

Professional Development Incentives for Oregon's Early Childhood Education Workforce: A Randomized Study

Many states seek to increase the education and training levels of their early childhood education (ECE) workforce to improve the quality of care for children. Increased educational attainment among ECE workforce members has been linked to improvements in classroom quality, yet ECE workforce members have lower educational attainment than K–12 teachers. Oregon encourages all ECE workforce members to sign up for a career lattice (a career pathway system that helps them determine goals related to increasing their education and training). The state also offers incentives for reaching specific steps in the career lattice, as well as scholarships for college credit and community-based training. The Oregon Center for Career Development in Childhood Care and Education (OCCD) collaborated with the Regional Educational Laboratory Northwest on this study to understand how to encourage the ECE workforce in Oregon—particularly workforce members with less than an associate degree—to pursue higher education levels (including both training and college coursework). OCCD manages the registry that documents the licenses and professional development of Oregon ECE workforce members.

This study used two randomized controlled trials in 2018 and 2019 to test whether sending emails and offering different financial incentives to Oregon ECE workforce members increased career lattice sign-up, education and training levels, or workplace retention. The sign-up randomization examined whether emails encouraged registration in the career lattice for workforce members who were not already registered. The incentive randomization examined whether emails, along with access to a small monetary incentive at an earlier-than-usual step in the career lattice or automatic enrollment in community college scholarships, encouraged movement up the career lattice for workforce members who were already registered.

Key findings

- **Sending up to five emails encouraging career lattice sign-up had no detectable impact on career lattice sign-up or workplace retention.**
- **Sending up to five emails offering a monetary incentive at an earlier-than-usual step in the career lattice had a positive impact on training hours recorded but no detectable impact on career lattice movement, college credit hours earned, or workplace retention.**
- **Sending up to five emails about automatic enrollment in a scholarship program had no detectable impact on scholarship use, career lattice movement, college credit hours earned, or workplace retention.**
- **After randomization, the email campaigns were implemented as planned, with emails sent and delivered to all intended participants, but the interventions ended sooner than planned because of a state policy change.**

The findings suggest that low-touch interventions such as emails have promise for increasing training hours but are not sufficient to induce changes in career lattice sign-up or continuing postsecondary education for Oregon ECE workforce members. The study findings provide information to guide future research, as well as information on how better messaging and supports might mitigate barriers to further education and training in the ECE workforce and how email campaigns can strengthen workforce communication efforts. Such information could be useful for state policymakers and professional development providers.