

## About This Case Study

This case study is a constructed scenario designed to illustrate how early childhood workforce systems function in practice. It draws on national research, state examples, and field experience but does not represent any single program or jurisdiction.

Using a six-part workforce system blueprint, the case demonstrates how recruitment, development, and retention of educators depend on the alignment of leadership, governance and accountability, policy infrastructures, professional development and career advancement, practice and quality improvement frameworks, compensation and benefits, and sustainability of innovation and access. While state action and leadership are necessary, philanthropy can provide leadership, and support with innovation such as salary scale development, research and collaborative efforts in higher education with other parts of the system and scholarships as examples. The purpose is to make visible the connections across these elements and to support system-level thinking, rather than to document one specific model.

## The Situation

Little Bridges Early Learning Center serves a diverse community of families with infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. Like many programs across the country, the center struggles to recruit and retain qualified early childhood educators.

After months of searching, the director meets **Maria**, a bilingual assistant working in the community who has strong relationships with families and natural teaching skills. Maria has years of informal caregiving experience and is beloved by parents, but **she does not yet meet the state's formal qualification requirements for a lead teacher.**

The program wants to hire Maria, recognizing her potential and the cultural and linguistic assets she brings to the classroom. However, without the right workforce system supports, Maria might never enter—or stay—in the profession and earn a living wage.

The question becomes:

**What conditions must exist in the early childhood workforce system to recruit, develop, and retain Maria as a qualified early childhood educator?**

The Blueprint categories illustrate how the workforce system must work together.

### 1. Leadership, Governance, and Accountability

The first condition is leadership that views workforce development as a **shared responsibility at a minimum across government state and federal, higher education, and the field.**

In Maria's state, a cross-sector early childhood workforce council coordinates policy and strategy across agencies responsible for:

- Licensing and regulation

## Case Study: Building a Teacher Through a Comprehensive Workforce System

- Higher education and credentialing
- Workforce development
- Childcare subsidy programs
- Professional registries

This governance structure ensures that **policy, funding, and workforce pathways align**, rather than leaving programs like Little Bridges to navigate fragmented systems.

Through this structure, the state has established:

- A unified early childhood competency framework
- Career pathways aligned with credentials
- Workforce registries tracking qualifications and professional growth
- The state and in some cases philanthropy provide funding for services and scholarships to support access to higher education and career advising and support.

This alignment reflects the national recommendations that **states must strengthen competency-based qualification requirements while building clear pathways to reach them.**

For Little Bridges, this means the director does not have to solve the problem alone—the system provides **structured pathways for educators like Maria to enter the profession, earning money while advancing toward credentials and degrees.**

## 2. Policy Infrastructure

Policy creates the rules that allow Maria to begin teaching while she works toward qualifications. The state has adopted several policies that make entry into the profession possible:

### Provisional Credentials

Maria can be hired as an **associate teacher** while completing coursework aligned with the state's competency framework.

### Credit for Prior Learning

Her caregiving experience and community-based training count toward credential requirements.

### Articulation Agreements

Courses taken at community colleges transfer seamlessly into bachelor's programs.

### Apprenticeship Models

Maria can earn a wage while participating in a registered apprenticeship program combining coursework and classroom experience.

These policies acknowledge that the early childhood workforce is diverse and that **alternative pathways are necessary to help the existing workforce gain credentials.** Without these policies, Maria would likely never enter or stay in the profession.

### 3. Professional Development and Career Advancement

Once hired, Maria enters a structured professional learning pathway.

Her development includes:

#### Scholarships

A state scholarship program covers tuition for an associate degree in early childhood education.

#### Coaching and Mentoring

Maria received career advising/coaching and navigation to support her to make choices about courses and choose options that support her career development and classroom practice across professional development opportunities and her college course.

#### Competency-Based Coursework

Her coursework focuses on child development, culturally responsive practice, and family engagement.

#### Stackable Credentials

Maria progresses through a pathway:

Assistant Teacher to Associate Credential to Lead Teacher Credential to bachelor's degree

This approach reflects research showing that **a combination of formal education, coaching, and professional learning supports professional growth**. The pathway ensures Maria is not only meeting requirements but also **growing as a reflective practitioner**.

### 4. Practice and Quality Improvement

Professional development is connected to classroom practice.

Little Bridges participates in a statewide strengths-based **Quality Improvement System** that includes:

- Practice-based coaching
- Classroom observation tools
- Peer learning communities
- Continuous improvement plans

Through this system, Maria receives feedback that helps her:

- Strengthen interactions with children
- Support early language development
- Partner with families

Maria receives weekly coaching from a master teacher who supports her classroom practice. Importantly, quality improvement focuses on **support, growth and improvement rather than punishment**. Maria's development becomes part of the program's overall quality strategy.

### 5. Compensation and Benefits

Recruiting and developing educators is not enough if the profession cannot sustain them. Maria begins as an associate teacher earning \$16 per hour. As she completes credentials, the workforce system ensures **compensation increases along the career pathway**.

The state supports this through:

- Wage supplements tied to credentials that are applied to salaries, and are incrementally to reward progress, not bonuses
- Salary scales aligned with qualifications
- Health insurance options for educators
- Retirement contributions through workforce initiatives

These policies address a critical barrier in early childhood: programs that often **cannot recruit or retain credentialed educators because reimbursement rates do not support competitive wages**.

As Maria advances, her ability to earn a living wage and benefits with compensation that reflects her growing expertise, helping her remain in the field.

### 6. Culture of Innovation, Sustainability, and Access

Finally, the workforce system must ensure that the pathway Maria followed is **not a temporary pilot but a sustainable system**.

The state invests in infrastructure that sustains workforce development:

- Workforce registries tracking educator credentials
- Data systems connecting training, employment, and outcomes
- Partnerships with and within higher education 2 year and 4 year schools
- Funding strategies linking workforce development to child care financing
- Opportunities that ensure that state workforce development systems which are a part of the state's economic development system include access for professionals in early learning and care.

Removing barriers and creating accessible pathways and livable wages for bi-lingual early childhood educators and seeing them as assets in the system is also central.

Because Maria is bilingual and from the community the program serves, the system values her cultural and linguistic assets—not just formal degrees.

The workforce system intentionally supports **a diverse educator workforce that reflects the children and families being served**.

### The Outcome

Little Bridges had program stability because it hired Maria while she grew her competencies:

Maria has completed her associate degree and is working toward a bachelor's degree. She is now the **lead teacher in the preschool classroom and earning a living wage.**

Families trust her. Children thrive in her classroom and have continuity in their teacher relationships.

Little Bridges has a stable workforce, and Maria mentors new educators entering the field.

### What This Case Demonstrates

This story illustrates a critical lesson:

**No single program or policy can solve workforce challenges. Integrated, comprehensive systems are required to elevate the workforce and meet the needs of society's youngest children.**

Recruiting, developing, and retaining educators requires a **comprehensive system** where the following elements work together:

- Leadership and governance align strategies
- Policy creates entry pathways
- Professional development builds skills
- Quality systems support practice
- Compensation sustains the workforce
- Innovation ensures long-term sustainability

When these pieces are aligned, programs do not just fill positions—they **build educators and strengthen the profession.**

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