TEACH EARLY CHILDHOOD®
National Center
A Division of Early Years

National Early Childhood Educator Apprenticeship Network

ANNUAL REPORT
FY 2025-2026



TEACH Early Childhood® Educator Apprenticeship Network powered by Early Years

INTRODUCTION



Apprenticeship offers a powerful way to grow and strengthen the early childhood workforce by connecting employment, higher education, skill development and career advancement. Participants earn while they learn — gaining hands-on experience in the workplace while working toward industry-recognized credentials and degrees.

At the heart of registered apprenticeship are five connected elements: paid employment, on-the-job learning, related technical instruction, mentorship and a recognized credential. Together, these elements create a flexible pathway that can meet individuals where they are and support them as they build skills, advance their education and move forward in their careers.

This approach aligns with the longstanding design of TEACH Early Childhood® scholarships, which connect employment and higher education while providing financial support for educators pursuing credentials and degrees. By bringing these strategies together, apprenticeship can expand the ways early childhood professionals enter the field, build their expertise and advance along a career pathway.

The TEACH Early Childhood® National Center, through the National Early Childhood Educator Apprenticeship Network, serves as an industry intermediary to help states explore, develop and strengthen early childhood registered apprenticeship programs. The National Center provides individualized technical assistance to support states in designing, recruiting for and implementing U.S. Department of Labor–approved apprenticeship models that align with existing workforce systems and resources.

Because every state and community has its own workforce needs, apprenticeship is not a one-size-fits-all solution. The National Center works alongside state and community stakeholders to develop models that reflect local priorities, build on existing infrastructure and scholarships and create meaningful opportunities for early childhood professionals to enter, grow and advance in the field.

WHAT STATES ARE SAYING — AND WHERE WE'RE GOING NEXT

After completing year 4, apprenticeship partnering states identified common opportunities to strengthen implementation, mentorship, higher education partnerships, data, sustainability and cross-state learning. These insights are helping shape the National Center's priorities for the year ahead.

Across state apprenticeship programs, four key themes emerged that will help shape the National Center's work moving forward. Partnering Apprenticeship states are looking for stronger program infrastructure, including clearer implementation roadmaps, onboarding resources, role clarity and communication processes. They also emphasized the importance of people and partnerships, particularly strong mentorship and meaningful connections with higher education. States identified a need to learn, measure and tell the story through stronger data, shared learning opportunities, evaluation tools and consistent messaging about apprenticeship impact. Finally, as programs mature, states are increasingly focused on planning for the future, including sustainable funding, long-term infrastructure and successful transitions from start-up to sustainable implementation. Together, these themes provide a roadmap for the National Center to strengthen resources, deepen partnerships, support shared learning and help states build apprenticeship programs that can grow and endure.

NATIONAL STATE DATA

90
Apprentices

40
Pre-Apprentices*

3.67
Average GPA

33.4
Average age of participants

1,192.5
College credit hours taken

98,945
On-the-job training hours

2,033
Individualized Apprentice Mentor Meetings

*completed 167 credit hours

APPRENTICESHIP PROGRAM HIGHLIGHT: NEBRASKA



"As the Nebraska AEYC Early Childhood Apprenticeship Program reaches the end of its second year, I have been reflecting on the successes and challenges we've experienced with this program. What we've learned is that nearly all apprentices report increased confidence, intentionality, a deeper understanding of child development, and increased pride in themselves and seeing themselves as professionals. These types of outcomes speak to the success of the program in ways that we might not have imagined.

As we explore survey responses from the apprentices and the mentors, common themes include being more reflective, slowing down to observe before acting, and better understanding the "why" behind best practices.

The apprentices are showing skill development by applying what they learn in their coursework directly to their classrooms. One apprentice has learned to distinguish between product and process art experiences, one is redesigning her classroom to create learning/interest centers, one has created a daily schedule that reinforces routines, and another is using observation intentionally to notice children's strengths and make adjustments to individualize for each child. Apprentices have also shared that they are doing well in their coursework, making the Dean's list, being invited to participate in leadership opportunities, some are preparing to graduate, and many are fostering more in-depth relationships with children, peers, and families.

Seeing how the apprentices are embracing their new learning, new skills and increased professionalism has been inspiring but this doesn't happen on its own. One of the key components of the program is the apprentice/mentor relationship. The survey summary showed that mentorship was the single most impactful element of the program, providing academic, professional, and personal guidance tailored to each apprentice's context and needs. The mentors light up as they share the apprentices' successes and the positive steps taken for the children, families, peers, and the professionalism of the apprentice themselves.

This program has shown many successful outcomes, but it would not have been possible without the support of the team at the TEACH National Center. From the first day, their support has been invaluable. They have walked side by side with us at each step, providing guidance, resources, and lessons learned that helped to inform the creation and implementation of our apprenticeship program."

— Tracy Gordon, Executive Director, Nebraska Association for the Education of Young Children

FROM RESOURCES TO RELATIONSHIPS — MOVING MENTORING FORWARD

Mentorship is a critical component of a successful early childhood educator apprenticeship, providing apprentices with individualized guidance, encouragement and opportunities to connect learning with practice. This year, the TEACH Early Childhood® National Center focused on strengthening the mentor–apprentice relationship and supporting the people who make that relationship possible.

The Mentor Toolkit for Early Childhood® Apprenticeships was developed to support states participating in the TEACH Early Childhood® Educator Apprenticeship Network with practical guidance for developing and strengthening mentor supports. As the Toolkit was introduced, interest quickly extended beyond Network states, with additional apprenticeship partners seeking resources and expertise to strengthen their own mentoring practices.

In response to this growing need, the National Center expanded the Toolkit with a series of companion documents focused on key themes and practices. The Center also developed a mentor-focused webinar series that brought these resources to life through professional learning and practical strategies. Topics included mentor selection, getting started with an apprentice, observation and goal setting, reflective practice and strategies for providing personalized support.

Together, these resources create a foundation for apprenticeship programs to prepare, equip and support mentors while strengthening the relationships that help apprentices navigate their learning and professional growth. The work also reflects an important principle of effective mentorship: support should be responsive to the individual apprentice — their experiences, strengths, interests, learning style and goals.



MENTOR HIGHLIGHT



"I love my work with apprentices because I get to see firsthand what happens when early childhood educators are truly supported as they grow. For years, I built teams by 'growing my own'—investing in educators, helping them discover their strengths, and encouraging them to continue their education. I often think that if an apprenticeship program like this had been available then, more of those talented educators might have stayed in early childhood instead of moving to public schools or leaving the field altogether.

What makes apprenticeship so powerful is that educators aren't asked to figure it all out on their own. They have education, mentoring, coaching, encouragement, and someone walking alongside them as they put what they are learning into practice. That kind of support builds more than knowledge—it builds confidence, competence, and a sense of belonging in this profession.

As a mentor, it is incredibly meaningful to watch an apprentice begin to recognize herself as a professional, find her voice, and realize, 'I can do this, and this is where I belong.' We talk so much about retaining the early childhood workforce. Apprenticeship gives us an opportunity to do more than talk about it—we can intentionally invest in the educators we hope will stay, grow, and become the next generation of leaders in our field."

— Elizabeth Scudder, M.Ed.
TEACH/AECA Arkansas

APPRENTICE HIGHLIGHTS



"Being part of the apprenticeship was one of the best experiences I have had. Elizabeth brought a wealth of knowledge and years of experience, but what made the experience so meaningful was that the learning went far beyond a textbook. It was hands-on, personal, and connected to what was actually happening in my classroom.

My favorite part was knowing I had someone in my corner. Whether we were talking about my classroom, schoolwork, new ideas, or simply life, Elizabeth was always a phone call away. When I felt overwhelmed or questioned whether I was doing something right, she helped me slow down, think it through, and trust what I already knew. I always left our conversations feeling encouraged, confident, and knowing what to do next.

The apprenticeship may be complete, but the relationship we built is not. I gained a mentor, a tremendous amount of knowledge, and a friendship that I know will last a lifetime. Elizabeth is still there when I need her, and that continued support means more than I can say."

— Tracy Rackleff
TEACH/AECA Arkansas Early Childhood® Apprentice

APPRENTICE HIGHLIGHTS



"The Early Childhood Education Apprenticeship means more to me than simply growing as a teacher—it means becoming the kind of teacher who leaves a little piece of love, confidence, and encouragement in every child I teach. My children may not remember every lesson or activity, but I hope they remember how they felt in my classroom: safe, loved, valued, and believed in.

Every new thing I learn through this apprenticeship gives me another opportunity to make a difference in their lives. I'm not just preparing children for their next step; I'm helping build the foundation of who they will become. That is what makes this journey so meaningful to me."

— Tina Plumlee
TEACH/AECA Arkansas Early Childhood® Apprentice

LOOKING AHEAD

In the year ahead, The National Center will not only continue to provide technical assistance and resources, but will also serve as a national learning intermediary for early childhood apprenticeship programs.



The next phase of the National Center's apprenticeship work will build upon the mentor resources developed this year by creating a more comprehensive approach to apprenticeship implementation, learning and storytelling. Working with Network states, the Center will document emerging practices, develop practical implementation and onboarding frameworks, strengthen mentor and program infrastructure and elevate the experiences of apprenticeship state partners. Together, these efforts will create a shared body of knowledge that states can use to strengthen existing programs, inform new apprenticeship development, and communicate the value and potential of early childhood educator apprenticeships nationwide.

We'd like to thank all our partners and funders for their support

Partnering State Information

Arkansas- Arkansas Early Childhood Association
Colorado- Early Childhood Council Leadership Alliance
Ohio- Ohio Child Care Resource and Referral Association
Minnesota- Child Care Aware of Minnesota®
Pennsylvania- Pennsylvania Child Care Association
Nebraska- Nebraska Association for the Education of Young Children
North Carolina- Early Years

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