

# “Not a Regular 9-5 Job”

*Georgia’s Infant-Toddler Teachers Share Insights on Recruitment, Retention, and Supporting the Workforce*

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## Introduction

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To better understand the experiences of Georgia’s early childhood educators and how to support this crucial workforce, GEEARS: Georgia Early Education Alliance for Ready Students conducted a series of focus groups—16 in total—throughout 2022-23 with early childhood educators from a range of settings, including center- and home-based child care, Head Start, and Georgia’s Pre-K. The report that follows outlines findings from the focus groups conducted specifically with **infant-toddler teachers** and explores the motivations, challenges, and aspirations of early childhood educators who work with children during their formative years.

## Methodology

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GEEARS conducted four virtual focus groups with a combined 21 infant-toddler lead and assistant teachers. The participants were employed in center-based classrooms across the state, representing 13 counties across North, South, and Central Georgia as well as the Metro Atlanta area. The majority (76%) identified as Black or African American, while 19% identified as white, and 5% as Hispanic/Latino. During the online focus groups, trained moderators guided participants through a series of predetermined questions and utilized polling to gather more specific feedback on factors influencing teacher recruitment and retention (i.e., work environment, career development, compensation, benefits, and teacher stress).



## Why Do Infant-Toddler Teachers Enter and Stay in the Field?

Infant-toddler teachers exhibited a profound **passion for nurturing and educating young children**, rooted in a strong sense of purpose and dedication to their work. Teachers expressed that this commitment goes far beyond the demands of a typical job, recognizing the weight of ensuring the well-being and healthy development of the children in their care. Many shared their deep love for working with young children in particular, describing the work as “more than a job” and something that holds greater meaning for them.

One teacher from Metro Atlanta emphasized her passion for the work, stating, "Don't come in it for the paycheck. If your heart is not in it, then maybe it's the wrong field for you. I do it for the kids." This sentiment resonated with many focus group participants, highlighting how **intrinsic motivation, rather than external rewards or incentives**, drives their dedication. A South Georgia teacher echoed this perspective, sharing, "I do everything. I go beyond. I still don't get a raise, but I don't worry about that. I do it for the children."

Some teachers described initially working with children of other ages, from infants or toddlers to elementary-aged students, before landing in Pre-K.

A teacher from Central Georgia illustrated the depth of her connection with her young students by choosing to teach them throughout various stages of their early development. She explained, "I didn't

want my kids to leave me. I wanted to be with my kids all the time, so I worked with them from infant all the way up to Pre-K. I just love them." Her experience reflects the bond that teachers form with the children in their care, further exemplifying how the work transcends traditional notions of employment to become a labor of love. “I feel like children are always going to be a part of my life, so I seated myself in the field and am always concerned about their education and their welfare in general,” said one Metro Atlanta teacher.

Infant and toddler teachers educate children during a **critical period of brain development**, setting a foundation for future learning during these formative years. One South Georgia teacher reflected on the importance of the time she spends with her students, saying, “I look at the bigger picture as to the type of change that child can make in the world. You can be teaching the next person that discovers the cure for cancer.” Others shared a similar perspective, including one teacher from North Georgia (“These children that we are taking care of, I like to call them our future leaders.”) as well as a teacher from Metro Atlanta (“I feel that our children are the leaders of tomorrow, and I enjoy seeing them explore. I like to see them learn new things.”).



“ We all need [pay and benefits], but if you don't have a love for children, it's not for you. ”

- Metro Atlanta teacher

Teachers found passion not only in teaching and caring for children but also **supporting the well-being of their parents and caregivers**, reflecting an understanding that children’s health and wellness are inextricably connected to that of their families. A teacher from South Georgia described how her work transcends the walls of the classroom: “I can make a difference in each child’s life and their parents because the new generation is having children and we can help them better themselves.” A Metro Atlanta teacher emphasized a more holistic view of her work, explaining, “I love what I do because I like making a difference in the children’s lives as well as the families.”

*Nearly half of teachers surveyed reported significant levels of work-related stress*

“Some people think this field is easy, but it’s not easy. It’s not just a regular 9-5 job. You have to love the kids.”  
-South Georgia teacher

## What Challenges Do Infant-Toddler Teachers Experience, and Why Do Some Leave?

### *A Stepping Stone to Other Career Opportunities*

Many, though not all, teachers expressed a desire to remain in early childhood education for the entirety of their careers. As one shared, “I plan on spending all my time in this field because it’s what I love doing.” However, teachers also acknowledged significant challenges that contribute to their own or fellow early educators’ desires to leave the field. For some, a teaching position in early childhood education is viewed as a stepping stone to other roles or career paths.

One South Georgia teacher expressed aspirations to advance within the field, finding value in their current role but ultimately planning to use the experience to support future career opportunities: “One of my hopes is to become the director one day because I want to make a difference and see my ideals come out.” She went on to say, “To me if you’re gonna be a director or have some type of leadership role, you need to be relatable.” Similarly, a teacher from Central Georgia shared, “My hope is to get my own [child care] center.”

While some viewed their infant-toddler teaching role as foundational for career advancement within early childhood education, others saw it as a platform to transition to different fields entirely. For instance, one South Georgia teacher shared, “I’ll probably be going into business; I also sell life insurance.” A Metro Atlanta teacher highlighted the value of her experience teaching young children for future career goals, saying, “I would like to stay at least 4-5 years because I plan on eventually going into some type of counseling. I figured early childhood development is the best way to start out in the field.” A teacher from South Georgia explained her current role as temporary and situational: “I had to intern, and that’s why I’m there. But my overall goal is to be in the public school system for sure.”

A few cited a lack of advancement opportunities as their reason for seeking a career change. For example, one Metro Atlanta teacher, explaining her desire to transition to the public school system, shared, “Where I am now, there is no growth.”

## Staffing Shortages and Teacher:Child Ratios

Many teachers asked for additional support, including technical assistance, professional development, and mentorship, to address children’s social-emotional needs. Teachers asked for supports that are targeted (i.e., not one-size-fits-all) to their needs. One South Georgia teacher, for example, requested more training and strategies that aligned with the specific behaviors her children exhibited in the classroom.

In some cases, teachers find themselves in understaffed classrooms or being pulled to cover other classrooms to maintain ratios. As one Metro Atlanta teacher explained, “We no longer have substitutes at our centers.” Temporarily transferring staff across classrooms often disproportionately affects classrooms with students who have unique needs requiring differentiated instruction and care. One teacher from Central Georgia described the frequent disruption affecting her classroom: “We’re always the first classroom to get pulled from. I believe that’s because we have three strong teachers who can handle it, but why stretch us thin if you don’t really need to?” Another teacher highlighted the strain caused by staffing shortages, noting, “My classroom has two assistants [as opposed to a lead teacher and an assistant] because we are short-staffed.”

Staffing challenges can disrupt the ability to maintain appropriate teacher-to-child ratios, particularly for classrooms with children of varying ages and needs, including those with disabilities or challenging behaviors. As one South Georgia teacher explained, “I’m in a combined class because of the short numbers. I’ve got two kids that are going to transition next month, so it’s been challenging trying to deal with crying babies, toddling babies, and talking babies.” Another teacher from South Georgia reflected on a similar struggle, explaining, “At one point, I had one-year-olds, two-year-olds, and three-year-old—all in a two-year-old classroom.”

Another explained that almost a third of her students had challenging behaviors that were difficult to manage with the existing teacher:child ratios, stating, “Right now in my classroom, I have at least four kids with behavioral issues. I can’t do it; it’s mostly because we’ve got three-year-olds biting, pottying issues, hitting, scratching, pushing, and it’s a lot. It’s becoming to where [leadership] is relying on the state ratios and it’s getting harder for us to do it by ourselves.”

### Maximum Staff:Child Ratios in Georgia

- *Infants < one-year-old or children under 18 months who are not walking* 1:6
- *One-year-olds who are walking* 1:8
- *Two-year-olds* 1:10

*Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning.  
<https://www.decal.ga.gov/CCS/RulesAndRegulations.aspx>*



# Individual Supports for Children with Challenging Behaviors or Diverse Needs

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Teachers frequently reported needing additional internal or external support to effectively work with children exhibiting challenging behaviors, disabilities, or developmental delays. Many expressed a need for targeted training to better address specific sensory, communication, and behavioral needs in their classrooms.

One teacher from South Georgia shared, “I have had some training in [Autism Spectrum Disorder], but nothing related to babies. Everything was [related to] older children. My concern is that we need more help.” This sentiment highlights a critical gap in training, particularly during the first three years of life. Without appropriate training tailored to these early years, when most children will not have a formal diagnosis, many teachers felt ill-equipped to implement individualized interventions to effectively address challenging behaviors. One teacher from Central Georgia explained, “[My student] has difficulty communicating when he’s angry, which was expressed to us when he first signed up, but it wasn’t expressed in the depths of how much he needed help. I feel like there are certain things that a teacher like me can’t do.” A South Georgia teacher highlighted how a lack of specialized training and collaboration affects the well-being of all students in the classroom: “Training is so important, so vital. We don’t have enough meetings at all. We don’t have powwows to actually talk about these students so that other educators could say, ‘This strategy worked for me--it’ll help you out.’ or ‘Go to this website,’ or ‘I just finished reading this book.’ We don’t connect. We don’t network.”

Even children without formal diagnoses or those exhibiting less intrusive behaviors can benefit from inclusive and differentiated instruction. Yet, teachers noted that the wide range of student needs in their classrooms often left them feeling overwhelmed and underprepared. Despite these challenges, teachers generally expressed a deep commitment to supporting all students, including those with developmental delays, disabilities, and challenging behaviors.

The desire for additional support and expertise was echoed by many educators. One teacher from North Georgia said she wished for more help to ensure her students’ success: “Getting [my children] the help that they need and having someone to come and help us would make a big difference.” Another teacher from South Georgia added, “They need immediate [support], like their own teachers who know how to deal with [challenging behaviors] better.”

Most teachers emphasized the value of having a specialized coach or trained professional to provide direct support in the classroom. One South Georgia teacher remarked, “If I’m going to have a room full of babies, I’m not going to be able to give that one-on-one time.” Another elaborated, “You need to have another person on board because if it gets to be too much, you need backup.”

Teachers also shared examples of successful strategies that helped address these challenges. One mentioned the positive impact of a child’s mother arranging for a professional to work with her child at the center through her health insurance, noting that this approach significantly benefited the child.



Another South Georgia teacher described how their advocacy encouraged a family to pursue therapy for their child, saying, “We kept talking to mom and dad and eventually they took him to therapies and he’s thriving.” Some teachers reported that families needed more support when it came to navigating systems for their children who may be eligible for early intervention or preschool special education

## Recognition and Respect

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Recognition and respect were unanimously reported by teachers as critical to their success and job satisfaction, with 100% of respondents rating these factors as either “extremely important” or “important.” Teachers described various forms of recognition and respect that held meaning for them, including support from directors, gratitude from parents, and acknowledgment of their work. These gestures not only enhanced their sense of value but also played a significant role in their retention within the field.

One teacher from South Georgia highlighted her director's efforts to show appreciation: “She’s just excellent. I didn’t know about teacher appreciation, but she gave us a whole week of it. The parents gave us little tokens of appreciation, thanks, and cards. It was beautiful.” Similarly, a teacher from Metro Atlanta shared the thoughtful ways her workplace celebrates staff, saying, “For our birthdays, they’ll get us a cake and gift card. They are awesome on that. I just love them for that. I love them.” These acts, while seemingly small, can have a profound impact on teachers’ job satisfaction. A teacher from Central Georgia underscored the negative effects of a lack of recognition, explaining, “I left my other job because [I was] not recognized for doing a good job.”

In addition to acts of appreciation and gratitude, many teachers emphasized the importance of hands-on support from administration as a way of feeling respected. A teacher from Metro Atlanta shared, “I [would feel] like you respected me if you contributed to the work. You would make sure, not only are the kids a priority, but I’m a priority too because they wouldn’t be here without me.”

A teacher from North Georgia further emphasized the role of administration in fostering a positive work culture and improving retention through encouragement and support. She explained, “I feel that in order to boost morale and to keep people in the [child care] setting, you should provide that support, provide all the things. Sometimes people do need to hear, ‘Hey, good job,’ or ‘I appreciate you doing that for me,’ or ‘Hey, I see what you’re doing. I see you’re trying. I see you’re here, you’re showing up,’ not just, ‘Oh, you need to work on this,’ or ‘Oh, you need to work on that.’” Another teacher, from South Georgia, described the collaborative approach her director has promoted over the years, leading to strong retention at her center: “Nobody has left. We just stay there, and we get along. If we have a problem, we talk it out or we have a meeting.”





## Career Development

When asked about opportunities to advance their careers—whether through additional education or credentials, professional development, or mentorship—teachers often reported experiencing fragmented resources and limited support. While some educators described positive experiences with administrators who encouraged professional growth, others expressed frustration over a lack of guidance and incentives to help them advance in their careers.

A few teachers shared that they had accessed tuition assistance programs that allowed them to pursue further education. One teacher from Metro Atlanta reflected on such support, sharing, “My current employer had tuition assistance. It was great when I was in school because [we] could check out books so that [we] didn’t have to purchase them. Once I finished the class, I turned it in, and that helped out a whole lot. It’s great to have something to encourage you to do what you’re doing.” Another teacher from the same area echoed this sentiment, adding, “The company I work for will pay us to go to school, as well.”

“ I tried to get certified, then unfortunately we moved, and your certification doesn’t move with you, so it’s like I had to start all over. I would just like to know, if you’re certified—some call it reciprocity—how can your teaching certificate move with you?  
-South Georgia Teacher

However, not all teachers had access to such resources or clear pathways for career development. Some expressed uncertainty about how to navigate evolving professional expectations. One teacher from South Georgia described the challenges she faced due to changing requirements in the field, stating, “I know when I first started working in child care, it wasn’t required to have a CDA or associate’s degree, but now that it’s required, it’s hard for a person who doesn’t know what to do.” Another teacher from South Georgia shared a similar sentiment regarding required credentials or degrees, explaining, “I just need to know what exactly it is that I need to do.”

Tailored mentorship was identified as a crucial component for helping teachers navigate their career paths. One teacher from Metro Atlanta emphasized its value, saying, “To me, mentorship is very important. It’s always good to have somebody to encourage you, and when you have questions about issues that you’re going through, they can direct you on what you need to do or how you need to do [it] to get through it.” Teachers consistently indicated that mentorship from fellow educators provides a source of encouragement and practical advice, particularly for those who feel uncertain about their next career steps.

In addition to mentorship, teachers expressed a need for clear and direct communication about how career advancements, such as earning additional degrees or credentials, could affect their compensation. This information was not always provided. One teacher from South Georgia described her experience this way: “I just recently got my master’s and [asked], ‘Is there any way to get higher pay?’ They said, ‘No, the only way you can get higher pay is if you move up within your job.’ I can’t move up. I’m at the highest position. The next highest position I can go to is director, so I wish I could get the higher pay to match my higher degree.”



## Compensation and Benefits

Across focus groups, teachers consistently acknowledged globally inadequate pay in the early childhood field. “Early childhood educators, as a whole, we are underpaid,” shared one Metro Atlanta educator. Compensation challenges may be particularly acute for infant-toddler teachers, whose wages lag behind their Pre-K and K-12 colleagues. Some participants felt their pay was not reflective of the demanding nature of the job and exacerbated their work-related stress.

A number of teachers drew a direct line between low pay and persistent turnover in the field. As one teacher from North Georgia asserted, “You can’t hire people at minimum wage and expect them to stay.” Another described the current state of her classroom, typically led by three teachers, this way: “I’ve got one co-teacher who’s ready to go. She’s ready to quit, looking for other employment. The other teacher said that within the next month, she was leaving, too.”

“Guess what? If someone is an MD, they had a teacher. If someone’s a firefighter, they had a teacher. If somebody’s a janitor, they had a teacher, so you’re gonna always need teachers and for whatever reason that’s always the lowest paid field.”  
—North Georgia teacher

Teachers described their co-workers leaving for positions both in the early childhood sector and outside it as they searched for better pay. Some recounted the “center hopping” they’ve observed among other educators, as their peers sought improved wages—even a small increase in their hourly rate—at other early childhood programs. One teacher from South Georgia described her own experience: “Some other centers have been trying to recruit me since they found out that I work at this particular center. I would be tempted to go, but it would be just for the money. I really like my center. I like my director.”

Focus group participants offered numerous examples of colleagues leaving teaching for higher-paying positions in other sectors, including retail, fast food, and warehousing. One teacher from North Georgia put it this way: “They’re leaving because of the pay. They need higher pay. They find that Publix and Walmart—even McDonald’s is paying what they’re receiving in child care.” Another added that other professions may pay the same or more as early childhood without the prerequisites: “I could be flipping burgers and not have to do anything else, not have to pay for the education to be there.”

“We need [higher pay] because if we’re passionate about teaching we do come out of pocket for our kids. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for mine.”  
—South Georgia Teacher

For many, the low pay was another indication of the limited respect and recognition afforded early childhood educators. “We’re not appreciated enough and then not compensated enough. So that’s why some of my colleagues are thinking of leaving and finding other alternatives,” said one teacher from South Georgia. Some felt the current pay structure—in which teachers of older children are generally paid more—should be reversed, acknowledging the increased demands often placed on teachers of the very young. “Early childhood should be getting at least \$30 an hour. We’re worth it because we put in a lot. We do a lot,” shared a teacher from Metro Atlanta.

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*“I buy everything for my class. If my class needs something, if I need pencils, paper, markers, crayons, anything, I buy that for my class.”*

”

*—South Georgia Teacher*

Beyond hourly or salaried pay, teachers reported inconsistent access to benefits, such as health insurance, paid time off, and retirement. While 93% of teachers agreed that such benefits were “extremely important” or “important” to their job satisfaction, most reported that they did not receive Calibri them. One teacher from South Georgia noted, “Because we’re small, we don’t have benefits and now that I’m getting a little older, I’m getting a little concerned.” Another teacher, from North Georgia, echoed this perspective, underscoring how critical benefits are to her ability to maintain employment: “I think we deserve more sick days because if anything happens, we’re out of a job.”

While a few teachers indicated their centers offered specific paid time off benefits, access to paid vacation and sick leave was inconsistent across participants. Similarly, access to employer-sponsored health insurance was limited. While most did not receive health insurance, those who did reported it was often prohibitively expensive. One teacher from Central Georgia stated, “[My employer] does offer health insurance, but it’s much more expensive with them and so that’s why the pay would need to be higher because it would take at least two or three dollars an hour off just to pay for health insurance by itself.”



*Infant-toddler teachers are deeply passionate about nurturing and educating young children—and their dedication often goes beyond the confines of a job, driven by intrinsic motivation and a profound sense of purpose. Despite their passion, these educators face significant challenges, including low pay, limited benefits, high staff turnover, and inconsistent opportunities for professional growth. Many view their roles as stepping stones to other career paths, while others remain committed to early childhood education despite systemic barriers. Teachers also highlight the importance of respect, recognition, and a supportive work environment in improving job satisfaction and retention. By addressing these challenges, early childhood leaders, program administrators, and policymakers can better support these essential educators, ensuring a stronger foundation for the children they serve.*

# Recommendations to Improve Recruitment and Retention of Georgia's Infant Toddler Teachers

Unlike publicly funded programs like Head Start and Georgia's Pre-K, there is no dedicated funding stream for birth-3 education. As a result, teacher pay for these age groups is often lower, dependent on small business owners with thin profit margins and already elevated parents fees. The recommendations that follow consider actions site-based leaders, child care administrators, and policymakers can take to improve recruitment and retention in the field.

## Compensation and benefits tailored to teachers' needs

- Work towards pay parity for teachers of younger children, helping to close the gap between infant-toddler teachers and their counterparts in Pre-K and K-3.
- Increase state and federal funding for child care

*The Childcare and Parent Services (CAPS) program, funded through the federal Child Care and Development Block Grant along with a required state matching contribution, is the primary mechanism for funding child care in Georgia, allowing some low-income families to access child care. Additional federal and state dollars would allow for higher reimbursement rates for CAPS-participating child care providers, which can help address teacher wage challenges.*

- Assess teachers' preferences for various types of benefits, including health insurance, paid time off, child care scholarships, and retirement
- Improve access to benefits for infant-toddler teachers

*Shared services models can allow smaller child care providers to access group benefits at more reasonable costs.*

*Adding early childhood educators as a priority group for CAPS scholarships would allow more teachers to access child care benefits for their own children.*

## Professionalization and increased appreciation and respect

- Ensure teachers are respected as professionals and recognized for their work—both in their own classrooms as well as in the broader education ecosystem
- Provide supportive and flexible work environments for infant-toddler teachers
- Balance professional supports and guidance with appreciation and recognition
- Prioritize access to relevant and timely professional development



# Recommendations to Improve Recruitment and Retention of Georgia's Infant Toddler Teachers

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## Support for children with challenging behaviors

- Increase educators' capacities to meet students' social-emotional and mental health needs by:
  - providing tailored job-embedded support and training
  - utilizing evidence-based infant and early childhood mental health (IECMH) interventions, such as Circle of Security or infant and early childhood mental health consultation
  - connecting with the Inclusion and Behavior Support team at the Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL)
  - integrating the early intervention workforce into the ECE setting for children who participate in the program (known as Babies Can't Wait in Georgia)

## Pathways for career advancement

- Ensure program leadership is knowledgeable about potential career advancement opportunities so they can connect their staff to necessary resources
- Consider providing both financial supports (e.g., tuition assistance, fees, books and supplies) and flexibility for teachers interested in advancing their education
- Bolster programs like DECAL Scholars that support ECE professionals in pursuing education and new skills





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