

Prioritising the professionalisation of early childhood education and care staff

INTRODUCTION

All children have the right to a fair start in life. Early childhood education and care (ECEC) services for children under six years of age play a fundamental role in laying strong **foundations for lifelong learning and wellbeing**, especially in the first three years of life.

Quality ECEC services can make an extraordinary difference in children's lives, especially for the most disadvantaged. Research indicates that children from vulnerable groups derive even greater benefit from high-quality ECEC than their peers from more advantaged families. In addition, ample evidence shows a positive correlation between the education level of ECEC staff and better child outcomes. **Competent ECEC staff** are well-equipped to create stimulating learning environments, to sustain shared thinking and quality interactions, and to enhance the opportunities for children to learn by paying attention to their initiatives, specific needs, and talents. Moreover, highly qualified staff can establish quality interactions and more effective cooperation with families, value their diversity and participation, and are more responsive to their needs – all key competences for **increasing access to ECEC for vulnerable communities**.

Only one-third of the European ECEC systems require core practitioners working with children under the age of three to have a bachelor's degree or higher level of qualification. In contrast, the proportion of ECEC systems requiring core practitioners to have a bachelor's degree or higher level of qualification in ECEC or in education is much higher for those working with children over three years of age.

Only a quarter of the education systems in Europe make continuous professional development (CPD) mandatory for core practitioners working with younger children, while up to half of these countries make CPD mandatory for those working with older children. Additionally, in half of the education systems that employ assistants, they are not required to have a qualification related to their profession and are rarely obligated to undertake **continuous professional development activities** (*Eurydice Report, 2019*).

Recommendations

- **Promote the societal value of ECEC services and ECEC profession**
 - **Establish a minimum standard of qualification accompanied by opportunities for career development for ECEC staff working with children under three years of age**
 - **Track data on ECEC staff qualifications and define targets for the levels of qualification of ECEC staff working in ECEC services, especially those working with children under three years of age**
 - **Define aligned competence profiles across different categories of ECEC staff to ensure high-quality service provision**
 - **Implement policies and mechanisms that bring more diversity in the ECEC workforce (gender, cultural background, etc.)**
 - **Increase investments for improving the ECEC staff working conditions (child-adult ratio, child-free time, remuneration, working environment)**
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EU POLICIES SUPPORTING THE PROFESSIONALISATION OF ECEC STAFF

In the past decade, through different policy documents, the European Union has underscored the pivotal role that well-trained and motivated professionals play in ensuring that high-quality ECEC is provided to all children and families. EU Member States have committed to establishing a [European Education Area](#) in recognition of the fact that:

- ECEC provision lays the foundation for further learning and is an effective investment in education and training.
- High-quality ECEC services are essential to improve education outcomes and give a fair start to all children, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

In September 2022, the European Commission (EC) released the [European Care Strategy](#), and launched a **Proposal for a Council Recommendation for the revision of ‘the Barcelona Targets’**. Previous targets called on Member States to provide ECEC to 33% of children under the age of three, and to 90% of children between the age of three and compulsory school age. The current revisions propose an increase in the percentage of children to be in ECEC. The new Barcelona targets state that by 2030:

- **at least 50% of children under the age of three, and**
- **96% of children from the age of three until the compulsory school age** are to be in ECEC.

The EC Proposal on the revision of the Barcelona targets emphasises not only the imperative of accessibility and affordability of ECEC services, but also of the quality of services, especially for the most vulnerable groups.

It recommends that Members States:

“support the professionalisation of all ECEC staff, including by increasing the required level of initial education and ensuring continuous professional development through adequate and lifelong training opportunities.”

Through data collected in 2021 in nine countries, the European [First Years First Priority Campaign](#) highlighted the **urgent need to track data on staff qualifications and their capacity to respond to the specific needs of children from vulnerable groups**, as well as data on the availability of, and access to, different types of formal childcare services for children under three.

Addressing these issues is urgent due to difficulties in recruiting staff and serious staff shortages caused by high staff turnover rates in many ECEC systems. Public investment is crucial in addressing these needs.

The [European Pillar of Social Rights](#) states that “children have the right to affordable early childhood education and care of high quality” and, in its first principle, lays down the right to quality and inclusive education, training and lifelong learning applicable for both children and staff in ECEC. The [Child Guarantee](#) also highlights the need to ensure access to affordable and quality ECEC especially for specific groups of children in need.

On 22 May 2019, the [Council Recommendation on high-quality early childhood education and care systems](#) was adopted. The document recommends that Member States support the professionalisation of ECEC staff, including leaders, to improve the quality and inclusiveness of ECEC systems.

The centrality of training and education for ECEC staff is reiterated in the [Toolkit for inclusive early childhood education and care](#) and the guidelines on [How to recruit, train and motivate well-qualified staff](#) both released in 2021 by the EC’s Working Group on ECEC. This latest report recognises that **the quality of ECEC provision is highly dependent on the professionalism, competence and commitment of staff working in the sector** and it is therefore particularly important that there is continued support for staff training and development, alongside enhancing working conditions.

WHAT CHANGES ARE NEEDED?

The ECEC sector requires qualified, competent, motivated, and diversified staff especially for those working with children under three years of age and with those who are the most disadvantaged. But how can ECEC systems attract and retain these staff while streamlining high levels of professionalisation?

- **Promote the societal value of ECEC and of the ECEC profession:** The ECEC sector needs to receive the recognition it deserves in order to attract and retain highly qualified staff. Additionally, it is crucial that the role ECEC professionals have in supporting children’s development and well-being is widely recognised by governments through adequate investment in their professionalisation, remuneration, and working conditions.

- **Establish a minimum standard of qualification for ECEC staff, accompanied by motivating and dynamic career opportunities:** Higher entry-level qualifications have longer-term benefits associated with higher quality provision and higher professional status. Provision of diverse opportunities for career development are efficient incentives for staff to join and stay in the ECEC workforce. The [EU ECEC Quality Framework](#) recommends to ‘aim for a pedagogical staff that is composed of highly qualified professionals holding a full professional qualification specialised in ECEC’. Participation of all ECEC staff in high-quality initial education and training and in continuous professional development (CPD) programmes is key to improving the quality of ECEC provision. Offering more attractive career prospects contributes to recruiting staff with different skills and competences who are motivated to professionally grow in the sector.

- **Define aligned competence profiles across different categories of ECEC staff:** The development of competence profiles for ECEC staff (i.e., core staff, assisting staff, leaders) is essential for ensuring quality ECEC services and programmes, and enables relevant and tailored support and professional development leading, to increased professionalism.
- **Diversify the workforce:** In inclusive ECEC systems, the composition of staff in ECEC settings reflects the diversity of the communities where they operate. Selection processes and education programmes for entering and growing in ECEC professions should remove any barrier (including gender) which may inhibit or prevent diverse members of society from applying to enter the ECEC profession.

Staff policies – Example from Finland

The new act on ECEC (2018) provisions emphasises the role of the workforce in providing quality ECEC in Finland and puts forward a new staff structure that will be implemented from January 2030. In ECEC centers, a teacher, a social pedagogue and a childcarer will be present. The changes also require the head of the ECEC centers to have a master's degree in education sciences. To accompany the legislative changes, a group of experts including representatives from the Ministry of Education and Culture, the National Agency for Education, the Education Evaluation Centre, the Trade Unions, the Student Organisations, the Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities and a representative of one municipality has been formed. The expert group is working on different themes, such as continuous learning and educational pathways for professionals to develop a training programme for ECEC staff.

(How to recruit, train and motivate well-qualified staff, ET2020 Working group Early Childhood Education and Care, European Union, 2021)

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Towards a graduate-led ECEC workforce – Example from Ireland

In 2002, with the introduction of the first ECEC model framework the ongoing process of policy reform started. After almost two decades, in 2021, the *Nurturing Skills: The Workplace Plan for Early Learning and Care and School Age Childcare 2002-2028* report was launched. This Plan seeks to move to a graduate-led workforce by 2028, in line with the *First 5* targets. The actions and recommendations set out in the report seek to address quality through five pillars which will aim to:

- Establish a career framework for Early Years Educators and School-Aged Practitioners and develop career pathways with clearly defined roles and responsibilities;
- Raise qualification levels incrementally with a focus on supporting existing staff in early years settings and school-aged childcare to upskill to achieve the *First 5* objectives of a graduate-led early years workforce by 2028;
- Develop a national Continuous Professional Development (CPD) system in which staff will be supported to participate through Core Funding;
- Support recruitment, retention, and diversity within the workforce to ensure there is a sufficient number of qualified staff for continuity and consistency; and
- Moving towards the regulation of the profession incrementally over the course of the Workforce Plan.

The recommendations contained in the report will be supported by the parallel process of the Joint Labour Committee (JLC) for early years services and the new funding stream announced in Budget 2022.

(Press Release, 7 December 2021: Department of Children Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth 'Minister O'Gorman launches Nurturing Skills: The Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare 2022-2028)

- **Improve working conditions to attract and retain ECEC staff**, paying attention to:
 - **Adult/child ratio:** setting child/staff ratios and group sizes based on children's ages is important if high-quality ECEC is to be delivered effectively and the profession is to be made more attractive. Even if there is no consensus across the EU on the best "ratios", there is agreement that it is difficult to have a child-centred approach to ECEC with large groups of children and low numbers of staff.
 - **Child-free time:** providing child-free time for staff to engage in professional activities such as reflection, planning, engaging with parents and collaborating with other professionals and colleagues is fundamental. However, in a great number of ECEC systems and settings, "child-free time" is not guaranteed, meaning that all the activities mentioned above need to take place during the staff's free time, or while working with the children, which can be detrimental to the quality of both activities.
 - **Salaries:** competitive and adequate wages can make employment in ECEC a more attractive option for better-qualified staff looking for proper careers. Unfortunately, in many countries there is a wide pay gap between childcare staff and teachers, with childcare staff being poorly trained and paid around minimum wage levels. ECEC provision is often managed and led by organisations in the public sector. However, there are many situations where provision and salaries are determined by market forces and private and third sector providers evaluate and assess how much to pay to attract the professional staff they need. A system of salary increase during careers in the ECEC sector must also be considered.

- **Working environment:** ECEC staff are looking for a reasonable schedule and workload, and flexibility (including managing their own family situations); support from colleagues and managers; recognition for their work; good salaries with progression; opportunities to develop and receive training; and a positive environment which makes it enjoyable to go to work.

Promoting continuous professional development – Example from Spain

In Spain, in most regions, teachers can apply every five years for an extra-salary supplement based on the completion of a minimum number of CPD activities, equivalent of 10 ECTS credits.

(How to recruit, train and motivate well-qualified staff, ET2020 Working group Early Childhood Education and Care, European Union, 2021)

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THE CAMPAIGN

The **First Years First Priority** Campaign focuses on prioritising children from birth to six years, with special attention to the first 1.000 days, and is rooted in an understanding that, from the first day they are born, all children are rights holders — despite their dependency status. The Campaign advocates for more political visibility and resource allocation to early childhood, focusing especially on the most vulnerable children — such as Roma and Traveller children, children with disabilities, migrant and refugee children, children in or at risk of entering alternative care, and those living in extreme poverty. With these aims in mind, the campaign works to ensure that early childhood development (ECD) remains high on the political agenda, by building a strong community of advocates at the EU and national level.

NATIONAL COORDINATORS OF THE CAMPAIGN:

- Bulgaria — [For Our Children Foundation](#) and [Trust for Social Achievement](#)
- Finland — [Central Union for Child Welfare](#)
- France — [Ensemble pour l'Éducation de la Petite Enfance](#)
- Hungary — [Family, Child, Youth Association](#)
- Ireland — [Child Rights Alliance](#)
- Portugal — [Fundação Nossa Senhora do Bom Sucesso](#)
- Romania — [Step by Step Center for Education and Professional Development](#)
- Serbia — [Pomoc Deci](#)
- Slovakia — [Open Society Foundation Slovakia](#)
- Spain — [Plataforma de Infancia](#)



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THE PARTNERSHIP

First Years First Priority is a joint initiative of **Eurochild** and the **International Step by Step Association** (ISSA). We are the leading European networks representing the children's rights and the early childhood sectors. Our partnership pools our respective strengths to campaign for the prioritisation of early childhood development in public policies across Europe. The European Public Health Alliance and Roma Education Fund are associate partners.

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