



Maine Child Care Employment Award Evaluation Report

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Introduction

The Center for Early Learning Funding Equity (CELFE) at Northern Illinois University contracted with Maine's Office of Child and Family Services (OCFS) to evaluate the implementation of the Child Care Employment Award Pilot.

The Maine Legislature allocated \$5 million (\$2.5 million per year) for the two-year initiative, which launched in July 2024. The pilot provides a workplace benefit to staff employed in licensed child care programs across the state. Designed to complement the Child Care Affordability Program (CCAP), it helps child care workers access affordable care for their own children, with aims to:

- 1) Increase CCAP participation within the ECE workforce,
- 2) Increase workforce retention, and
- 3) Increase workforce recruitment.

The pilot was available to staff working at least 20 hours per week for 75% of the year in a licensed child care program. It quickly reached capacity after launch and established a waitlist in October of 2024. As of September 2025, 511 children from 313 families are participating in the program, with an additional 470 children from 312 families on the waitlist.

Data Collection and Methodology

To assess participant and waitlist demographics, as well as the cost of serving each pilot family over time, CELFE conducted repeated analyses of the program participation tracking sheet. These analyses were completed in June 2024, August 2024, January 2025, and September 2025.

In March 2025, CELFE also facilitated 7 focus groups across the state to gather qualitative insights on the program's implementation from a range of stakeholders. A total of 57 individuals participated, including early childhood educators and staff receiving the Employment Award, center-based directors who employ staff receiving the award, home-based program owners who received the award and/or employed staff receiving the award, and early care and education advocates.

In addition, CELFE was able to incorporate survey data into the analysis from its recent complementary [evaluation](#) of Maine's ECE Workforce Salary Supplement System. In collaboration with OCFS and the Survey Lab at the University of Chicago, CELFE designed and disseminated a survey to all early childhood educators in the state receiving the salary supplements. Survey respondents included 1,903 members of the early childhood workforce in the state – 24% of the total 7,925 survey recipients. Respondents were proportionally represented across the state's geographic regions, with response rates ranging from 21% to 28% across urban and rural counties. Among respondents, 23% were owner/directors and 77% were other staff.

CELFE included survey questions to capture information relevant to the Employment Award Pilot, including demographic characteristics such as whether respondents had children under age 13. Among those who answered this question, 36% reported being the legal guardian of at least one child under 13, with an average of 1.77 children in that age range per respondent. CELFE used these responses to estimate how many child care workers statewide may qualify for the Employment Award, which helped assess the potential fiscal impact of scaling the pilot statewide.

Results

Participation

By January 2025, the pilot served 704 children from 375 families, with 425 children from 248 families on the waitlist. In September 2025, 511 children from 313 families were participating, and 470 children from 312 families were on the waitlist. This decline is likely due to some awards ending earlier than expected over the first year of the program as parents changed employment, no longer met eligibility requirements, or their child no longer needed care.

When CELFE analyzed participation in June of 2024, most applicants (94%) qualified for CCAP (family income under 125% SMI). In subsequent rounds of analysis, the share of CCAP-eligible applicants decreased, reaching 62% by September 2025. At program launch, only 3 families (5 children) qualified for the award by being employed in family child care (FCC) settings. By September 2025, this number had increased to 18 families (35 children), still less than 7% of current pilot participants. The children currently being served include approximately 23% infants and toddlers, 35% preschoolers, and 42% school-age children.

Program Impact

Workforce Retention and Quality of Life

Findings from focus groups of those currently receiving the award suggest that the program has had a positive impact on workforce retention for those enrolled in the pilot. Nearly all participants who received the award reported that they had been considering leaving the field before receiving it but overwhelmingly said that it enabled them to remain in their roles. Many were mothers with young children who were weighing the net benefit of paying for child care while earning low early childhood wages against staying home with their children. Notably, most were not considering jobs in other sectors; rather, they were deciding whether working at all made sense given the high cost of child care. As one participant shared,

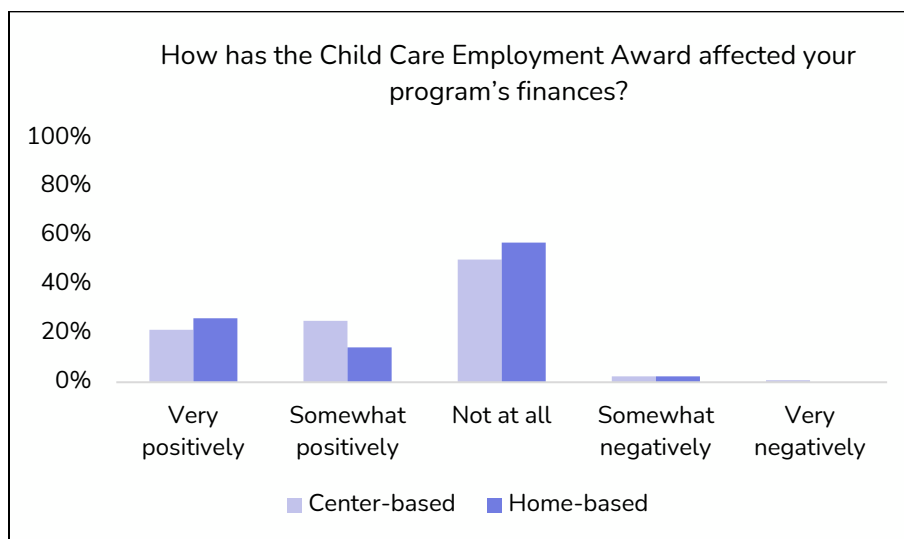
“We have four employees who were going to quit because they couldn't afford child care... They've all stayed with us. Due to this.”

Participants also emphasized the “quality of life” benefit of having their child cared for at their workplace. Program participation data show that the share of children receiving care at their parents’ place of employment rose from 72% in June 2024 to 78% by September 2025. Focus group participants reported that this arrangement eased daily logistical challenges and provided reassurance about the quality of care their children received. One respondent noted, *“I didn't want to leave my kids with anyone. I'm picky about babysitters and even family. So, to have them with me where I at least know that they're okay, like I can check in on them throughout the day, was a big thing.”* Participants also described psychological benefits, saying the award made them feel “seen” and appreciated by the state.

Program Finances

One survey question asked center-based directors and home-based owners how the Child Care Employment Award affected their program's finances. As seen in Figure 1, survey respondents overwhelmingly reported that the award had a very positive, somewhat positive, or neutral effect on their finances, with only a few indicating any negative impact.

Figure 1



However, some focus group participants noted that financial strain emerged when some staff were placed on the waitlist while others were enrolled in the program. Both center- and home-based directors expressed frustration that they had to continue offering their own employee child care discounts to those staff, which negatively affected their program finances. As one director explained, *"We still offer [a child care discount to employees] because we only had 1 out of 20 employees that was able to access the grant before being put on a waitlist... And we did hire naively thinking that people were going to be able to get this child care covered. So, we were hiring mothers willy-nilly thinking that it wasn't going to impact us as much as it did. But we did lose \$210,000 last year for children staff seats."*

Workforce Recruitment

The Child Care Employment Award pilot shows potential to support workforce recruitment if implemented at scale. Several participants reported that friends or acquaintances applied to work in early care and education after learning about the award. One respondent noted,

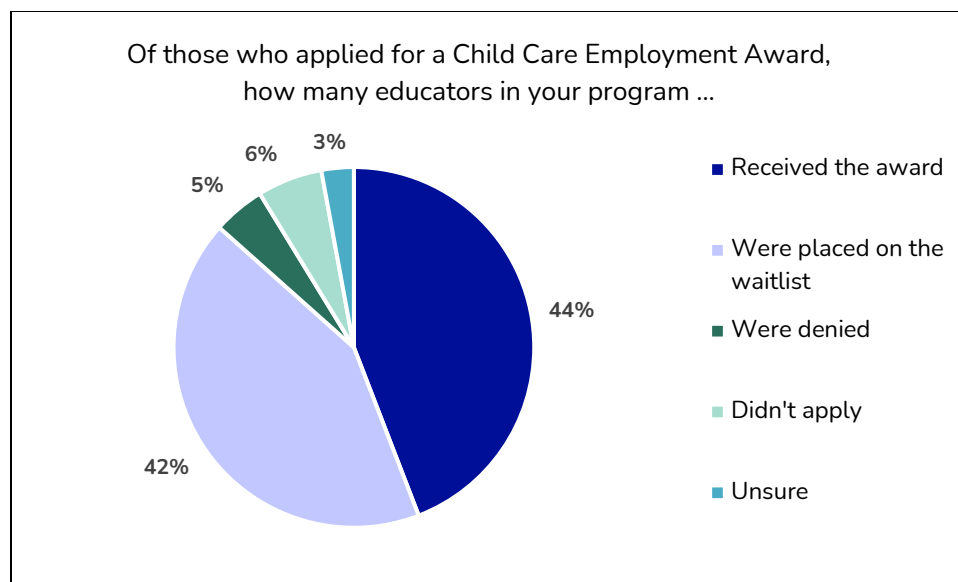
"I know like three or four people who went to work for child care because of this award."

Others observed shifts in the applicant pool, including older candidates and a higher proportion of mothers than before the award launched.

Center directors described how the pilot (sometimes in conjunction with increased compensation through the Salary Supplement Program) initially helped recruit staff and expand classroom capacity. One director shared, *“If I combine that with the increased stipend...we were able to actually recruit... I think between our two buildings, four new staff people and opened up three new classrooms and have 40 kids more than we had a year ago.”*

However, the abrupt shift to a waitlist in October 2024 significantly limited programs’ ability to use the Employment Award as a recruitment tool. Some directors had to inform new hires that they would not receive the award after all, and both directors and staff reported challenges with inconsistent access, sometimes even among applicants from the same program. Survey data from program directors – as shown in Figure 2 – indicate that on average, among educators in their programs who applied for a Child Care Employment Award, 44% received the award and 42% were placed on the waitlist.

Figure 2



Advocates in the focus groups echoed frustration with the program’s rollout, noting that although the Employment Award was funded as a pilot, it was not communicated or implemented as such. As one advocate observed, *“Some may think that there was a math problem or a modeling problem, because who the heck would roll out this massive communication and this really great strategy and only have money for two months?”* Others emphasized that while funding levels were appropriate for a pilot, presenting the program as broadly available to all eligible applicants further diminished trust.

Based on program participation and survey data, we estimate that **only about 11%** of eligible early childhood educators, directors, and owners are currently receiving the Employment Award: 311 out of an estimated 2,853 providers with children under age 13 in the state.

Fiscal Impact of the Program at Scale

The cost of serving each family in the pilot varies depending on the family's eligibility status. For families who meet CCAP income eligibility requirements (currently less than 125% of the state median income), the pilot covers the full CCAP copay. For families who are not CCAP-eligible (household income above 125% of the state median), the pilot covers 50% of the cost of child care. In May 2025, a new copay structure lowered copays for CCAP-eligible families, reducing the pilot's per-family cost. Although the state's overall investment stayed the same, more of the cost for CCAP-eligible families shifted from the pilot to CCAP.

Using survey data and current program participation, CELFE estimated the potential cost of serving all eligible families statewide. Among 1,706 respondents who answered the relevant survey question, 609 individuals (36%) reported being the legal guardian of at least one child under age 13 (Appendix Table 1). Because over 93% of Maine's early childhood programs participate in the state's ECE Salary Supplement Program, we used the 7,925 educators receiving supplements as a proxy for total workforce size. Educators not enrolled in the supplement program are unlikely to participate in other compensation initiatives, so this provides a reasonable estimate. Applying the 36% share of respondents with children under 13 to the 7,925 educators yields an estimate of roughly 2,853 child care workers statewide who likely have at least one child under age 13.

Families with school age children are less likely to rely on formal child care. To reflect this, we reduced the projected pool of children needing care by 10% – from 2,853 to 2,568 – based on the following assumptions:

- Across the 6-12 age group, only about 75% as many children are being served as we would expect if they used formal care at the same rate as children ages 0-5. This implies school age children are 25% less likely to need care.
- Because children ages 6-12 represent about 53% of all children ages 0-12, multiplying 53% by 25% yields an estimated adjustment of 13.5%.
- We rounded this down to 10% to account for families with multiple children.

Because families who are CCAP-eligible have only their CCAP copay covered by the pilot, their cost to participate in the program is typically less than families who are not CCAP eligible, where the state pays approximately 50% of cost of care for that family. CELFE assumed the CCAP eligibility status of families who could potentially receive the Employment Award would mirror the distribution of CCAP eligibility among current pilot participants.

Based on these calculations, the table below presents the estimated number of additional families the program could serve and the resources required to serve them.

Table 1: Estimated resources needed to bring program to scale

Eligibility Type	Rate	Estimated number of eligible families	Estimated pilot cost per family	Total Cost
CCAP-eligible	62%	1398 families	\$5,926 per family	\$8,284,540
Not CCAP-eligible	38%	857 families	\$7,888 per family	\$6,757,426
All families—Additional resources needed to bring program to scale				\$15,041,966

Conclusion

The Child Care Employment Award Pilot demonstrates clear benefits for Maine's ECE workforce, particularly in supporting retention and improving the quality of life for staff with young children. Focus group participants and program data indicate that the award has helped many educators remain in their roles by providing financial, quality of life, and psychological benefits. The program also shows promise as a tool for recruitment, as several focus group participants reported that friends or acquaintances were drawn to the field after learning about the award; however, this potential was constrained once the program reached capacity and transitioned to a waitlist.

At the same time, the pilot's rollout revealed important implementation challenges. The program quickly reached capacity, creating a waitlist that limited access for eligible staff and generated tension within programs. CELFE estimates that the program is currently only serving 11% of those eligible, and of those who are currently participating, less than 7% are employed in family child care settings. Directors and advocates noted that the pilot's communication and structure did not adequately account for demand, contributing to frustration and a decline in trust among stakeholders.

Financially, the award generally had positive or neutral effects on program budgets, although some directors reported difficulties in covering child care costs for staff on the waitlist. Scaling the program statewide would require substantial additional resources, and we estimate that approximately \$15 million would be needed to serve all eligible families.

Appendix (Survey Responses)

Table 2: Are you the legal guardian of one or more children under the age of 13?

	Director/Owners	Staff	Overall
Yes	34%	37%	36%
No	66%	63%	64%

Table 3: Are you currently receiving a Child Care Employment Award, which reduces child care expenses for staff working in child care programs?

	Yes	No	% Yes
Center-based	110	305	27%
Home-based	12	45	21%

(Staff with children under 13 only; N=472)

Table 4: Why aren't you receiving a Child Care Employment Award?

	Center-based	Home-based	Overall
I was not aware of the program	43%	51%	44%
I applied but was placed on the waitlist	14%	7%	13%
I did not apply	16%	11%	15%
I do not qualify	8%	16%	9%
I do not need this assistance	20%	16%	19%

(Staff with children under 13 only; N=472)

Table 5: Of those who applied for a Child Care Employment Award, how many educators in your program...

	Center-based	Home-based	Overall
...received the Child Care Employment Award?	44%	57%	44%
...were put on the waitlist?	43%	9%	42%
...were denied?	5%	8%	5%
...didn't apply, although they were eligible (e.g., because they knew there was a waitlist)	6%	9%	6%
Unsure	3%	17%	3%

(Owner/Director Only; N=438)

Table 6: Where did you first learn about the Child Care Employment Award?

	Center-based	Home-based	Overall
My supervisor	48%	23%	45%
A colleague	13%	5%	12%
The Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS)	20%	59%	24%
Professional agency network	5%	5%	5%
Other	14%	9%	14%

(Staff with children under 13 only; N=472)

Table 7: Before the Child Care Employment Award was available, did you offer a child care discount or benefit to employees?

	Yes	No	% Yes
Center-based	249	84	75%
Home-based	42	181	19%
Overall	291	265	52%

(Owner/Director Only; N=438)

Table 8: How much of a discount did you offer, approximately? ¹

	Center-based	Home-based	Overall
75% off tuition per child	9%	19%	11%
50% off tuition per child	36%	17%	33%
25% off tuition per child	19%	29%	20%
Other	35%	36%	36%

(Owner/Director Only; N=438)

¹ 46 respondents (16% of total responses to the question) indicated in write-in comments that their program currently offers 100% tuition coverage for at least one child per employee.