

Understanding ECE Workforce Needs in Massachusetts

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Access to affordable, high-quality early care and education (ECE) is essential for children, families, and Massachusetts' economy. ECE programs support children during the most critical years of brain development, create the conditions for parents and caregivers to work, and yield long-term returns across education, health, and income outcomes.

Recent investments have stabilized and expanded ECE capacity, but substantial unmet demand remains.¹ Meeting future demand for ECE in Massachusetts requires understanding not only how many educators are needed to serve more children, but also how program structure and workforce turnover shape recruitment needs.

How many ECE educators are there in Massachusetts?

EEC-licensed centers and family child care (FCC) make up the vast majority of Massachusetts' licensed early care and education sector. Centers account for approximately 77% of licensed capacity in the state.² FCC providers generally operate in home-based settings and make up the remaining 23% of formal care capacity. In September 2024, there were over 21,000 teachers³ in center-based ECE programs and about 5400 FCC providers.⁴ The ECE workforce also includes assistant teachers and FCC assistants, who have different qualification requirements and responsibilities. Public school-based preK programs employ additional teachers, though they operate under a separate licensure system administered by DESE. These counts establish a baseline, but estimating future needs requires looking beyond them.

Educator needs vary by licensing requirements and program characteristics

The number of educators needed to serve a given number of children depends on state licensing regulations that set minimum educator-to-child ratios—and those ratios vary significantly by the age of the children being served.

KEY FINDINGS

Turnover multiplies recruitment needs. For every educator added to the workforce, roughly four more must be recruited to replace those who leave.

Massachusetts must continuously recruit educators simply to maintain current capacity.

In 2024:

APPROXIMATELY

17% of center-based teachers left their program

AN ESTIMATED

6% of FCC programs closed

Workforce growth requires both recruitment and retention. Efforts to reduce turnover can be as consequential as efforts to attract new educators into the field.

For example, under Massachusetts licensing regulations, the current required ratios for centers are:⁵

- 1 educator per 3 infants (under 15 months)
- 1 educator per 4 toddlers (15–33 months)
- 1 educator per 10 preschoolers (33 months–kindergarten)

Infant and toddler classrooms require substantially more educators per child than preschool classrooms. A program's overall staffing needs depend heavily on the mix of ages it serves. Roughly half of all centers in Massachusetts have at least one infant or toddler classroom—meaning that demand for infant and toddler educators is significant and extends across much of the sector.

FCC providers serve children across age groups with different child-to-provider ratios than centers. How new capacity is distributed between centers and FCCs affects how capacity expansion targets translate into educator need. Any projection of educator needs to account for whether new capacity is expected to come from growth in centers, FCC providers, or both.

Program administrators, assistant teachers, and FCC assistants play an important role in helping programs meet licensing ratios and expand capacity. However, they are limited in their ability to independently care for groups of children under EEC regulations.

Program operating hours also affect staffing needs. EEC licensing regulations require ratio and teacher coverage continuously throughout a program's operating hours, so programs open longer than a typical day may require more staff hours.

Why recruitment needs exceed growth targets

Turnover is a significant factor in ECE workforce planning. A significant number of educators need to be recruited each year simply to keep the workforce at its current size. Available data from 2024 suggest an annual turnover rate of approximately 17% among center-based teachers in Massachusetts.⁶ Not all turnover represents educators leaving the

profession. Some teachers move to another ECE program while remaining in the workforce. We do not currently have a state-specific estimate of the number of teachers who move to a different program, but based on studies from other states, we estimate about 5% of turnover is due to program switches and that the remaining 12% comes from teachers leaving the sector entirely.⁷

This dynamic applies to FCC providers as well, though the data look different. FCC programs close at an estimated rate of about 6% per year,⁸ which means that new FCC providers are needed to maintain capacity in addition to expanding the number of FCC seats.

These data suggest that recruitment efforts must exceed net growth targets. Recruiting enough educators to fill new positions is not sufficient to expand access; additional recruitment is required every year to backfill positions vacated by departures.

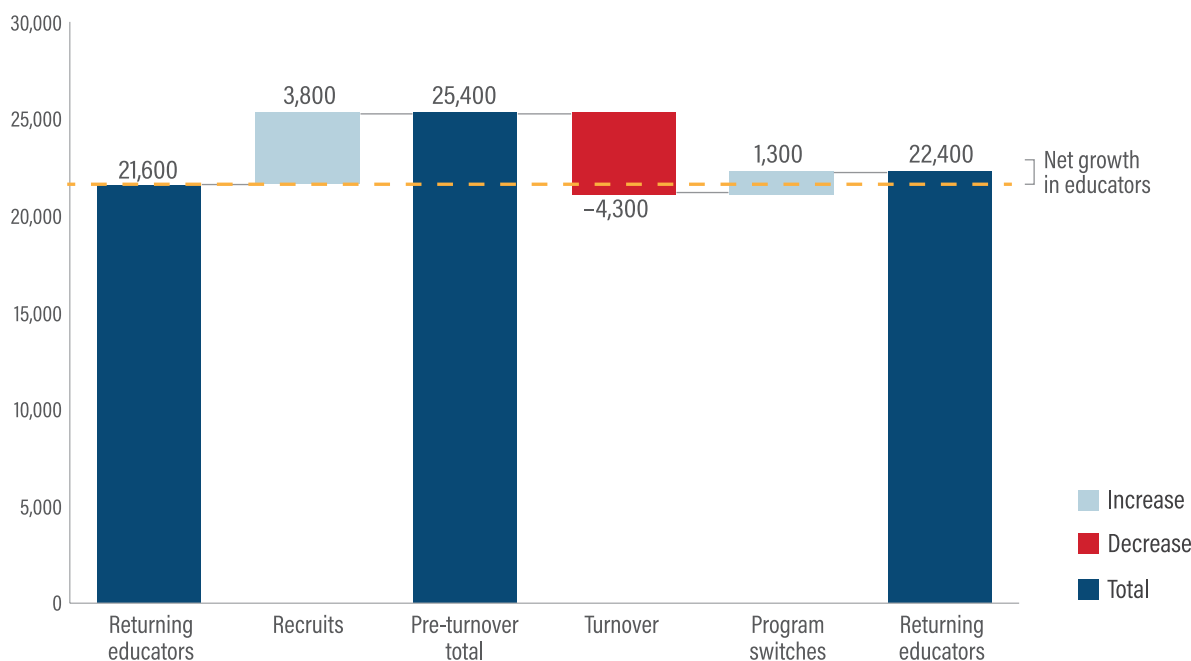
Applying the framework to a capacity expansion scenario

To show how these factors would translate into workforce need, we consider an illustrative scenario that adds 20,000 licensed seats statewide over four years. Based on Liebman's (2024, 2026) estimates of current enrollment and unmet demand, an expansion of this size would increase the share of young children in formal care by about 5 percentage points—a meaningful step toward closing the access gap. To roughly maintain the same ratio of center seats to FCC child seats, this scenario assumes 15,000 additional center-based seats and 5,000 additional FCC seats.

For center-based programs, this scenario would require approximately **2,500 additional teachers overall**.⁹ The figure below translates that multi-year target into the annual recruitment effort required to reach it. These estimates focus primarily on teachers—not assistant teachers or other center staff. While assistant teachers play an important role in ECE classrooms and can help programs meet licensing ratios, they are not allowed to independently lead a classroom under EEC regulations.

Annual teacher recruits required to achieve a 20,000-seat expansion over four years

Illustrative scenario only; estimates change under different expansion targets and assumptions.



What this scenario illustrates

The estimates below are based on the illustrative scenario described above (20,000 additional seats over four years). Different expansion targets or assumptions about age and staffing mix, setting mix, and workforce mobility would produce different estimates, but any calculation of growth in the workforce needs to account for annual turnover.

- **Most newly recruited educators replace educators who leave.** About 12% of teachers (~2,520 annually) leave the ECE sector each year, meaning many new hires simply maintain the existing workforce. For every educator added to the workforce, roughly four more must be recruited to replace those who leave.
- **Recruitment needs substantially exceed current hiring.** Under this scenario, meeting this expansion target would require roughly **3,800 new center teachers annually**, compared with approximately **2,300 who entered the workforce in 2024**.¹⁰ Over four years, these annual dynamics would cumulatively produce approximately 2,500 additional teachers.
- **Similar recruitment challenges exist for FCC providers.** Applying the same framework suggests that approximately 600 to 700 new family child care providers would

need to open annually over a 4-year period to expand FCC capacity by 5,000 seats.

- **Improving retention can reduce recruitment needs.** The gap between educators needed for new seats and educators who must be recruited is driven largely by workforce exits.

Looking ahead

The framework described here helps estimate how many educators Massachusetts may need under different expansion scenarios, but it also points to an important next question: where will those educators come from? Understanding future workforce supply requires understanding the pathways through which educators enter, move within, and leave the ECE workforce. How large is the potential recruiting pool? Do workforce needs vary in different parts of the state? What pathways do educators follow into ECE work, and how long do those pathways take? Which workforce support programs successfully translate into sustained employment, and which do not?

Answering these questions requires better data than are currently available, including: the number of new hires enter-

ing the sector each year, educators' career trajectories over time, and the relationship between preparation and support programs and actual workforce outcomes. It also requires a clearer framework for evaluating the relative costs and benefits of different recruitment and retention strategies.

The supply and demand picture described here highlights a central challenge: sustaining progress on ECE access will depend not just on creating seats, but on building and strengthening the workforce pipeline that supplies those educators.

REFERENCES

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ENDNOTES

- 1 As of April 2025, licensed capacity has grown by 7% but just over half of 0-to-5-year olds were enrolled in formal care and only 29% of 0-5 year-old children eligible for Child Care Financial Assistance were receiving it (Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care, 2025).
- 2 Data are from EEC's Child Universal Success Platform, September 2025.
- 3 This is a headcount of teachers and lead teachers based on C3 survey data from September 2024.
- 4 Data are from EEC's Child Universal Success Platform, September 2025.
- 5 Requirements for mixed age classrooms depends on the age composition and distribution of children.
- 6 This is based on center director reports from September 2024 C3 survey data. The turnover rate is calculated as the share of teachers employed across all programs during the previous year who left their program during that year.
- 7 Sector exit and program switching estimates are informed by studies from Illinois (Wiegand et al., 2024) and Louisiana (Bassok et al., 2021).
- 8 This is estimated as a share of FCCs that closed in 2024, using total FCCs in 12/2023 as a starting point. Data are from EEC's KPI dashboard.
- 9 This calculation assumes a 6-8 hour day requiring one shift. More staff would be required to cover a full day. For example, an 8:00 am to 5:00 pm schedule would require multiple staff shifts.
- 10 This is based on C3 survey data from September 2024.

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