimes/often did not have enough to eat	5%	4%	6%

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

*Interpret with caution (fewer than 50 respondents).

Public Assistance

To make ends meet, many early educators enroll in public safety net programs such as Medi-Cal or SNAP (food stamps). **Table 2.6** shows the proportion of educators participating in one or more forms of assistance.

Compared to our statewide sample, center teachers and assistants in Sonoma County were more likely to participate in public assistance programs. While few center directors leveraged these safety net programs, 45 percent of FCC providers and 50 percent of center teachers and assistants used at least one form of public support. Participation for center teachers and assistants is particularly high in Sonoma County when compared to our statewide sample (only 31 percent).

Table 2.6. Early Educator Use of Public Safety Net Programs

Sonoma County Early Care and Education Workforce Study, 2023

	FCC Providers	Center Directors	Center Teachers/ Assistants
Sonoma County	(N=57)	(N=40*)	(N=76)
One or more forms of assistance	45%	28%	50%
Medi-Cal for self	22%	15%	33%
Medi-Cal for child	23%	9%	17%
SNAP	12%	2%	8%
WIC	7%	0%	4%
Food pantry	14%	13%	13%
Statewide	(N=481)	(N=478)	(N=411)
One or more forms of assistance	50%	19%	31%
Medi-Cal for self	24%	7%	17%
Medi-Cal for child	26%	7%	12%
SNAP	9%	4%	8%
WIC	3%	1%	2%
Food pantry	6%	3%	5%

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

*Interpret with caution (fewer than 50 respondents).

Across provider types, Medi-Cal was the most commonly used program. Enrollment in Medi-Cal in Sonoma County is a major driver in the increased role of public safety net programs for teachers and assistants. In the county, educators were twice as likely to report enrolling in Medi-Cal (33 percent), compared to 17 percent statewide.

Physical and Mental Well-Being

Health Risks at Work

Our survey also asked respondents about their level of concern regarding health risks they face on the job. The response options included “not at all concerned,” “slightly concerned,” “moderately concerned,” and “very concerned.” **Table 2.7** shows the proportion of our sample that selected either “moderately” or “very concerned.”

Table 2.7. Early Educators Concerned About Health Risks at Work

Sonoma County Early Care and Education Workforce Study, 2023

	FCC Providers	Center Directors	Center Teachers/ Assistants
Sonoma County	(N=60)	(N=45*)	(N=71)
Being exposed to infections at work	52%	26%	34%
Working with young children who are not vaccinated against infections	36%	14%	20%
Getting injured while performing my regular duties	45%	14%	27%
Working longer hours to clean and sanitize	66%	18%	18%
Statewide	(N=522)	(N=500)	(N=433)
Being exposed to infections at work	51%	34%	57%
Working with young children who are not vaccinated against infections	41%	26%	49%
Getting injured while performing my regular duties	43%	21%	42%
Working longer hours to clean and sanitize	57%	22%	35%

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

Note: The table reports the proportion of educators who selected “moderately” or “very concerned” on a four-point scale (“not at all concerned,” “slightly concerned,” “moderately concerned,” and “very concerned.”).

*Interpret with caution (fewer than 50 respondents).

Compared to early educators throughout California, center teachers and assistants in Sonoma County less often reported concern about health risks. For instance, only 34 percent of our Sonoma County sample reported concern about exposure to infections at work, compared to 57 percent statewide. FCC providers were similarly likely to be concerned about health risks, and their concern about the risk of working longer hours to clean and sanitize was greater in Sonoma County than statewide (66 percent vs. 57 percent).

Chronic Health Conditions

Working with young children is highly physical and can take a toll on the body. Our survey asked about a number of health challenges. **Table 2.8** reports on the number of early educators who have one or more diagnoses of chronic health issues.

Table 2.8. Early Educators With Chronic Health Conditions

Sonoma County Early Care and Education Workforce Study, 2023

	FCC Providers	Center Directors	Center Teachers/ Assistants
Sonoma County	(N=55)	(N=41*)	(N=56)
Any chronic health condition	71%	57%	59%
Condition with chronic pain (e.g., back pain, arthritis)	51%	26%	33%
Pulmonary condition (e.g., asthma, COPD)	21%	14%	16%
Cardiovascular condition (e.g., heart disease)	10%	9%	13%
Statewide	(N=474)	(N=460)	(N=389)
Any chronic health condition	59%	67%	69%
Condition with chronic pain (e.g., back pain, arthritis)	40%	37%	38%
Pulmonary condition (e.g., asthma, COPD)	10%	14%	17%
Cardiovascular condition (e.g., heart disease)	18%	24%	22%

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

*Interpret with caution (fewer than 50 respondents).

FCC providers in Sonoma County were more likely to report at least one condition compared to their peers throughout California (71 percent and 59 percent, respectively). Specifically, conditions with chronic pain and pulmonary conditions were more common. Center-based educators, meanwhile, were somewhat less likely to report chronic health issues in Sonoma County (59 percent) than statewide (69 percent).

When we compare early educators' responses in **Table 2.8** by age, we find that respondents under the age of 40 somewhat less often reported one or more conditions, including 48 percent of center teachers and assistants and 64 percent of FCC providers. Chronic pain was still the most common form of health condition for this age group.

According to the International Association for the Study of Pain (2024), back pain and other similar conditions are very common across professions that involve lifting heavy objects, especially while bending over or twisting. Chronic physical pain can influence worker turnover and is particularly prevalent in professions like nursing, transportation, and construction. Additionally, "Psychological demands that increase risk for back pain are low supervisor support, stressful monotonous work, rapid pace work, job insecurity, work-family imbalance, and exposure to hostile work" (International Association for the Study of Pain, 2024).

Stress and Depression

Our survey additionally included two validated measures of emotional well-being: the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-4) (Warttig et al., 2013) and the Center of Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D-10), a 10-item self-report measure of depression (Roberts et al., 2019).

Table 2.9 reports on educators experiencing two types of challenges to their mental health. The table shows: 1) the proportion of educators who scored six or greater on the PSS-4, which corresponds to high levels of perceived stress; and 2) the proportion of educators with a score of 10 or more on the CES-D-10, which is indicative of significant depressive symptoms.

While FCC providers less often met the criteria for perceived stress, approximately one half of respondents in Sonoma County did so. Center directors in Sonoma County, however, more often met the standard for high stress (67 percent, compared to 59 percent statewide). Meanwhile, center teachers and assistants in Sonoma County less often met the standard for depression in Sonoma County (29 percent, compared to 39 percent statewide).

Table 2.9. Early Educators Reporting Challenges to Their Mental Health

Sonoma County Early Care and Education Workforce Study, 2023

	FCC Providers	Center Directors	Center Teachers/ Assistants
Sonoma County	(N=57)	(N=43*)	(N=71)
High levels of perceived stress**	50%	67%	63%
Significant depressive symptoms***	19%	33%	29%
Statewide	(N=505)	(N=494)	(N=421)
High levels of perceived stress**	48%	59%	65%
Significant depressive symptoms***	25%	36%	39%

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

*Interpret with caution (fewer than 50 respondents).

**Reflects the proportion of respondents who scored six or more on the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-4), the threshold of high levels of perceived stress.

***Reflects the proportion of respondents who scored 10 or more on the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (CES-D-10), the threshold for significant depressive symptoms.

Contact With Other Adults at Work

In addition to capturing elevated stress and depression, our survey asked educators about their contact with other adults at work. Connecting with colleagues during paid time without children is important for early educators to plan and reflect (Schlieber & McLean, 2020). Educators responded to the prompt “I have sufficient contact with other adults during the week so I don’t feel isolated” using a six-point scale, ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.”

As shown in **Table 2.10**, most educators reported having enough contact with other adults at work, with positive responses fairly split between “somewhat agree,” “agree,” and “strongly agree.” Very few educators selected one of the three “disagree” options (for instance, only 13 percent of center teachers and assistants). In addition, there were only minor differences in the findings for the county and the statewide samples: for instance, 55 percent FCC providers in Sonoma County selected “agree” or “strongly agree,” compared to 64 percent statewide.

Table 2.10. Early Educators Reporting Sufficient Contact With Other Adults at Work
Sonoma County Early Care and Education Workforce Study, 2023

	FCC Providers	Center Directors	Center Teachers/ Assistants
Sonoma County	(N=61)	(N=45*)	(N=71)
Strongly agree	28%	34%	28%
Agree	27%	41%	38%
Somewhat agree	23%	14%	21%
Disagree**	22%	10%	13%
Statewide	(N=518)	(N=505)	(N=437)
Strongly agree	31%	35%	25%
Agree	33%	35%	42%
Somewhat agree	17%	20%	22%
Disagree**	19%	10%	12%

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

*Interpret with caution (fewer than 50 respondents).

**Includes "somewhat disagree," "disagree," and "strongly disagree."

Supportive Strategies

To gauge educators' ability to address mental health challenges, our survey included the prompt "I have strategies to help me manage stress and maintain a healthy lifestyle." Respondents used a six-point scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree."

As reported in **Table 2.11**, center-based educators in Sonoma County were more likely to "strongly agree" that they had strategies to cope with stress and keep healthy than our statewide sample. In the county, 36 percent of directors and 29 percent of teaching staff selected "strongly agree," compared to only 26 percent of directors and 18 percent of teaching staff statewide.

Table 2.11. Early Educators Reporting Strategies for Managing Stress and a Healthy Lifestyle

Sonoma County Early Care and Education Workforce Study, 2023

	FCC Providers	Center Directors	Center Teachers/ Assistants
Sonoma County	(N=61)	(N=45*)	(N=73)
Strongly agree	30%	36%	29%
Agree	36%	27%	34%
Somewhat agree	17%	28%	27%
Disagree**	17%	8%	10%
Statewide	(N=515)	(N=504)	(N=440)
Strongly agree	30%	26%	18%
Agree	36%	32%	35%
Somewhat agree	19%	30%	33%
Disagree**	15%	12%	14%

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

*Interpret with caution (fewer than 50 respondents).

**Includes "somewhat disagree," "disagree," and "strongly disagree."

Discussion

Early educator well-being includes both personal and professional dimensions, which frequently overlap. Inadequate resources for food and rent can impact physical health and overall stress, and educators can be proud of their professional impact, yet worry about the toll their work takes on them.

Overall, early educators across provider types and settings face challenges to their well-being. While a few themes arise from this chapter, we particularly find evidence of FCC providers expressing positivity and resilience. For instance, FCC providers are least likely to report: a) being challenged by children's behaviors; or b) elevated levels of perceived stress.

Yet this positive note is only part of the story. We also find that FCC providers, particularly in Sonoma County, more often contend with chronic health conditions and report insufficient contact with other adults. They also are less likely than their center-based peers to have support for addressing the needs of children and families.

On some indicators, center teachers and assistants in Sonoma County report similar levels of well-being or even better well-being than their peers statewide: for instance, they less often report significant depressive symptoms according to the CES-D-10 scale. They also more often “strongly agree” that they have strategies for managing stress and maintaining a healthy lifestyle, though many educators continue to select “agree” or “somewhat agree,” instead. However, center teaching staff in Sonoma County report heightened food insecurity, particularly in the form of running out of food.

Together, these findings suggest a mixed record in Sonoma County relative to the rest of the state. While all early educators in our sample would benefit from stabilized economic well-being, there is a particular need for increased support of FCC providers in their physical health and professional aspirations.

Chapter 3. Stability of the Field



Our report concludes with a look at workforce stability: how programs have weathered changing conditions and how early educators experience career progression. We also discuss how lingering impacts of the COVID pandemic interact with growing transitional kindergarten (TK) expansion.

Program Stability

Business Challenges

Table 3.1 reports business challenges that FCC providers and child care centers are currently experiencing. The most prevalent challenge was maintaining sufficient income (69 percent of FCC providers and 49 percent of centers). Compared to our statewide sample, FCC providers in Sonoma County were particularly likely to struggle with maintaining enrollment (60 percent, compared to 43 percent statewide). Center directors in Sonoma were less likely to report maintaining enrollment as a current challenge (33 percent, compared to 39 percent statewide). This difference may be partially explained by centers

funded by State Preschool or a similar source, where programs were not required to be fully enrolled to receive their monthly contractual payments.

Table 3.1. Programs Experiencing Business Challenges

Sonoma County Early Care and Education Workforce Study, 2023

	FCC Providers (N=65)	Center Directors (N=46*)
Sonoma County	(N=69)	(N=49*)
Earning sufficient income	69%	49%
Maintaining desired enrollment	60%	33%
Reliable access to the Internet	10%	8%
Sufficient learning materials/equipment	41%	N/A**
Receiving and tracking payments	15%	N/A**
Statewide	(N=463)	(N=488)
Earning sufficient income	63%	43%
Maintaining desired enrollment	43%	39%
Reliable access to the Internet	7%	7%
Sufficient learning materials/equipment	36%	N/A**
Receiving and tracking payments	11%	N/A**

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

*Interpret with caution (fewer than 50 respondents).

**Question not included in center director survey.

Center Staffing Challenges

Our survey also included questions regarding staffing challenges. **Table 3.2** reports center directors' responses in Sonoma County and statewide. Recruitment of qualified staff was the most common challenge (78 percent), followed by arranging coverage during staff absences (74 percent). Directors in our Sonoma County sample were more likely than their counterparts statewide to report challenges with arranging substitutes, retaining staff, funding professional development, and paying staff.

Table 3.2. Centers Experiencing Staffing Challenges

Sonoma County Early Care and Education Workforce Study, 2023

	Sonoma County (N=49*)	Statewide (N=488)
Recruiting qualified staff	78%	78%
Arranging coverage during staff absences	74%	69%
Finding, keeping, and/or funding substitute teachers/providers	67%	56%
Retaining qualified staff	51%	43%
Allocating funds to support staff's professional development needs	46%	29%
Paying staff	42%	28%
Covering the cost of my own professional development needs	33%	22%

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

*Interpret with caution (fewer than 50 respondents).

Our survey also included questions about recruiting challenges for FCC providers. Many providers with assistants reported challenges with staff recruitment (56 percent) and retention (41 percent). Staff shortages in early care and education predate the COVID-19 pandemic, but the size of the ECE workforce in California is still somewhat smaller than it was in January 2020 (Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, 2024).

Shifting Enrollment

When our survey concluded in Fall 2023, TK was in its second year of statewide expansion. By the end of the five-year period, TK will be available to all four-year-olds throughout California. **Table 3.3** reports the effects of TK expansion that FCC providers and center directors have encountered.

In 2023, 42 percent of FCC providers and 72 percent of centers were already experiencing a decline in enrollment of four-year-olds (see **Table 3.3**). Some FCC providers (35 percent) were also enrolling fewer three-year-olds, who are not yet eligible for TK. Compared to our statewide sample, center directors were somewhat more likely to begin enrolling infants and toddlers (13 percent, compared to 2 percent statewide), though this change remains rare on the whole. FCC providers in Sonoma County were also somewhat more likely to

report increasing the number of infants and toddlers in their program (36 percent), compared to our statewide sample (26 percent).

Table 3.3. Impact of TK Expansion on ECE Programs

Sonoma County Early Care and Education Workforce Study, 2023

	FCC Providers (N=65)	Center Directors (N=46*)
Sonoma County	(N=77)	(N=49*)
Fewer four-year-olds	42%	72%
Fewer three-year-olds	35%	6%
Began before- or aftercare for TK students	11%	6%
Accepting more infants and toddlers	36%	11%
Began accepting infants and toddlers	10%	13%
Statewide	(N=528)	(N=501)
Fewer four-year-olds	46%	61%
Fewer three-year-olds	30%	18%
Began before- or aftercare for TK students	14%	7%
Accepting more infants and toddlers	26%	9%
Began accepting infants and toddlers	8%	2%

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

*Interpret with caution (fewer than 50 respondents).

FCC Provider Financial Challenges

Because they are small business owners operating in their own homes, FCC providers' job stability cannot be disentangled from the stability of their business. For greater insight, we look at four types of business challenges these providers have faced since January 2021 (**Table 3.4**). In Sonoma County, around 43 percent of FCC providers had to go without paying themselves at some point between January 2021 and our survey in 2023. We did not find a difference by provider size, unlike in our statewide sample. We find few differences by provider license size in Sonoma County, with the exception of credit card debt: large FCC providers were more likely to take on debt to support their business (52 percent). In our statewide sample, only 41 percent of large FCC providers reported taking on credit card debt for their program.

Table 3.4. FCC Provider Financial Challenges Since January 2021

Sonoma County Early Care and Education Workforce Study, 2023

	Small FCC Providers	Large FCC Providers	All FCC Providers
Sonoma County	(N=35*)	(N=42*)	(N=77)
Unable to pay myself	43%	43%	43%
Missed a rent, utility, or vendor payment	34%	31%	33%
Took on credit card debt for my program	40%	52%	44%
Took out a second mortgage	6%	5%	5%
Statewide	(N=262)	(N=237)	(N=499)
Unable to pay myself	40%	48%	44%
Missed a rent, utility, or vendor payment	38%	32%	36%
Took on credit card debt for my program	39%	41%	40%
Took out a second mortgage	1%	3%	2%

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

*Interpret with caution (fewer than 50 respondents).

Career Progression

Center Job Progression

Table 3.5 shows job-level progression for center-based educators from 2021 and 2023. The table does not imply that educators remained at the same site, but describes educators' progression through positions or titles. Most respondents experienced continuity in job level. For instance, 88 percent of our 2023 director sample reported being employed as a director in 2021. However, some educators experienced job advancement: around 10 percent of current directors were employed as teachers two years earlier, and 10 percent of current teachers were employed as assistants.

Table 3.5. Center Job Progression From 2021 to 2023

Sonoma County Early Care and Education Workforce Study, 2023

	Directors, 2023 (N=52)	Teachers, 2023 (N=62)	Assistants, 2023 (N=25*)
Directors, 2021	88%	3%	0%
Teachers, 2021	10%	69%	4%
Assistants, 2021	0%	10%	84%
Other, 2021	2%	18%	12%

Legend Advancement Continuity Step Back

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

*Interpret with caution (fewer than 50 respondents).

Future Degrees

Looking to the future, we find many educators are interested in earning a degree as part of their career progression. **Table 3.6.1** reports that center teachers and assistants in Sonoma County are particularly interested (63 percent, compared to 46 percent statewide). FCC providers are less often interested (39 percent, compared to 46 percent statewide).

Table 3.6.1. Early Educators Interested in a Future Degree

Sonoma County Early Care and Education Workforce Study, 2023

	FCC Providers	Center Teachers/ Assistants
Sonoma County	(N=74)	(N=84)
Yes	39%	63%
No	32%	14%
Don't know	29%	23%
Statewide	(N=277)	(N=245)
Yes	46%	46%
No	32%	30%
Don't know	22%	24%

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

Table 3.6.2 compares educators’ responses by their current level of educational attainment. Among center-based teaching staff, interest is similarly high among educators with some college credit or less (74 percent) and those with an associate degree (70 percent).

Table 3.6.2. Early Educators Interested in a Future Degree, By Educational Attainment

Sonoma County Early Care and Education Workforce Study, 2023

	FCC Providers	Center Teachers/ Assistants
County Responses by Educational Attainment		
Some College or Less	(N=39*)	(N=23*)
Yes	47%	74%
No	20%	13%
Don’t know	33%	13%
Associate Degree	(N=20*)	(N=27*)
Yes	36%	70%
No	36%	7%
Don’t know	28%	22%
Bachelor’s Degree or Higher	(N=14*)	(N=29*)
Yes	22%	45%
No	60%	24%
Don’t know	18%	31%

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

*Interpret with caution (fewer than 50 respondents).

Job Plans in Three Years

In **Table 3.7**, we present FCC providers’ responses regarding their professional plans in three years. A majority of FCC providers intend to continue offering home-based services (68 percent of small FCC providers and 80 percent of large FCC providers). A few small FCC providers were interested in working in a center (4 percent) or another job with children (4 percent). Around one in ten providers planned to retire.

Table 3.7. FCC Provider Job Plans in Three Years

Sonoma County Early Care and Education Workforce Study, 2023

	Small FCC Providers (N=28*)	Large FCC Providers (N=30*)
Continuing to provide FCC services	68%	80%
Working in a center	4%	0%
Working in a TK-12 classroom	0%	0%
Other job in ECE/in support of children	4%	0%
Working in a job outside of ECE	4%	3%
Retired	11%	7%
Don't know	11%	10%

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

*Interpret with caution (fewer than 50 respondents).

Center-based educators' plans varied more than FCC providers (**Table 3.8**). The most common plan in three years was continuing work in the same center, including 63 percent of directors and 40 percent of teachers and assistants. Some teaching staff members were interested in switching centers or working in TK-12, and 12 percent planned to leave the ECE field. Meanwhile, 25 percent of teachers and assistants selected "don't know."

Table 3.8. Center-Based Early Educator Job Plans in Three Years

Sonoma County Early Care and Education Workforce Study, 2023

	Center Directors (N=43*)	Center Teachers/ Assistants (N=68)
Working in my current center	63%	40%
Working in a different center	0%	4%
Working in a TK-12 classroom	0%	9%
Other job in ECE/in support of children	6%	7%
Working in a job outside of ECE	10%	12%
Retired	14%	3%
Don't know	6%	25%

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

*Interpret with caution (fewer than 50 respondents).

Discussion

In this chapter, we come full circle with our study findings. ECE programs experienced substantial instability and upheaval during the COVID-19 pandemic, but challenges like staffing shortages are not new. Our survey demonstrates, however, that concerns such as staff recruitment and child enrollment are affecting the majority of providers in Sonoma County. Compared to our statewide sample, FCC providers in the county are particularly impacted by the latter, while directors in the county were more likely than their counterparts statewide to report difficulties with arranging substitutes, retaining staff, funding professional development, and paying staff.

Despite the personal and professional challenges to their well-being covered in **Chapter 2**, early educators hold a deep personal connection to their work, and most of them intend to continue working with children and families over the next three years. In centers, some early educators may even experience job-level advancement, like the 10 percent of center teachers in 2023 who had been assistants two years earlier. Nonetheless, a noteworthy 25 percent of teaching staff members report uncertainty about their future plans. Center-based educators, however, are keenly interested in furthering their own education.

FCC providers are most likely to envision themselves continuing to operate, though unintended drops in income may force them to close against their wishes. From 2021 to 2023, four in ten FCC providers had to forego pay at one point or another. As we add the growing TK headwinds to the picture, we can expect some FCC providers will be challenged to earn sufficient income while enrolling their desired mix of age groups. Transitional kindergarten will impact centers, as well: center-based ECE programs are more likely to already report a decline in four-year-old enrollment.

Conclusion

The vast majority of early educators in Sonoma County feel they are “helping children grow and develop” and “making a difference” with the children in their care. Despite their dedication, their wages are chronically low, and they routinely encounter challenges to their well-being. While FCC providers less often report teaching challenges or elevated levels of perceived stress compared to their center-based peers, we also find they are most likely to be using SNAP and experiencing one or more chronic health issues.

In child care centers, compensation is tightly linked to staff turnover. As more job opportunities in TK become available, turnover and vacancies may grow. While few early educators intend to leave the field within three years, some center teachers plan to switch sites or pursue other jobs supporting young children—and one in four of them are unsure what they will do. Most FCC providers, by contrast, planned to continue operating, but unstable enrollments and income may force them to reconsider.

We present this data not only to offer a snapshot of the ECE workforce and the programs in which they work, but also to provide local leaders with insight for policy and planning purposes:

- We hope these data can guide areas of much-needed support for early educators’ well-being. Agencies that provide professional support or mental health services or that assist with program operations can use the report as a touchpoint for determining areas of need.
- The data can also serve as a resource for advocacy regarding local or state policymaking. For instance, the report demonstrates the dire economic situation many members of the workforce experience, as well as the need for swift and decisive action in passing legislation to increase compensation.

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Founded in 1999, the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (CSCCE) is the national leader in early care and education workforce research and policy. We act on the premise that educators should be valued, respected, and guaranteed economic dignity and that the provision of early care and education is a public responsibility.

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