The Foundation of Quality: Growing and Keeping Tennessee's Early Educators

Tennessee can't meet demand for child care on wages that don't compete.

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Child care is the workforce behind the workforce, and it competes in the labor market. Tennessee providers hire from the same pool as retailers, warehouses and public schools, and they often lose that competition on pay and benefits.[1,2,3] When educators leave, classrooms close or run short-staffed, and children lose the steady relationships good care depends on.

Median hourly pay, Tennessee[1]

Child care	Retail	Warehouse	All jobs
$14.26	$15.36	$17.38	$22.78

Public aid, Tennessee[3]

37% of Tennessee early educator households rely on public aid such as SNAP or Medicaid, costing taxpayers **$74 million** a year.

Yearly turnover, U.S.[4]

Child care workers	Typical occupation
14.9%	9.1%

Low pay keeps seats empty

In a 2023 TQEE survey of 392 Tennessee providers[5]

- **62%** lost applicants or staff because pay was too low
- **71%** served fewer children than licensed for
- **80%** had a waiting list of children or families

- U.S. child care pay has trailed inflation for 14 straight months.[6]
- Child care lost jobs in seven of the past nine months as total U.S. jobs grew.[6]
- In a Virginia trial, a $1,500 retention payment halved turnover.[7]

Credentials don't pay enough

Better training is linked to better classrooms,[8] but credentials don't make child care pay competitive. Demand for Tennessee's WAGE$ salary supplements exceeds funding.[9,10]

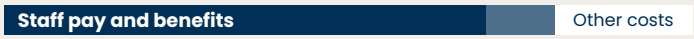
Infant-toddler pay, U.S., 2024[11]

	HOURLY	ANNUAL
High school	**$15.10**	$31,400
CDA	**$16.60**	$34,500
Associate degree	**$17.20**	$35,800
Bachelor's or higher	**$21.20**	$44,100
New TN public school teacher[2]	**$24.04**	**$50,000**

Providers can't raise pay on their own

Raising pay means raising tuition many parents already can't afford. Margins are low,[12] and Tennessee's assistance rates mostly track what providers charge, not the cost of quality.[13]

Staff pay already takes 70–80% of a typical budget[14]



Infant care already costs more than a year at UT Knoxville[15]

Infant center care	**$14,300**
UT Knoxville	**$13,812**

Where the pipeline breaks

Tennessee has assets like WAGE$, CCR&R coaching and apprenticeships, but gaps at each stage make it hard to enter, finish credentials and stay. **A state task force reports by December 31, 2026; its draft recommendations are on the next page.**[9,10,16,17]

1 Enter the field	TECTA's recruiting and advising ended in September 2025 without a full replacement. Separately, high school early childhood enrollment fell by more than half from 2015 to 2024.[9,16]
2 Pay for school	Free-tuition programs don't typically fit working educators: Promise requires full-time study, Reconnect two courses every term without a break. Neither generally covers books or a bachelor's degree.[9,18]
3 Gain experience	Many providers can't fund apprentice wages, mentors or release time. Background checks and inconsistent guidance can block student placements.[9,16]
4 Earn credit that counts	Colleges are only beginning to award credit for a CDA or prior learning, credits can be lost at transfer, and coaching mostly runs separately from coursework.[9]
5 Stay and advance	Pay often doesn't rise with credentials.[9] Until compensation competes, Tennessee can't build a workforce that meets the needs of parents and young children.

Across every stage: no single agency coordinates the pipeline or tracks whether educators enter, finish and stay.[9]

A Proposed Goal for 2030

By 2030, every Tennessee early educator can find, afford and finish a credential, and earns compensation that rises with each credential and closes the gap with Tennessee's median wage.

Research informs this goal but does not set a specific pay target.

Concepts for discussion

Make Compensation Competitive

BEYOND THE TASK FORCE · STAGE 5: STAY AND ADVANCE

The Task Force warns that education investments "will have limited lasting impact unless educators can afford to enter and remain in the profession."[9] Other states use wage supplements or pay scales tied to credentials, retention payments, benefits help and child care assistance for educators' own children regardless of income. Some also extend assistance above the federal income limit and pay higher rates to programs that raise staff pay, so providers can afford better compensation.[12,19]

IN TENNESSEE Child care pays 63% of the state median wage, and public aid for educator households costs taxpayers $74 million a year.[1,3] The 2026 Promising Futures Act created a pilot offering free child care for educators' own children and authorized Smart Steps Plus for middle-income families, which requires additional funding given the existing Smart Steps waiting list.[20]

1 Restore the Front Door and Track Results RECS 2, 12

STAGE 1: ENTER THE FIELD

Bring back a familiar orientation as the first step into the field, with college-based staff who recruit educators and keep them on track. Name a statewide lead (TBR and THEC in the draft) to report publicly on enrollment, completion, pay and retention.[9]

IN TENNESSEE Dyersburg State's high school partnership fell from about 30 schools to 3 or 4 once TECTA's support staff ended, even though courses remained.[16]

2 Build Regional Pathways RECS 3, 8

STAGE 1: ENTER THE FIELD

Support and incentivize regional partnerships that link high schools, colleges, employers and providers. Expand Early Childhood and Teaching as a Profession dual enrollment with shared instruction so small and rural schools can easily join.[9]

IN TENNESSEE In Sullivan County, YMCA-run centers at schools are set to open in summer 2027, and Northeast State expects its first early childhood academy graduates in May 2027.[16]

3 Make Paid Learning Workable RECS 4, 9

STAGES 2–3: PAY FOR SCHOOL, GAIN EXPERIENCE

Cover the costs aid often misses, like books, fees, technology, transportation and child care. Help fund apprentice wages, mentors, release time and substitutes, and clarify funding rules so workforce boards can invest in pathways to higher-paying jobs.[9]

IN TENNESSEE About 90 Lipscomb apprentices earn degrees on the job, backed by aid, philanthropy and employers. K–12 districts fund apprentice wages; most providers can't.[16,21]

4 Clear Placement Barriers REC 10

STAGE 3: GAIN EXPERIENCE

Create one consistent process for observations, practicums, high school work-based learning and apprenticeships across TDHS and TDOE settings, covering background checks, minimum ages, supervision, ratios and insurance.[9]

IN TENNESSEE Colleges' background checks aren't accepted by TDHS, and inconsistent guidance on practicums leads some providers to turn students away for fear of licensing violations.[9,16]

5 Make Every Credit Count RECS 5, 6, 7, 11

STAGE 4: EARN CREDIT THAT COUNTS

Expand prior learning assessment so CDAs, training and work experience earn college credit. Align certificates and degrees so each step stacks toward child care careers or teacher licensure. Pair CCR&R coaches with college faculty so coached practice counts toward coursework.[9]

IN TENNESSEE Lipscomb awards 18 credits for a CDA; three community colleges award 6.[9]

6 Tie Advancement to Pay REC 1

STAGE 5: STAY AND ADVANCE

Expand WAGE$ and align TDHS quality recognition with education. Programs now earn the same maximum three points on TDHS's Health and Safety Classroom Observation Tool whether educators hold CDAs or more advanced credentials and degrees.[9]

IN TENNESSEE WAGE$ pays up to $800 a year for a CDA and $7,800 for a bachelor's or master's with early childhood credits. Demand exceeds funding, so applicants wait on a list.[9,10]

Questions for the Room

1. **What would make compensation competitive?** Which options fit, and who should share the cost?
2. **Which Task Force concepts matter most?** Which would best help educators enter, finish and stay?

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