

# Listening to Family Child Care Educators' Perspectives on Higher Education and Credential Requirements

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## Highlights

- Family child care educators agree that **continuing education is important and beneficial** to their programs.
- Educators in this sample generally agreed that **increased educational qualifications should not be required** and may not improve program quality.
- Several **barriers to attaining qualifications** were noted, including inadequate compensation, lack of access to higher education, and higher education curriculum that is not tailored to the home-based setting.
- Family child care educators noted the **importance of accounting for experience and providing adequate financial supports** as key components of assisting family child care educators in attaining higher qualifications.

## Introduction

This brief presents key findings about family child care (FCC) educators' perspectives on state and national efforts to require higher levels of education and credentials for early educators. Findings are based on data from 19 virtual focus groups conducted with 95 FCC educators in 20 states as part of the Everyday Quality project.

Nationally, there is increased focus on requiring higher levels of education and credentialing for early childhood educators, especially those participating in publicly funded programs (McClellan et al., 2024).

## About Us

The Everyday Quality project is a joint effort between **The University of Alabama** and the **University of Delaware**, in partnership with the Alabama Department of Human Resources, to create quality improvement tools specifically for FCC settings.

Since 1982, the National Association for Family Child Care (NAFCC) has been supporting family child care throughout the country as educators make the intentional choice to offer high quality early care and education in their homes. NAFCC's mission is to support and leverage a nationwide network of educators in expanding and promoting the power of FCC.



However, little attention has been paid to the unique needs of early childhood educators in home-based settings.

Increased education requirements may place undue challenges on FCC educators, many of whom have significant longevity in the field and serve many young children. In 2019, the National Survey of Early Care and Education (NSECE) surveyed a national sample of listed providers, defined as licensed FCC programs and others who appear on state or national lists. Findings indicate that listed home-based providers serve 291,000 children under age 3 and 303,000 children aged 3 to 5. Additionally, 69% of listed providers have more than 10 years of experience caring for children other than their own (Datta et al., 2021). Therefore, it is essential to listen to FCC educators' perspectives on increased education and credentialing requirements to inform policy decisions in this area.

## Key Findings

Overwhelmingly, FCC educators agreed that continuing education is important and beneficial. FCC educators in this sample highlighted how continuing their education and earning credentials like the Child Development Associate (CDA) supported them in their work with children and families and emphasized the importance of lifelong learning. For example, one educator said, "The more knowledge, the more certifications you have, the better you're going to be with kids, the better you'll be able to do what is required of you."

However, almost all participants agreed that increased qualifications and degrees should not be required. One educator said, "If we want to get more education, that's fine, go right ahead, but we should not have to be

forced to get education." Notably, they cited barriers to accessing degree programs, a lack of attention to home-based settings in most higher education coursework, and the unclear relationship between increased educational attainment and higher pay. Specifically, educators—depending on their state and early care and education (ECE) systems participation—were **unsure whether earning a degree or credential would directly affect their compensation.**

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"If that [credentialing] becomes a requirement for many states, you're going to lose the most qualified, experienced providers that exist in our industry."

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Educators expressed concerns that many experienced FCC educators would stop caring for children if qualification requirements were increased—they may leave regulated FCC, retire, or move to a center- or school-based setting where they could earn a pay raise once they finished a degree. For example, one educator shared, "Do they really think that once I get my certification as a teacher, I am going to stay in this field if you're not going to compensate me more, just off the strength of me loving it, when I can go to the school system where I got benefits?"

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"To force us to have the higher education to even get funding to support us financially in our business, I don't think that's fair."

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FCC educators had **mixed opinions about whether increasing educational qualifications would increase quality**. Most participants did not believe that raising qualifications would ensure higher quality. They shared comments like:

- “Our end goal is to make sure that children are cared for, families are supported, and that we're reaching for the highest quality. Do I think that a person has to have a higher education degree to do that? I don't.”
- “That's not going to help me be a better child care provider. It's going to stress me the heck out.”

This finding is especially notable since the group of educators who participated in focus groups was, on average, more highly educated and engaged in quality improvement systems at higher rates than the general population of FCC educators.

Some participants raised concerns about the **relevance of the content** in early childhood degree programs for FCC educators. An educator who had already earned two degrees in education said, “I'm going to honestly say that neither one of those degrees has changed what I've done in my program or how I've built my program. I'm sitting here at 65 with a lot of student debt that will probably never get paid off.” Educators wanted a way for their experience in the field to be counted towards a credential or degree and clear, accessible pathways to earn qualifications.

Educators identified that **time and cost are barriers to increasing education**. FCC educators primarily mentioned barriers

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“You can't keep asking for stuff, and you're not creating actual pathways for providers to actually do these things.”

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related to the cost of earning and maintaining credentials, noting that they would not be able to raise tuition for families based on their education level. One educator noted the ongoing costs of the CDA, saying, “I have my issues with CDA because if you can't pay for it, you can't maintain it.”

Given FCC educators' long work hours, **time is another clear barrier**. One educator said, “Your normal family child care providers [work] 10 to 12 hours a day. So, how in the world are they going to put school on top of that already long work schedule?” Many courses and classes are scheduled when FCC educators are unavailable, and even when educators enroll in asynchronous courses, these can be challenging to fit into their busy days.

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“We want to increase our education, but at the same time, if you don't have to, if you're going to get the same thing that you had anyway, it's not going to hurt or harm your business.”

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### **Supports Needed**

FCC educators identified a range of supports they would need to increase their education, including scholarships, virtual options, a

reasonable timeline to meet requirements, and cohort-based learning, including coaching and peer support.

Spanish-speaking FCC educators also identified the **need for classes and coaching in Spanish**. They noted the difficulty of participating in coursework and navigating higher education systems in a language that was not their first language. They described having to meet additional requirements to take coursework in English, such as proficiency exams or extra classes. As one educator noted, “There is no better way than to be able to understand in one’s own language.”

Educators agreed that **salaries and benefits would need to be increased** if education requirements were to be increased. However, they noted that increasing the tuition costs they charge families is not an option. One participant said, “Are you increasing my pay? Because I have to pay for school. So, if I have to pay for school, who is helping me recoup that? Because I’m not going to go out there and get in debt and have loans and stuff and still make this little bit of money over here.”

Overall, participants believed increased qualifications should be encouraged and supported but not required. They raised concerns that many degree and credentialing programs were not accessible or attainable to many FCC educators.

- “I think that it is important that it is promoted. I do not believe that it should be made into a requirement.”
- “My opinion is that they shouldn't be requiring anybody to increase anything if

they're not going to make it equitable for everyone to actually access it.”

## Promising Approaches and Recommendations

### Increasing FCC Educator Compensation

There is a pressing need for **increased compensation for FCC educators, regardless of their qualifications and experience**. The Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (CSCCE) offers policy recommendations to increase pay and provide benefits to the ECE workforce, and many of these apply to FCC educators as well as center-based educators (McLean et al., 2024).

Examples of promising initiatives to increase overall compensation include Colorado’s pilot program to subsidize benefits costs for eligible FCC educators (Miller & Maier, 2023) and Washington, DC’s efforts to pay the cost of health insurance premiums for center-based and home-based early educators (DC Health Link, 2023).

Along with ensuring compensation increases for all FCC educators, **completing degrees and credentials should then be linked to further compensation increases**.

Educators noted that initiatives that linked additional compensation with earning higher credentials and/or degrees were beneficial. However, these initiatives often offered short-term bonuses; more sustainable compensation increases for educators earning degrees and credentials are needed.

### Scholarship and Tuition Support

FCC educators need financial support to access higher education and qualifications. Although they noted the value of continued



education, cost was a primary barrier. Many educators we spoke to had taken advantage of financial assistance and scholarships for higher education available to them and encouraged others to do the same. They made comments like, “It’s a win-win if they’re paying for it.”

More than 20 states offer educators scholarships through T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood®; some states have their own scholarship programs as well, but these can have limited funding available. In total, 48 states and the District of Columbia have at least one scholarship program available to help early educators pay for degrees and/or credentials (McLean et al., 2024). It is important to improve the availability of scholarships like T.E.A.C.H., ensure that FCC educators are aware of these scholarships, and verify that program design and implementation meet the needs of educators in home-based settings.

Public service loan forgiveness allows individuals to apply for loan forgiveness if they are working full time in a public service field. However, early childhood educators only qualify for this program if they are employed by a non-profit organization or federally-run child care program, like a Head Start center. Therefore, most FCC educators, who run small businesses, are not eligible. Expanding the eligibility criteria for loan forgiveness would also increase options for financial support.

### **Clear and Accessible Pathways**

Clear and accessible pathways to degrees can help FCC educators continue caring for children while increasing their education. Many FCC educators work alone, balancing multiple responsibilities in their program, and

may offer care during extended or non-traditional hours. Therefore, accessible pathways are key. This includes ensuring classes and supports are offered in the languages educators prefer, outside of child care hours, and in accessible locations. Some educators may benefit from an option to participate remotely. Allowing educators to complete field-based practicum experiences and internships in their own programs also helps make obtaining a degree more accessible to FCC educators.

Registered apprenticeship programs are one option for an accessible pathway to a degree or credential based in on-the-job learning. Approximately 35 states now have regional or statewide apprenticeship programs in ECE (Smith et al., 2023). It is important to consider how to meaningfully include FCC educators in the growing number of registered apprenticeship programs for the early childhood workforce. One example is Rhode Island’s registered apprenticeship program for FCC programs, which includes pay increases and Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) rating increases when educators complete their CDA (Building Futures Rhode Island, 2021).

### **Recognition of Prior Experience and Current Competencies**

Efforts to connect FCC educators to degree programs and credentials need to consider how to best give credit for prior work and lived experience. This has the potential to make degrees more accessible and to recognize and honor the vast hands-on experience in the field that many FCC educators have. For example, EDvance College offers college credit for work in full-time licensed ECE programs (<https://www.edvance.edu>).



Competency-based credentials and competency-aligned higher education curricula are also beneficial for FCC educators. For example, the Child Development Associate (CDA) credential is a nationally recognized competency-based credential, which educators can earn by completing professional development, passing an exam, and completing a verification visit where they are observed working with children. Additionally, EarlyEdU Alliance (<https://earlyedualliance.org/>), operated by Cultivate Learning at the University of Washington, offers competency-based ECE coursework that can be offered by higher education institutions.

### Relevant Content

Degree and credentialing programs should be evaluated to ensure that content is relevant for FCC educators. Content that can be quickly put into practice will both engage students and help improve practices quickly. Removing unnecessary and irrelevant content could enable students to complete programs more rapidly, allowing them to save both time and money.

Specifically, coursework should include content that supports FCC educators in caring for mixed ages of children, honors multilingual instruction, and fosters business skills. Degree programs need to embrace an inclusive view of early childhood quality rather than a traditional classroom-centric view and reflect the realities of FCC educators' work, such as working alone and caring for children in a home environment.

The National Association for Family Child Care (NAFCC) has set as a policy priority to expand the use of equitable measures to recognize quality in home-based settings. In



turn, these measures can help inform inclusive content in higher education (<https://nafcc.org/public-policy/>).

### Academic Advisement

Higher education programs should consider their academic advising systems and ensure that they are accessible and helpful to FCC educators. Flexible scheduling of advising sessions and clear program requirements will ensure educators are able to complete programs in a timely manner. Degree programs should include an in-depth orientation to help students adjust to higher education, embedding advising opportunities into coursework, offering tutoring and peer support groups, and maintaining regular communication with students (Douglass et al., 2015; Lo et al., 2017).

### Methodology

FCC educators from 20 states participated in online focus groups. Data were collected in June–December 2023. Participants were contacted via email to participate. These focus groups were part of a larger project focused on supporting quality improvement in FCC settings, Everyday Quality, conducted by the University of Alabama and the University of Delaware. Focus groups included questions about FCC educators' views about whether higher qualifications should be required and what supports would be needed to assist FCC educators in earning degrees and credentials. Groups were conducted in English and Spanish.

Participants were 100% female. 49% identified as African American, 44% as white, and 13% as Latina. Over half (57%) of participants had 20 or more years of experience in Early Childhood Education and 64% were 50 or older. Participants were well qualified with 49% holding a CDA and 52% holding an associate's degree or higher. Additionally, 36% were NAFCC accredited and 73% participated in their state's QRIS.



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