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Early Childhood Special Education Faculty in Higher Education: A National Survey of Capacity and Needs

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ABOUT NIEER

The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) at the Graduate School of Education, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ, conducts and disseminates independent research and analysis to inform early childhood education policy.

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Shortages of early childhood special education (ECSE) teachers are a pressing concern, whether because of problems that emerged with the COVID-19 pandemic or the steady rise in the number of young children requiring early intervention and preschool special education services. We collected data from a national sample of faculty in institutions of higher education with ECSE programs to assess their capacity to meet the nation's needs for ECSE workforce expansion. We received responses from 76 faculty in 34 states regarding their demographic characteristics, roles and responsibilities, and future plans, and on program capabilities and capacities to provide the types of preparation needed by future ECSE teachers. We find that ECSE programs have substantial under-enrollment and have the capacity to produce much larger numbers of fully qualified ECSE teachers and leaders. The biggest challenge is recruiting and incentivizing students to enter those programs. A looming future challenge is a potential decline in the number of faculty in ECSE programs and the preparation of adequate numbers of faculty specialized in ECSE, as most programs enrolled very few doctoral students. As most faculty did not have preparation specializing in ECSE and there is a substantial need to improve coverage of key topics in ECSE teacher preparation, ongoing professional development of higher education faculty as well as ECSE teachers and leaders is another key to meeting the field's needs.

Introduction

The nation is experiencing a shortage of qualified early childhood special education (ECSE) teachers (Lohmann & Macy, 2024). Nationally, almost 520,000 3- and 4-year-olds received early childhood special education services in fall 2023, including five percent of 3-year-olds and nine percent of 4-year-olds. This represents an eight percent increase in the number of children receiving early childhood special education services from before the COVID-19 pandemic. The number and percentage of children receiving early childhood special education have been increasing for the last two decades. (Friedman-Krauss & Barnett, 2023; U.S. Department of Education, 2023). These numbers highlight the significant and expanded demand for well-qualified ECSE teachers. This report summarizes findings about higher education program capacity to prepare ECSE teachers with implications for higher education policy and practices changes required to meet future needs for fully qualified ECSE teachers.

To obtain information on higher education capacity to adequately prepare the next generation of ECSE teachers, the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) conducted a national survey of faculty in departments with ECSE programs between April 2024 and May 2025. The survey was developed in collaboration with the Early Childhood Intervention Personnel Center (ECIPC). Faculty were asked questions regarding their demographics, training, job responsibilities, course load, and their intent to stay in or leave their program. Additionally, we asked for information on their ECSE programs' capacity, enrollment, degrees offered, and licenses and certifications.

Key Findings

- **Demographics:** Most responding faculty were female (88%) and non-Hispanic White (87%). Twenty percent spoke another language in addition to English. On average, they were 54 years old with 13 years in their current faculty position.
- **Faculty expertise:** Only a few faculty had ECSE as the specialization for their highest degree (16%). Another 30% earned their highest degree in special education while 32% reported a general education degree and 13% a degree in early childhood education. Half of faculty had a license or certification that covered early childhood ages.
- **Courseload:** Faculty reported teaching an average of eight courses over the last year, including an average of three in each of the fall and spring semesters and one each during the winter and summer sessions. Half of faculty taught both undergraduate and graduate students. One-quarter taught undergraduates only while the other one-quarter taught graduate students only.
- **Retention and Turnover:** Nearly one-quarter of respondents reported planning to leave their job in the next three years, either for a new job (7%) or retirement (17%). Another quarter of respondents were undecided. During the last year, about one in three faculty received a written offer for another job.
- **ECSE Programs:** Three-quarters of ECSE programs offered a bachelor's degree and/or master's degree program. Only 17% offered a doctoral program, and 5% reported offering a sixth-year program. Forty-one percent of programs offered a license or certification in ECSE and 42% offered a blended ECSE & ECE program. In total, 71% of programs offered an ECSE and/or a blended ECSE & ECE license or certification.
- **Enrollment and Capacity:** Many ECSE programs were under-enrolled. Bachelor's degree programs were underenrolled by an average of 32 students, and master's degree programs were underenrolled by an average of 36 students. This indicates excess capacity that could increase both bachelor's and master's enrollments by about 50% over current enrollment. The number of Ph.D. students enrolled and graduating was very small compared to capacity.
- **Staffing:** ECSE programs had an average of five full-time and three part-time faculty. Programs tended to employ more full-time tenure/tenure-track than full-time adjunct faculty but more part-time adjunct faculty than part-time tenure/tenure-track faculty. Almost two-thirds of programs had a faculty program coordinator for ECSE. Nearly two-thirds of ECSE programs do not intend to hire additional faculty in the next year; of those that do, the most common open position is for adjunct faculty.
- **ECSE Content Coverage:** For most topics relating to ECSE teacher preparation, a substantial portion of faculty did not believe the topic was fully adequately addressed through their program's coursework. As these topics are necessary for ECSE teacher effectiveness, this poses an important challenge.

Method

NIEER developed the survey of ECSE faculty in partnership with ECIPC. The final survey was approved by the Rutgers University Institutional Review Board. The questionnaire contained mostly multiple-choice questions. The survey was programmed by NIEER in Qualtrics and was distributed electronically to potential respondents.

ECIPC provided NIEER with a list of faculty at all university and college ECSE programs. NIEER distributed a personalized survey link to each of the 622 faculty members on the list. Seven individuals reported no longer being in the ECSE department, that their department or school no longer had an ECSE program, or that they were no longer in the department or school. Five others reported that they were not ECSE faculty and said they forwarded the survey to a colleague. We initially distributed the survey in April 2024, sent follow-up emails several times over the next year, and closed the survey in May 2025. A total of 76 faculty responded to the survey and provided usable information. An additional 18 faculty started the survey but reported they did not have an ECSE program and therefore did not complete the survey.

Who are the ECSE Faculty Survey Respondents?

A total of 76 faculty members responded to the survey across 34 U.S. states. Respondents' ECSE programs offered certificates or licenses in 51 different U.S. states or territories. Most (93%) programs offered certificates or licenses in only one state.

The responding ECSE faculty were more likely to be female and were somewhat less diverse and older than higher education faculty generally (U.S. Department of Education, 2024). Eighty-eight percent of responding faculty were female. Eighty-seven percent were non-Hispanic White, 3% non-Hispanic Black, 6% Hispanic, and 4% Asian. Additionally, 20% reported speaking another language in addition to English. The faculty were on average 54 years old, had an average of 16 years total experience as faculty, and 13 years as faculty in their current college or university (Table 1).

Table 1. Age and Experience of ECSE Faculty

	n	Mean	Std. Dev.	Median	Min.	Max.
Age	64	54.0	9.6	54.0	34.0	76.0
Years of experience as faculty	71	16.0	9.1	14.0	0.0	42.0
Year of experience as faculty in current college/university	71	13.1	8.5	11.0	0.0	39.0

Nearly 90% of faculty had a doctoral degree: 59% of faculty had a Ph.D. and 30% had an Ed.D., while 9% had a master's degree, and 2% reported other degrees. Most faculty had their highest degree in a field related to ECSE, but only 16% had their highest degree specifically in ECSE. Another 30% earned their highest degree in special education, 13% in early childhood education (ECE), and 32% in education (See Figure 1). Half of the faculty had a certification or license that specifically covered early childhood ages. As shown in Figure 3, 17% had a certification or license covering children 0 to 5, 16% had a certification covering children 0 to 3rd grade, 17% had a certification or license covering pre-K to 3rd grade. Another 10% had a lifespan certification or license that covers infancy through adulthood. However, 26% reported having a certification or license that covered elementary school or school-age children. Additionally, 1 in 10 responding faculty indicated they had not earned any educational certificate or license.

Figure 1. Discipline of Faculty's Highest Degree (n=69)

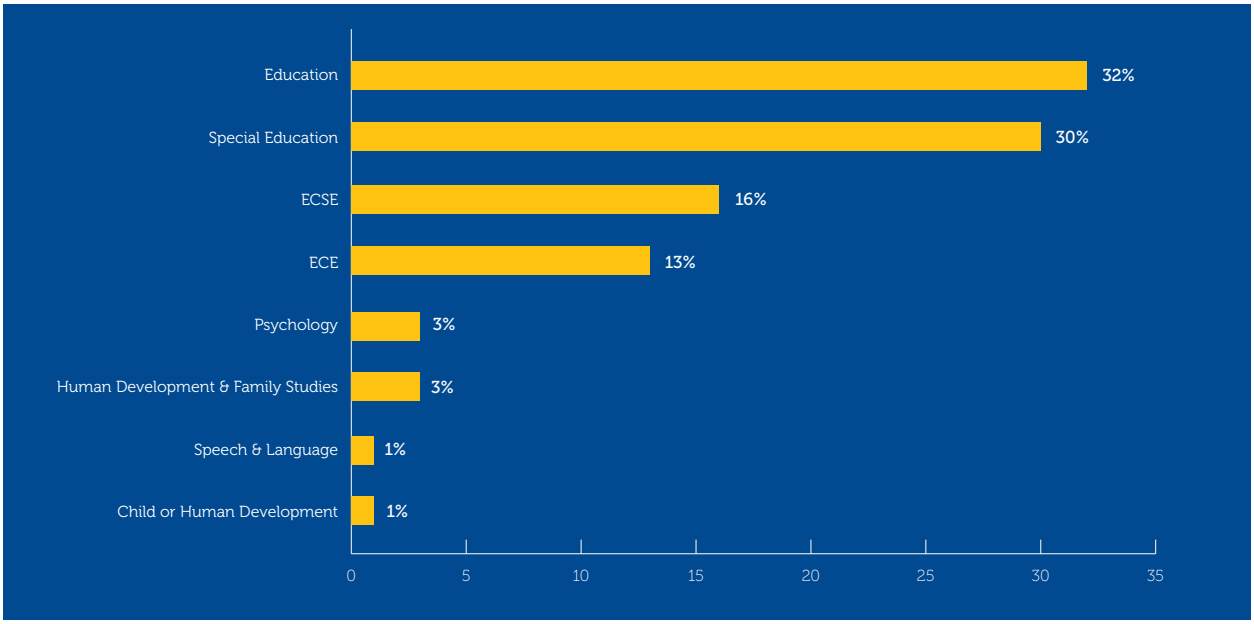
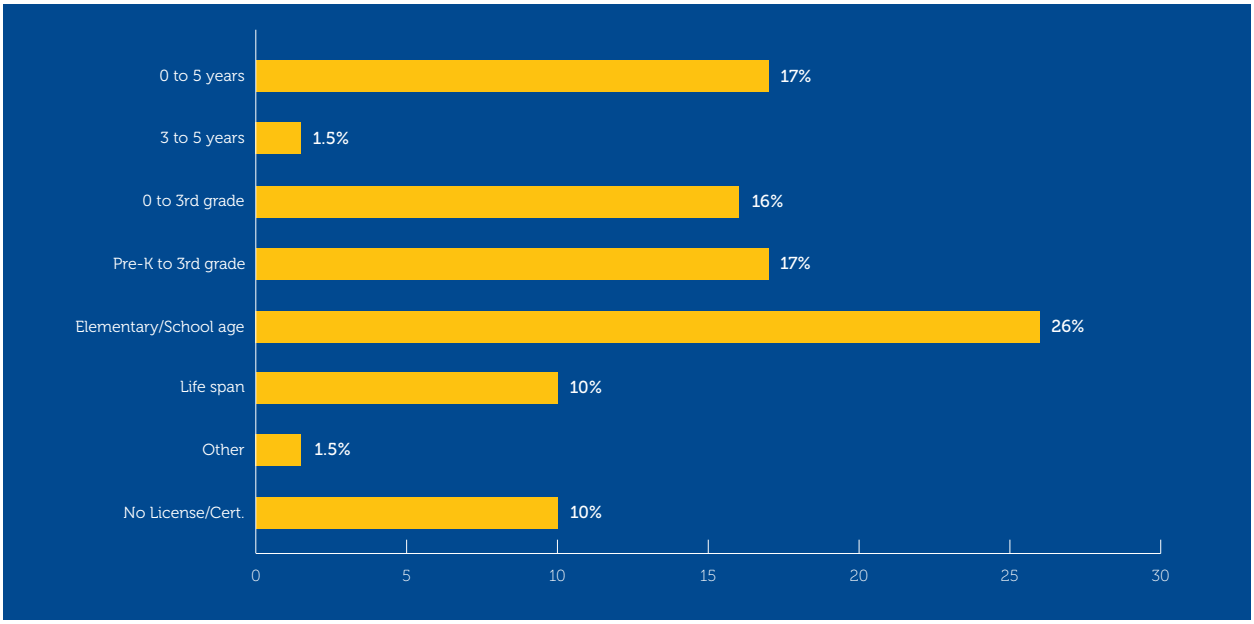
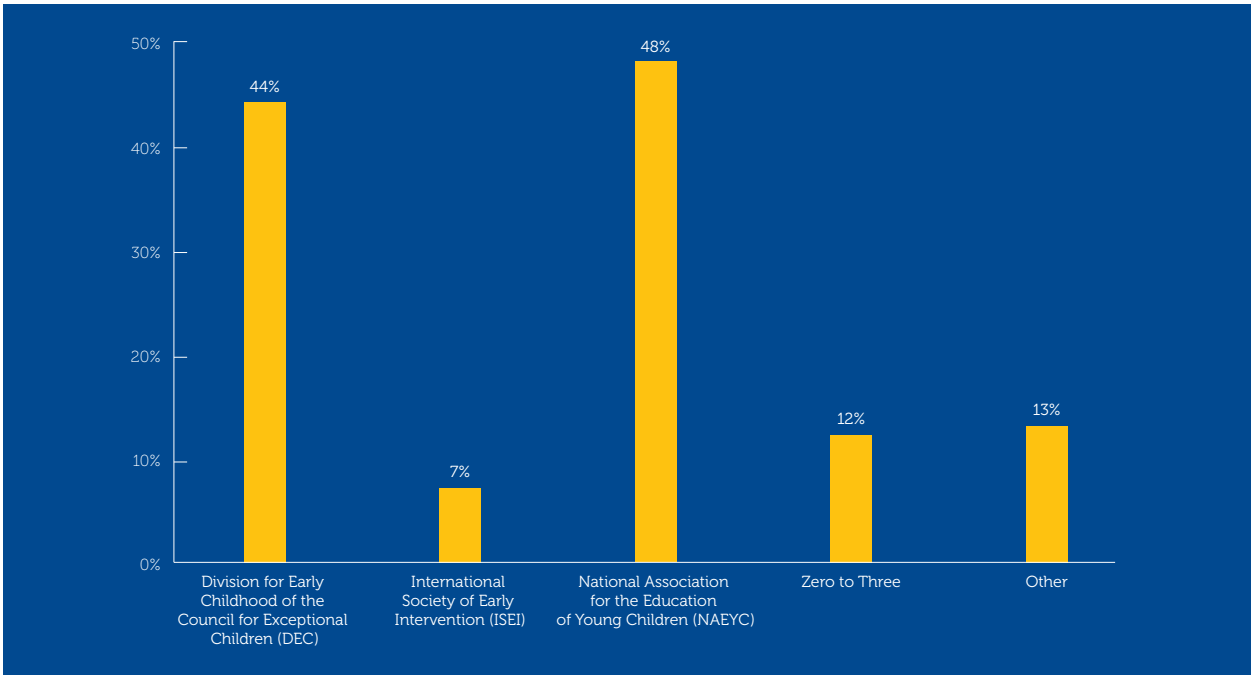


Figure 2. Age Range Covered by Faculty's Primary Certification or License (n=69)



Eighty-four percent of faculty reported membership in a professional organization. By far the most commonly reported organizations were the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC; 48%) and the Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children (DEC; 44%). See Figure 3 for additional professional organizations.

Figure 3. Faculty Membership in Professional Organizations (n=75)



Note: Faculty could indicate they were a member of more than one professional organization and thus, percentages add up to more than 100%.

Faculty Roles and Responsibilities

One-quarter of the faculty reported a primary appointment in a department of Early Childhood Education and ECSE (24%), while another 14% were in an ECSE department (Figure 4). Additionally, one-fifth of faculty reported they were in a department of special education that was not specific to early childhood, and nearly one quarter were in a department of education or teacher preparation, but no age group was specified.

About two-thirds of faculty were at the rank of associate (36%) or full (30%) professor with another 14% assistant professors, 6% adjunct faculty, 4% lecturers or instructors, and 9% other. Most faculty (59%) were tenured, and another 7% were on the tenure track but not tenured. Twenty-eight percent were not on the tenure track and another 6% were in an institute of higher education that did not have a tenure track system (Figure 5).

Figure 4. Department of Faculty's Primary Appointment (n=76)

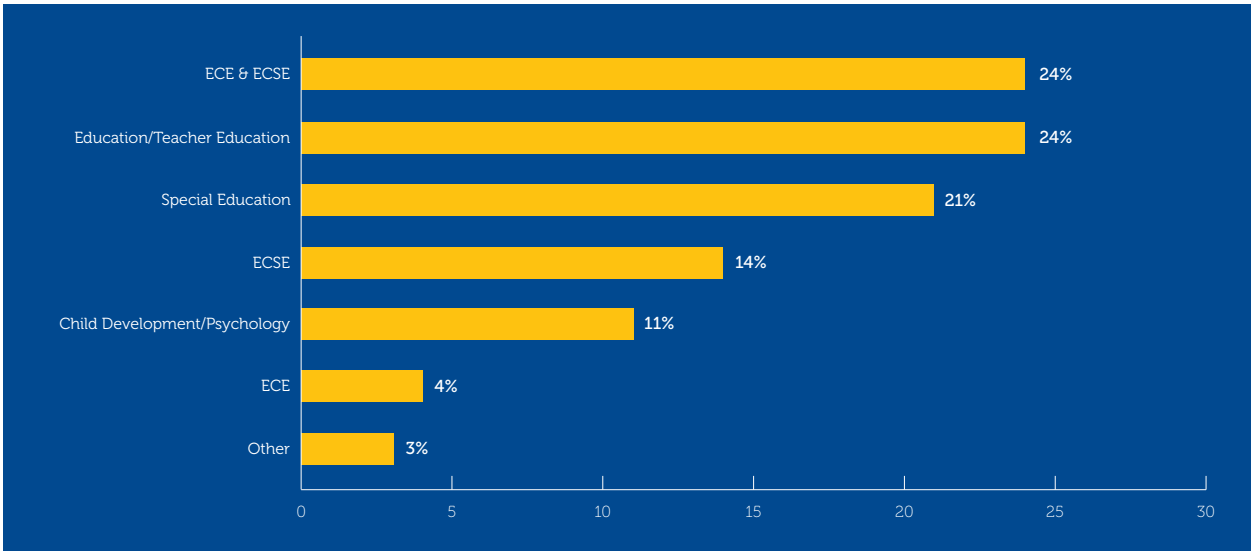
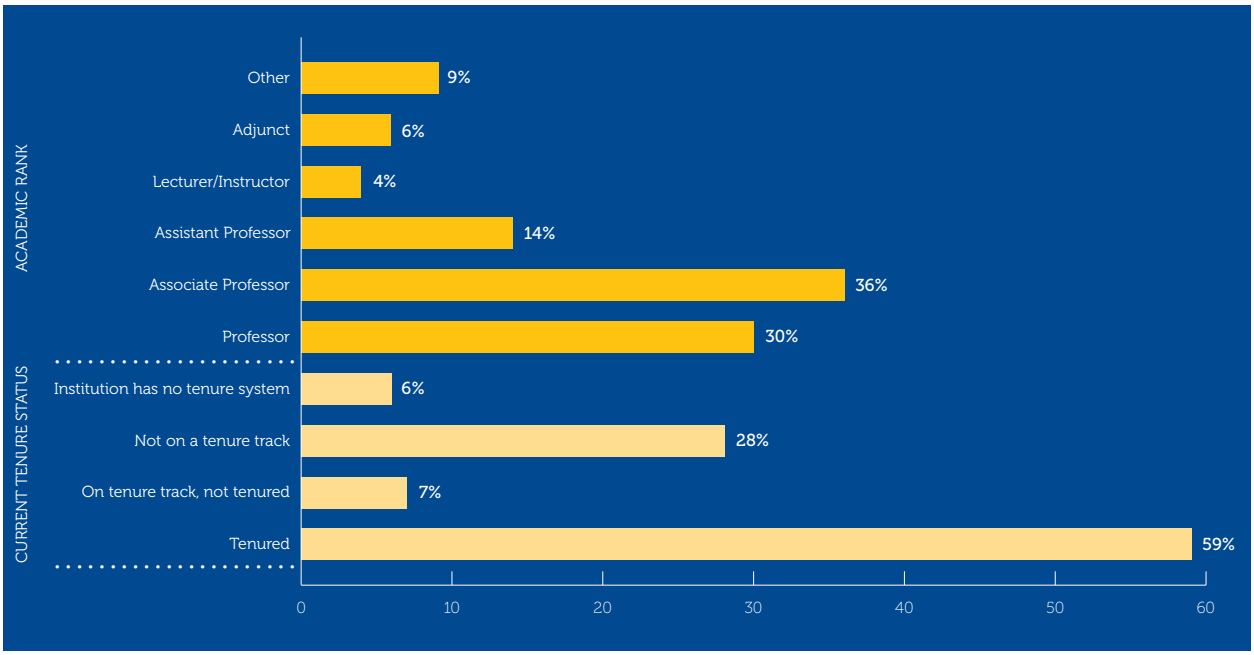
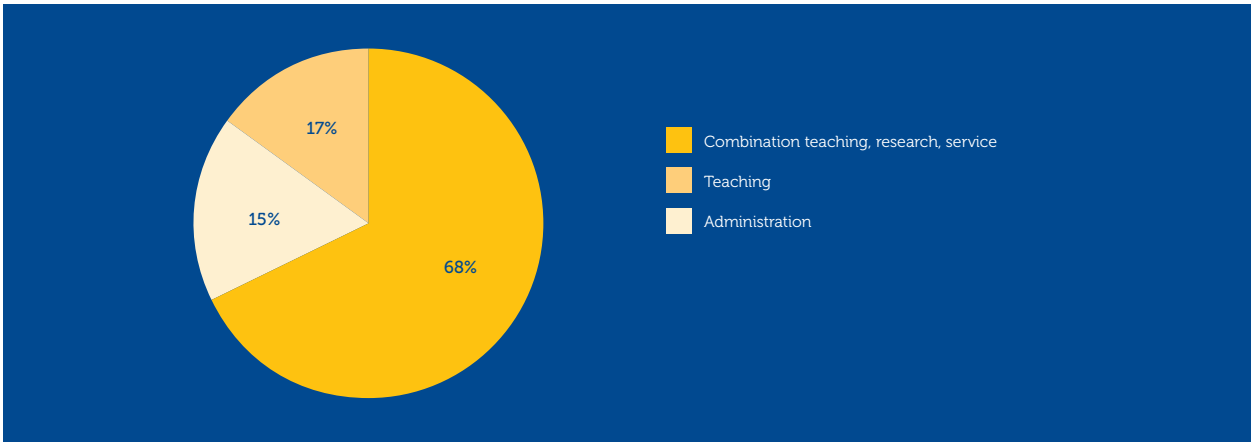


Figure 5. Academic Rank and Tenure Status of Responding Faculty (n=69)



More than two-thirds (68%) of responding faculty reported that their primary job responsibilities were those of a typical professor position, including a combination of teaching, research, and service. As shown in Figure 6, 15% reported that teaching was their primary responsibility and 17% reported that program administration was their primary responsibility (two-thirds of this last group also reported teaching during the past year). Additionally, nearly all faculty reported having a full-time position: 33% had a full-time calendar year position, 61% had a full-time academic year position, and only 6% reported having a part-time position.

Figure 6. Primary Job Responsibilities of ECSE Faculty (n=69)



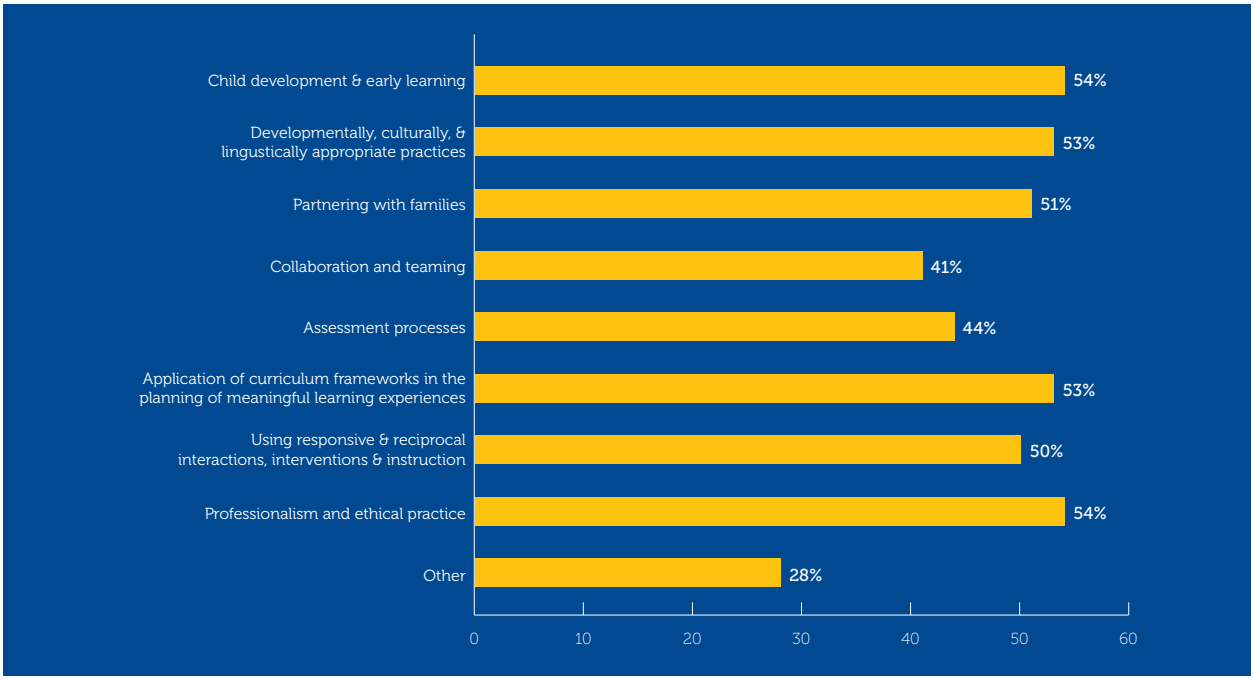
Nearly all faculty (93%) reported they taught at least one course over the past year. Table 2 provides a full description of courseloads for faculty who taught. Faculty reported an average teaching load of eight classes over the last year, with an average of three courses each in the fall and spring semesters. Some faculty also taught during winter (0.5 course) and summer (1 course). Three out of four faculty taught no winter or summer courses. As these results are only for faculty who responded to the survey, it will not reflect course offerings across their full ECSE programs. Almost half of faculty reported they taught both undergraduate and graduate students (47%), while 27% primarily taught graduate students, and another 27% taught primarily undergraduate students.

Table 2. Average Course Loads of Responding Faculty (n=64)

	Mean	Std. Dev.	Median	Min.	Max.
Total courses	8.1	4.4	8.0	1.0	25.0
Fall semester	3.3	1.9	3.0	0.0	10.0
Winter session	0.5	1.1	0.0	0.0	4.0
Spring semester	3.0	1.9	2.0	0.0	11.0
Summer session	1.1	1.3	1.0	0.0	6.0

Faculty reported covering in their courses a wide range of important topics that students training to be ECSE teachers should learn. As shown in Figure 7, between 40 to 50% of faculty reported covering each of the topics. The most taught topics were child development and early learning (54%) and professionalism and ethical practice (54%). Only 44% of faculty reported teaching assessment processes. Note that not every professor needs to teach each topic to provide coverage, and the data only represent courses taught by the responding faculty and not by all faculty in their ECSE program.

Figure 7. Percentage of Faculty Covering Each Topic in their Courses (n=70)



Note: Faculty taught courses on multiple topics and thus, percentages add up to more than 100%.

Faculty Retention and Turnover

We asked respondents about their plans to leave their current faculty position over the next three years (See Figure 8). Only seven percent reported plans to leave their current job in the next three years for another job, but another 17% reported plans to retire. Less than half (48%) reported they plan to stay in their current job, while 28% were undecided about whether they would leave or stay.

Over the last year, 29% of respondents considered leaving their current job for a position outside academia and 21% considered leaving for a different job in academia.[1] Moreover, 32% of respondents reported they had received a written job offer in the past year. Nearly half of these offers (46%) were from outside higher education, while 38% were from their current institution, and just 25% from another institution of higher education. See Figure 9.

[1] Note: These groups are not mutually exclusive.

Figure 8. Faculty Plans to Leave Current Job in the Next Three Years (n=66)

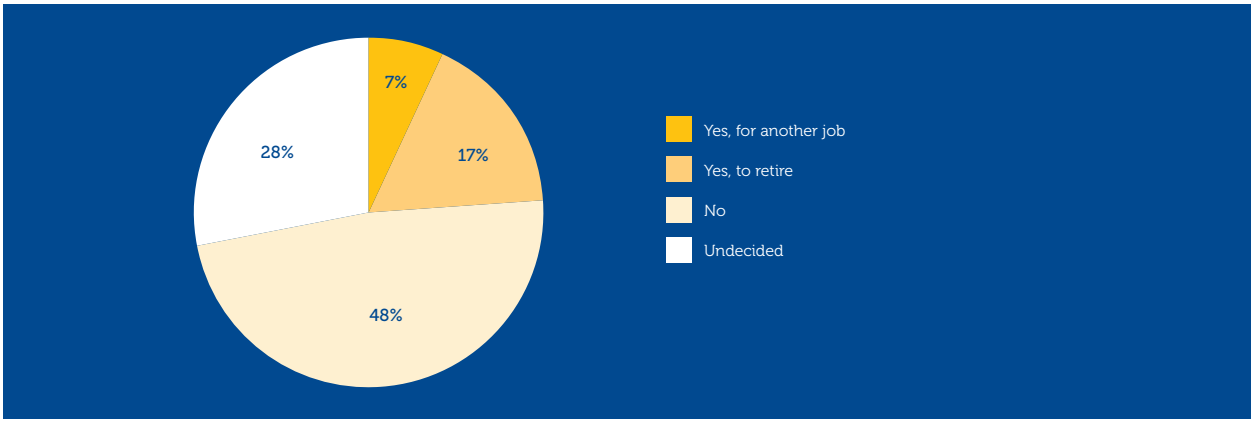
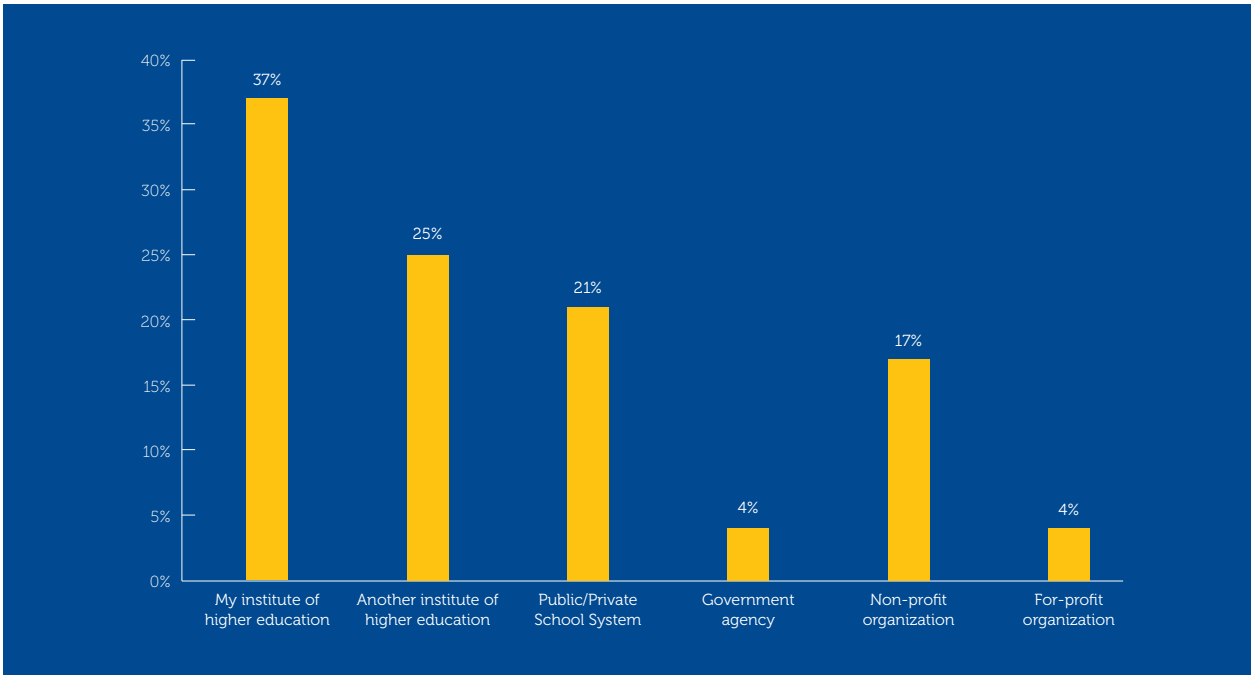


Figure 9. Types of Job Offers Received by Faculty (n=24)



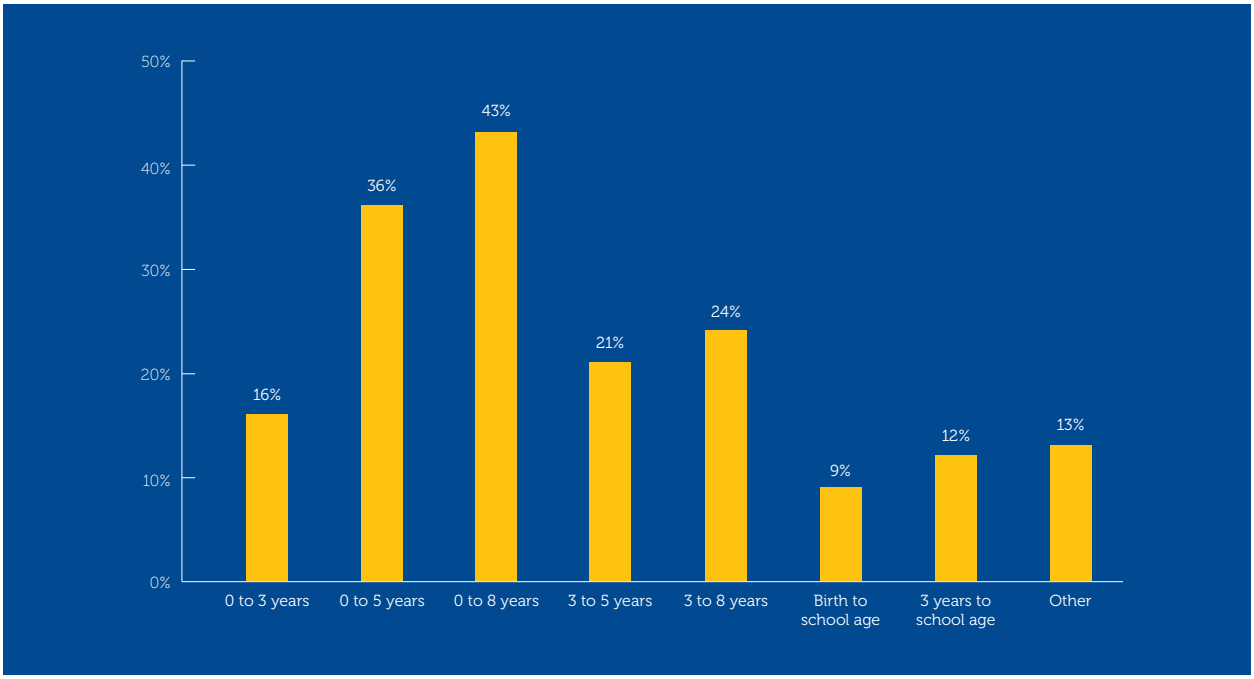
Note: Due to multiple job offers, percentages add up to more than 100%.

ECSE Program Characteristics

Three-quarters of the programs offered bachelor's (76%) and master's degree programs (75%), with fewer offering sixth-year (5%) and doctoral programs (17%). Thirteen percent of programs provided only in-person coursework, but 57% of programs provided some ECSE coursework in person. Fourteen percent of programs provided only online coursework, but 54% provided some online coursework. And 29% of programs provided all hybrid coursework only while 57% of programs provided some hybrid coursework. Most programs (63%) had a faculty coordinator for ECSE.

As shown in Figure 10, programs varied in the child age range for which they prepared teachers, though nearly all (97%) covered the preschool years in some capacity.

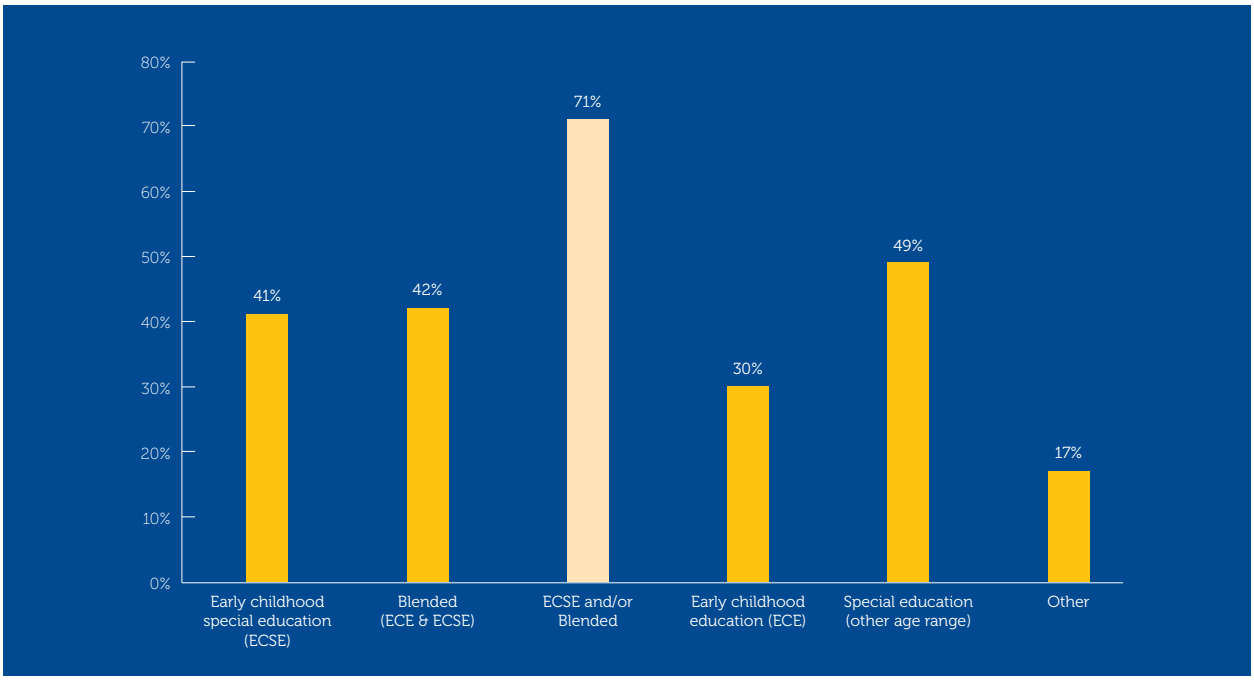
Figure 10. Age Groups for which Faculty's ECSE Programs Prepare Teachers (N=76)



Note: As programs provide training to work more than one age group; percentages add to more than 100%.

As seen in Figure 11, 71% of programs offered a license or certification in ECSE (41%) and/or a blended license or certification in ECSE and ECE together (42%). Additionally, 30% of programs offered a license or certification in regular ECE, 49% offered a license or certification in special education for another age range, and 17% offered other licenses or certifications.

Figure 11. Licenses or Certifications Offered by Programs (N=76)



Note: As some programs prepare students for more than one license or certificate, percentages add to more than 100%.

Table 3 provides information on the program capacity, number of students enrolled in ECSE programs in the last year, and the number of students who graduated in the last year. Bachelor's degree programs enrolled an average of 67 students but had the capacity to enroll an average of 90 students. Eighty percent of bachelor's degree programs were under-enrolled. Bachelor's degree programs were under-enrolled by an average of 32 students. On average, bachelor's degree programs were at 63% capacity. Master's degree programs enrolled an average of 44 students but had the capacity to enroll an average of 186 students. Eighty-seven percent of master's degree programs were under-enrolled. On average, these programs were under-enrolled by an average of 36 students. On average, master's degree programs were at 52% capacity. Doctoral programs enrolled an average of 7 students but had the capacity to enroll an average of 28 students. Data on sixth-year programs was reported by so few programs that we do not report estimates on capacity and enrollment.

Table 3. Program Capacity, Enrollment, and Graduates

	Mean	Std. Dev.	Median	Min.	Max.
Maximum capacity of programs					
Bachelor's degree	90.2	137.7	50.0	3	800
Master's degree	186.3	752.9	50.0	10	5,200
Doctoral degree (Ph.D or Ed.D)	27.5	16.6	25.0	10	50
Number of students enrolled					
Bachelor's degree	67.2	113.3	25.0	0.	700
Master's degree	41.0	83.7	20.0	0	533
Doctoral degree (Ph.D or Ed.D)	7.3	10.0	3.5	0	22
Number of students graduated in the past year					
Bachelor's degree	26.9	64.2	10.5	0	400
Master's degree	14.8	16.6	10.0	0	76
Doctoral degree (Ph.D or Ed.D)	0.3	0.5	0.0	0	1

Note: Forty-eight faculty provided information on bachelor's degree programs, 44 on master's programs, and only four on doctoral programs.

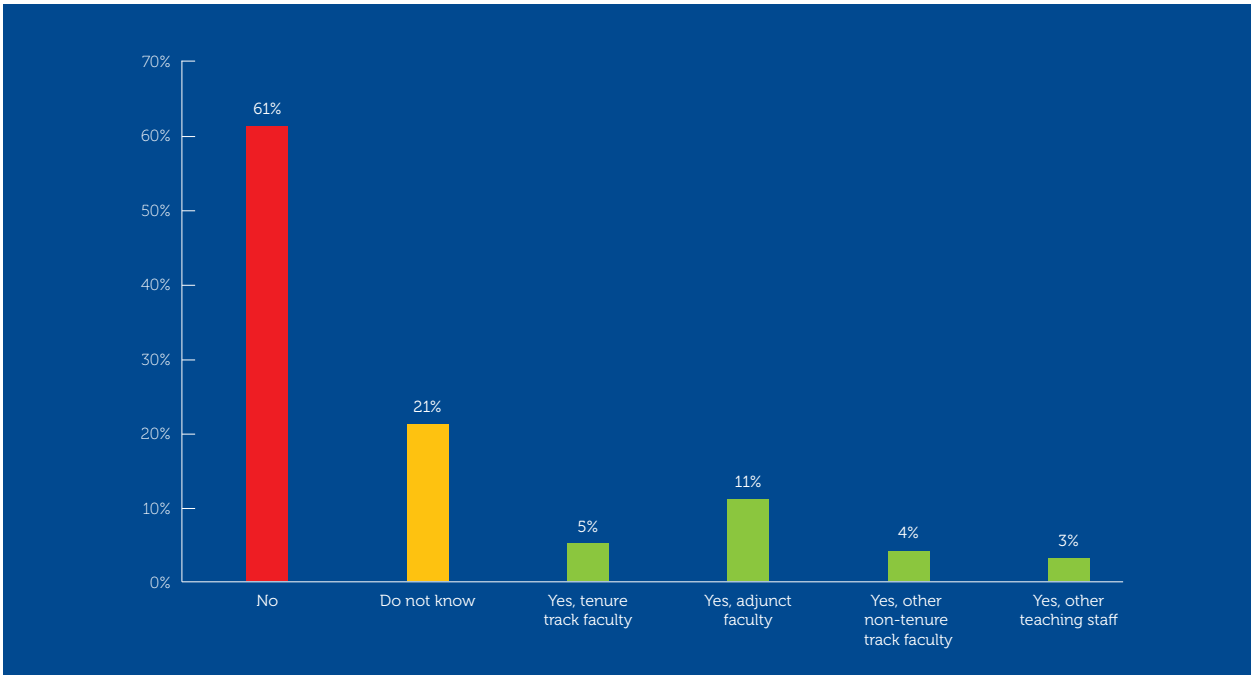
Table 4 reports on the number of full- and part-time faculty in ECSE departments. On average ECSE programs had 4.5 full-time faculty and 3.2 part-time faculty. Most full-time faculty have tenure-track positions. Most part-time faculty have non-tenure track positions, primarily as adjunct faculty. Sixty-one percent of ECSE programs had at least one full-time tenure-track faculty member.

Table 4. Number of ECSE Program Staffing Reported by Responding Faculty (n=72)

	Mean	Std. Dev.	Median	Min.	Max.
Full-time ECSE faculty in department/program	4.5	4.9	2.5	1	29
Tenured/tenure track faculty	2.3	2.0	2.0	0	12
Adjunct faculty	1.1	3.7	0.0	0	25
Clinical faculty	0.4	0.8	0.0	0	3
Research faculty	0.1	0.5	0.0	0	3
Other	0.4	1.0	0.0	0	5
Part-time ECSE faculty in department/program	3.2	6.0	1.0	0	32
Tenured/tenure track faculty	0.6	3.5	0.0	0	30
Adjunct faculty	2.1	3.9	0.5	0	25
Clinical faculty	0.4	3.2	0.0	0	9
Research faculty	0.1	1.1	0.0	0	9
Other	0.2	1.2	0.0	0	9

As shown in Figure 12, most programs (61%) did not plan to hire new faculty in the coming year. Only 20% of faculty reported that their ECSE programs had plans to hire new ECSE faculty in the next year. Another 21% reported that hiring was uncertain. Among those with plans to hire additional faculty, 29% plan to hire tenure-track faculty, 57% adjunct faculty, 21% other non-tenure-track faculty, and 14% other teaching staff.

Figure 12. ECSE Department Hiring Plans for the Next Year (n=76)



Note: As programs could plan to hire more than one type of faculty, percentages add to more than 100%.

Perceived Adequacy of ECSE Program Coverage of Key Topics for Training ECSE Teachers

ECSE faculty were asked how adequately they thought 15 key topics for ECSE teacher preparation were covered by coursework in their ECSE programs. Across all 15 topics, on average, 65% of faculty indicated coverage was fully adequate. Faculty very rarely indicated that coverage was not at all adequate so much of the variation was in whether coverage was considered fully or only somewhat adequate. Table 5 shows faculty ratings of coverage by topic. Nearly 80% of faculty reported that child development and early learning, partnering with families, professionalism and ethics, and the state's early learning and development standards were fully adequately covered. At the other end of the spectrum, less than one-third reported that delivering home-based service models was adequately covered and only 43% reported that delivery of services in community-based early childhood programs was adequately covered. The delivery of home-based services was the only topic to have a substantial percentage (25%) reporting coverage not being at all adequate. Slim majorities reported fully adequate coverage of developmentally, culturally, and linguistically appropriate practices (53%) and collaboration across disciplines (57%), indicating greater needs for improved coverage on these topics, though there is some evidence that improvements are needed in a substantive number of programs across all topics.

Table 5. Adequacy of covering key ECSE topics in program courses (n=72)

	Not at all adequate	Somewhat adequate	Fully adequate
Child development & early learning	0%	21%	79%
Developmentally, culturally, & linguistically appropriate practices	1%	46%	53%
Partnering with families	0%	21%	79%
Collaboration and teaming	0%	29%	71%
Assessment processes	1%	32%	67%
Application of curriculum frameworks in the planning of meaningful learning experiences	1%	24%	75%
Using responsive & reciprocal interactions, interventions & instruction	0%	33%	67%
Professionalism and ethical practice	1%	19%	79%
My state's early learning & development standards	1%	19%	79%
Collaborating with other team members across multiple disciplines during assessment, intervention, and evaluation	1%	42%	57%
Delivery of home-based service models	25%	44%	31%
Delivery of services in community-based early childhood programs	8%	49%	43%
Delivery of services in inclusive classrooms	3%	22%	75%
Social-emotional competence & positive interventions to support challenging behavior	1%	38%	63%
Reflective practice, partnership, and advocacy to ensure children & families are provided appropriate & individualized services and interventions to meet their needs	0%	39%	61%

Conclusions and Implications

Coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic there continue to be widespread reports of teacher shortages (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2025; McLean et al., 2024), and the ECSE workforce is no exception (Lohmann & Macy, 2024). These shortages, coupled with increases in the number of young children with disabilities needing a qualified ECSE teacher (e.g., Friedman-Krauss & Barnett, 2023; Zablotsky et al., 2023), raise concerns about capacity to grow and expand a fully qualified ECSE workforce. Although our survey's low response rate suggests caution in extrapolating its findings, the sample is not obviously unrepresentative, and it remains the best information available on ECSE teacher preparation programs and their faculty. With this in mind, we offer the following conclusions and recommendations.

Although most faculty had some expertise in preschool-age children, only 16% had earned their highest degree specifically in ECSE. This suggests a need for the preparation of more faculty specialized in ECSE who can prepare teachers, leaders, and future professors. Only four programs reported having doctoral students currently, and those programs averaged seven doctoral students. Additional funding for doctoral programs and/or fellowships for doctoral students in ECSE could help ensure there are enough qualified faculty in ECSE programs in the future. This seems particularly important given the reported plans of current faculty to leave their position.

Almost one-quarter of faculty reported that they plan to leave their position in the next three years either for retirement or another job, and another 28% are undecided. This suggests that half of ECSE faculty might leave their position in the next few years. Yet only a small fraction of programs reported plans to hire additional faculty this year. Likely this is at least partly because most ECSE programs were under-enrolled.

Most ECSE programs enrolled fewer bachelor's and master's degree students than they had the capacity to enroll. This suggests that ECSE teacher shortages may be due not just to exits from the profession but from a decline in entrants. Policies to increase enrollment could address teacher shortages relatively quickly (though not immediately). Scholarships for ECSE students, loan forgiveness programs, and other financial assistance to help with admissions (fees relating to applications), and funding for recruitment might help boost enrollment. Increases in compensation for ECSE teachers might also be effective, though outreach is required to make this information available to prospective students for both traditional and alternate routes.

Some attention to improving coverage of key ECSE topics could help improve teacher preparation, and this, in turn, might improve teacher retention. For example, only 43% of faculty reported that the coverage of "delivery of services in community-based early childhood programs" was fully adequate, which could impact children receiving services that are truly in their least restrictive environment. Only 57% of faculty reported that the coverage of "collaborating with other team members across multiple disciplines during assessment, intervention, and evaluation" was fully adequate. Preparation and hiring of new faculty who are adequately prepared to teach this content is one way to support improvement. Another is to provide modest funding for faculty to improve course coverage of the topics most often reported to lack fully adequate coverage. Even without such support, we suggest that ECSE programs review the syllabi of courses required for ECSE teachers with an eye towards improving coverage of the key topics.

Training qualified new ECSE teachers is essential for providing quality early education services to young children with disabilities in their least restrictive environment. The findings from this report offer opportunities and challenges. Existing ECSE programs have substantial untapped capacity to produce a greater number of fully qualified ECSE teachers. Most faculty in those programs also report that they provide strong preparation for ECSE teachers across all key topics. The biggest challenge is to take steps to ensure that students are willing and able to take advantage of these opportunities.

In addition, the survey reveals a need for on-going professional development of ECSE teachers, leaders, and higher education faculty (who mostly did not obtain their highest degree in ECSE). Despite good coverage of most key topics in ECSE courses, there are some shortcomings reported for most topics and serious shortcomings for a few. This report offers guidance on the highest priorities while indicating a general need for additional support. Professional development can support the existing workforce prepared by these programs in the past, as well as support those responsible for improving their preparation of future ECSE teachers and leaders.

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