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REPORT September 2025

The ECEPTS Journey

Building a National Infrastructure for Early Educator Apprenticeship

By Lea J.E. Austin, Abby Copeman Petig, Elizabeth Pufall Jones, and Jenna Knight

The ECEPTS Journey

Building a National Infrastructure for Early Educator Apprenticeship

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About CSCCE

The Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (CSCCE), founded in 1999, is the national leader in early care and education workforce research and policy. CSCCE provides research and analysis on the preparation, working conditions, and compensation of the early care and education workforce. We develop policy solutions and create spaces for teaching, learning, and educator activism. Our vision is an effective public early care and education system that secures racial, gender, and economic justice for the women whose labor is the linchpin of stable, quality services.

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1. Introduction

It is well established that high-quality early care and education (ECE) hinges on a well-prepared, appropriately supported, and suitably compensated workforce. While many of these educators have pursued training and higher education—more than one third of the workforce has a college degree—the pathway to becoming an early educator or upskilling is too often complicated, underfunded, and poorly aligned with the realities and needs of the workforce (McLean et al., 2024). Educators are frequently expected to navigate disconnected systems—from higher education institutions to licensing bodies and quality improvement systems—without coordinated support, accessible career pathways, or living wages. As a result, even passionate and skilled educators face burnout and debt or are unable to pursue college degrees or continuing learning opportunities, all of which contribute to a chronically unstable workforce and challenge the ability to ensure consistent, quality early care and education for all children and families.

When current or future early educators do gain access, the conditions are not conducive to their success. Many of these educators are working adults, parents, and persons from populations historically shut out of access to higher education, so they are defined as “non-traditional students.” Research has demonstrated that a core set of conditions are associated with significant success in helping non-traditional students achieve their educational goals in a timely fashion. These conditions include alternative course schedules, varied modalities of in-person and virtual learning, articulation agreements, cohort models, financial aid, community-located and contextualized learning, and specialized supports (Copeman Petig et al., 2019; Kipnis et al., 2012; McLeod et al., 2019; National Association for the Education of Young Children & The Education Trust, 2019). Furthermore, experts have long recommended that the incumbent workforce have access to acquiring degrees and credentials while being able to maintain their employment and at no personal expense (Institute of Medicine & National Research Council, 2015). Many communities have made progress, but efforts are often limited in scope by factors such as the availability of funding, the type of program someone works in, or their job role.

In this increasingly complex environment, apprenticeship has emerged as a strategy to navigate these systems and address long-standing barriers to educational attainment and advancement for early educators. Apprenticeship can provide a structure that allows individuals to gain credentials and experience without sacrificing income. While modern-day apprenticeships in the United States have traditionally focused on trade careers (e.g., construction, plumbing, carpentry, welding, and electrical work), the foundational definition of apprenticeship is broader: apprenticeship is a program for a trade or occupation that requires specialized or advanced skills, delivered through a structured combination of learning and on-the-job experience. Thus, early care and education fits well within the scope of apprenticeship. Furthermore, apprenticeships are appealing because they are intentionally designed for people to remain in

the workforce while gaining new knowledge and skills (Copeman Petig et al., 2019). This appeal is reflected in ECE apprenticeship programs' rapid growth in recent years. In fact, the U.S. Department of Labor has identified ECE as one of the top five new occupations for apprenticeship (United States Department of Labor [U.S. DOL], n.d.-c).

Nearly one half of all apprentices in the United States are associated with unions (U.S. DOL, n.d.-b), which often fund apprenticeship training programs and schools. Traditional trades are typically paid through private business or government agencies with which unions can strike prevailing wage agreements that can include costs for apprenticeship training programs and significantly higher wages as apprentices advance along a pathway from entry to expert. Early educators rarely belong to unions, however, and ECE services are typically paid for by parents and limited pools of public funds, which rely on paying low wage to early educators. While the median annual salary of a construction trade worker is $56,490, it's just $27,186 for early educators (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2025; McLean et. al., 2024).

To be effective, apprenticeships in early care and education must be different from those in the traditional trades. They must identify different, sometimes multiple, funding sources and be rooted in local contexts and supported by robust systems. They need to be anchored in organizations capable of navigating institutional complexity, building and sustaining strategic relationships, and delivering experiences for apprentices and employers that are effective and cost efficient. Standing up such a model is not a simple task.

Early Care & Education Pathways to Success (ECEPTS) offers an instructive case study in how apprenticeship can respond to the local context and be used not only as a workforce development tool, but as a systems-level strategy for building sustainable infrastructure in ECE. What began as a localized effort in California has evolved into a national model through ECEPTS' triple role as a Registered Apprenticeship (RA) sponsor, a federally designated industry intermediary, and a field builder.

ECEPTS has evolved from a state-based program sponsor to a national industry intermediary by forging strategic relationships, offering comprehensive program design and implementation support, and leveraging a core set of operating principles throughout its work. Collectively, these strategies help communities design, launch, and sustain apprenticeship programs tailored to their unique needs, while staying grounded in research-based strategies to successfully support learning and professional development.

More Than “Just” an Intermediary

As we approached this project, our initial focus was on documenting the role of ECEPTS as a Registered Apprenticeship Industry Intermediary.[1] Our research team reviewed organizational documents, attended ECEPTS Boot Camps and national conferences, and interviewed multiple ECEPTS staff and partners within existing apprenticeship efforts. But as we tried to distill and describe the role of ECEPTS as an *intermediary*, we found ourselves coming up short. It was difficult to capture the essence of the organization’s work using a conventional framework for intermediary functions or to produce a set of generalizable findings that others might easily replicate.

So, we stepped back. We re-examined what we had observed and learned. And with this distance came clarity. ECEPTS is not "just" an intermediary, and its evolution has not been linear. ECEPTS’ work in this space is deeply rooted in its experience as a Registered Apprenticeship sponsor, a role that reflects decades of experience in the ECE field by the organization’s founder and its staff. ECEPTS’ intermediary functions grew out of its practical work in building and sustaining apprenticeship programs, not from an abstraction or following a how-to manual on being an apprenticeship intermediary.

What emerged instead was a unique and evolving organizational journey, defined not by a single role, but by a deeply held set of principles that shape everything ECEPTS does, from the activities it prioritizes, to how staff work with partners, to what the organization believes it takes to create lasting workforce systems.

Ultimately, we realized that the story we needed to tell isn’t just about an ECE intermediary model. It’s about how apprenticeship requires an entirely different approach when it is treated as a workforce development and systems change strategy, not just an alternative path or program. And it’s about how ECEPTS’ journey—shaped by principles like continuous improvement, adaptability, and building expertise from within the ECE sector—offers a powerful set of lessons for the broader field and a clear example of what it takes to build sustainable workforce systems that center the needs of early educators.

[1] A Registered Apprenticeship Industry Intermediary is an organization that partners with the U.S. Department of Labor and State Apprenticeship Agencies to expand and support registered apprenticeship programs within a specific industry by providing expertise, technical assistance, and outreach (U.S. DOL, n.d.-c.). Learn more about the role and function of these organizations on page 14.

ECEPTS' Operating Principles: The "Secret Sauce"

ECEPTS often describes the research-based participant supports at the core of its apprenticeship model as its "secret sauce."

What ECEPTS' founder and staff may not have fully recognized at the time is that the organization itself has a secret sauce. In tracing its journey from sponsoring a handful of ECE apprenticeships in California in 2019 to becoming a national leader shaping the ECE apprenticeship landscape, a clear set of **operating principles** emerges. The following principles could sit alongside ECEPTS' mission and values as part of its organizational identity. They are woven into the decisions and approaches that ground ECEPTS' activities and partnerships.

- **Continuous Improvement:** ECEPTS embraces iteration. Its programs and strategies are piloted, assessed, and refined based on partner feedback, real-world challenges, and data to ensure relevance and effectiveness.
- **Building Community and Relationships**: Apprenticeship is not just a training model; it's a community-building endeavor rooted in trusting and respectful relationships. Peer networks and shared learning opportunities are integral to how ECEPTS iterates and continues to build the organization, its expertise, and its staff members.
- **Experts as Learners**: Staff, partners, and apprentices are all contributors and learners in this ecosystem—ECEPTS is not "the" expert. This ethos of mutual learning and appreciation for the diverse expertise held by stakeholders fosters innovation, humility, and respect across programs.
- **Grow Your Own**: While apprenticeship in ECE is a "grow your own" model for the workforce in which educators from within local communities are the focus, ECEPTS prioritizes educator and community experience and expertise in its pipeline: half of its staff have a background in early care and education, and all of those working directly with RA partnerships have experience with ECE and/or degree-driven apprenticeships.
- **Consistency and Efficiency**: Standardized tools and reliance on research-based approaches support implementation and allow ECEPTS to scale its work efficiently without trading fidelity to its mission and values.
- **Adaptability to Local Contexts**: ECEPTS has continually adapted its approaches to help partners reflect their communities' distinct cultural, political, policy, and economic contexts.

In the sections that follow, we do not list or describe every activity or service that ECEPTS offers nor do we place an emphasis on counts of who has participated (ECEPTS has all of that information available in various papers and webinars). Instead, we utilize core stages and elements of ECEPTS' work as an illustration of what is needed to transform ECE workforce development and how ECEPTS has taken on this challenge with its RA model. While journey mapping is often used in qualitative research to capture an individual's experiences (Haltom & Kamdar, 2024), we applied that concept here to understand and document the organizational path that ECEPTS has charted to advance ECE workforce development and, ultimately, learning and employment opportunities for early educators.

What are Registered Apprenticeships?

Registered Apprenticeships (RAs) are earn-and-learn career pathways that combine on-the-job training and related instruction and lead to a national or industry-recognized credential. In early care and education, this might be a teaching credential, a degree, or a specific set of courses or competencies that get approved for certification. Critical to this construct of RAs is the interrelation among training, instruction, and employment (U.S. DOL, 2018). Every registered apprenticeship must include the following five elements:

- Direct business involvement (i.e., employers);
- On-the-job training;
- Related instruction;
- Compensation increases for skill gains; and
- Completion of a national or industry-recognized credential.

Reflecting their relational nature, RAs are guided by a committee. The composition of entities involved may vary somewhat by local context and program design, but key partners generally include:

- Employer(s);
- Union(s)—if the employer is unionized, labor is required to be represented on the committee;
- Sponsor;
- Related instruction partner(s); and
- Representation from an Office of Apprenticeship or State Apprenticeship Agency (U.S. DOL, n.d.-a).

A survey of 10 ECE apprenticeship programs found that nearly all programs responding had at least four partners, highlighting the complexity of implementing such programs (Sharrock et al., 2023) and the need for building relationships among many entities and across multiple systems.

In producing a paper on apprenticeship, we would be remiss not to also acknowledge the historical context in which apprenticeship systems have operated. In many sectors, apprenticeships were used as mechanisms of exclusion to limit access to training and career and wage pathways for women, people of color, immigrants, and others from historically marginalized groups (Knight et al., 2025). This context makes all the more significant ECEPTS' stated focus on equity and inclusion and its initial focus in California, where the majority of early educators are women of color. By designing Registered Apprenticeships explicitly to serve underrepresented and underserved communities, ECEPTS is utilizing apprenticeship as a tool to disrupt this legacy of exclusion.

2. Founding and Early Evolution of ECEPTS

Understanding the history of ECEPTS—how it was founded, how it evolved, and how its principles undergird its development and operation—is essential to understanding what makes its approach to apprenticeship successful. In a time when apprenticeship is gaining popularity as a workforce strategy, there may be a tendency to rush into implementation or apply models from other industries without regard for context. The road to building an effective apprenticeship system for early educators is not a plug-and-play path. It requires deep familiarity with the workforce and the broader systems that shape their access to and conditions for success in education and training. ECEPTS' work is grounded in operating principles like "Experts as Learners," acknowledging that staff, partners, and apprentices are co-creators in this work and that ECEPTS is still learning and evolving. And its "Grow Your Own" principle ensures that those closest to the field inform and lead implementation. Today, for example, more than half of ECEPTS staff come directly from the ECE workforce, and all staff supporting RA partnerships have experience in early care and education or apprenticeship. This grounding enables ECEPTS to build programs with, not just for, the field.

ECEPTS can still be considered a relatively new organization, founded in 2019 by Randi Wolfe, Ph.D. Yet the concept behind ECEPTS was borne out of decades of experience in the ECE sector, including an apprenticeship that Dr. Wolfe began developing in 2014 and launched in 2016 through the Service Employees International (SEIU) Early Educator Training Center in California. Building from her past work experience—including as a preschool teacher and administrator, teacher educator, and university professor—and her leadership experience designing pathway programs like the Child Development Workforce Initiative (CDWFI) in Los Angeles County (Whitebook et al., 2013), Dr. Wolfe recognized the need for a model that could align educational institutions, public agencies, and employers around shared practices and outcomes for ECE workforce development.

> "I understood the idea of pathways and building relationships between the community colleges and the universities. **What was missing in the [CDWFI] project were employers.**"
>
> — *Dr. Randi Wolfe, ECEPTS Founder and Executive Director*

The expertise Dr. Wolfe brought to these early stages, along with a vision rooted in the actual needs of the ECE workforce and the systems that support them, played a pivotal role in securing critical support that helped launch the organization and build momentum.

Drawing on these lessons and her experience with the SEIU apprenticeship, Dr. Wolfe led the crafting of a mission, vision, values, and logic model for ECEPTS in July 2019, with a planning grant from The James Irvine Foundation (see **Figure 1**). The planning grant allowed ECEPTS to establish itself as an organization, undertake plans to build upon and extend the SEIU models, and document the importance of becoming a Registered Apprenticeship. While the planning phase was originally expected to take longer, ECEPTS accomplished this work in six months and leveraged this early success into a second grant for operations from the Irvine Foundation.

Among the first activities ECEPTS undertook in this next phase was a statewide convening on February 28, 2020, just days before the COVID-19 pandemic shut down California and much of the country (Early Care & Education Pathways to Success [ECEPTS], 2020). The purpose of the event was to "continue developing a statewide network of ECE stakeholders interested in exploring and understanding the apprenticeship model," to learn about and from programs already underway for center- and home-based educators, and to gauge interest in apprenticeship programs that would be registered with the state or federal labor departments (possibly unlocking funding opportunities in the process). In total, 130 stakeholders attended, representing 30 community colleges, as well as state and local agencies and nonprofits, philanthropic organizations, school districts, unions, researchers, and advocates. Almost none of the attendees were involved in apprenticeship at the time. The turnout and engagement signaled strong interest and laid the groundwork for the roles ECEPTS would assume in implementing apprenticeships as well as engaging stakeholders and building knowledge about apprenticeship across systems.

Figure 1. ECEPTS' Logic Model



LOGIC MODEL

EARLY CARE & EDUCATION PATHWAYS TO SUCCESS

STRATEGY	ACTIVITIES/TARGETS (WHAT WE DO/WHO WE TARGET)	OUTPUTS	SHORT-TERM OUTCOMES	INTERMEDIATE OUTCOMES	LONG-TERM OUTCOMES
PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT AND DISSEMINATION	• Develop, test, refine program models • Promote awareness of program models • Develop program implementation partnerships • Provide technical assistance and support to guide program development and implementation **Targets**: Family-serving employers and organizations, workforce development organizations, community colleges and universities	• Research-based program models • Dissemination activities • Partnerships replicating models • Model replication support	Awareness, adoption and successful replication of ECEPTS program models through innovative partnerships	Increased capacity of the ECE professional development system to effectively prepare ECE workers (e.g., apprenticeships)	An ECE workforce that is well trained, well treated, and well compensated, and prepared and capable of fostering optimal child outcomes in early learning and care programs and environments
FIELD BUILDING	• Share and disseminate research-based program models and best practices • Promote and facilitate discourse about the workforce and professional development needs of workers who serve young children and their families **Targets**: Organizations and associations engaged in professional development of the ECE workforce, community colleges and universities, workforce development organizations	• Dissemination activities (e.g., conferences and professional meetings) • Dissemination products (e.g., toolkits and publications)	Visibility of ECEPTS' research-based program models and practices	More entities implementing and supporting research-based approaches to ECE professional growth and increased compensation (e.g., apprenticeships)	
ADVOCACY FOR SYSTEMS CHANGE	• Engage with decision makers that influence the policies and systems affecting ECE workforce • Develop and maintain networks and alliances in support of shared goals for the ECE workforce • Participate in relevant local, regional, statewide and national committees and efforts • Advocacy-focused program dissemination **Targets**: State and local family-serving systems, workforce development organizations, government, advocacy organizations, higher education systems	• Engagements with key decision makers • Joint advocacy efforts with partners • Representation in influential groups • Policy and white papers	Increased recognition of the significance and economic viability of the ECE sector across the workforce development community and among public officials	Policy and systems change result in increased funding for the professional development and compensation of the ECE workforce	

Source: ECEPTS, 2019

ECEPTS' early work was rooted in partnerships with organizations such as the YMCA of the East Bay in Northern California and Child Care Resource Center (CCRC) in Southern California, leveraging community knowledge and prior success in piloting and implementing cohort-based training models and SEIU apprenticeships. With funding for operations from the Irvine Foundation, ECEPTS initially developed standards for three apprenticeships registered with the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Apprenticeship and the California Division of Apprenticeship Standards. Building on their experience working together on the SEIU apprenticeships, both the YMCA and CCRC were early adopters of ECEPTS-sponsored apprenticeships.

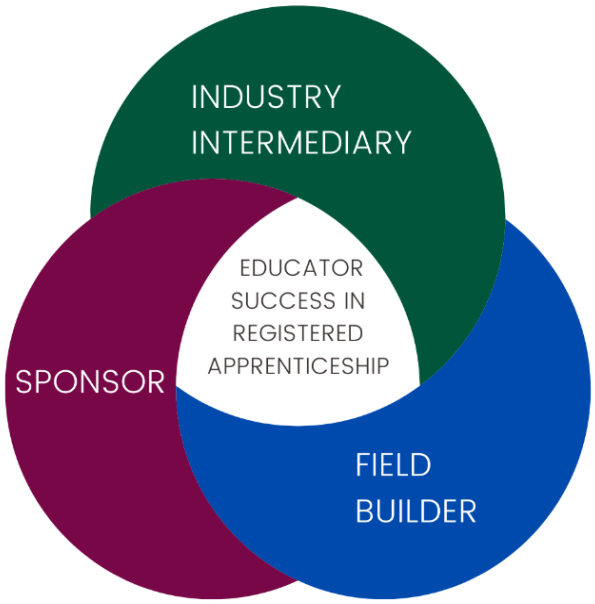
With a growing staff, ECEPTS expanded its sponsorship of RA programs across 11 California counties over the next six years, launching 23 programs and enrolling nearly 1,300 apprentices. In 2023, ECEPTS was awarded a U.S. DOL contract to serve as a national Industry Intermediary for ECE, expanding its reach and cementing its leadership role in building a national ECE apprenticeship network. Since 2023, ECEPTS has provided training and technical assistance to RA initiatives in 21 states. Over the course of the first two years of the DOL

contract, ECEPTS efforts as an intermediary supported the registration of more than 1,000 new ECE apprentices in 17 states. By way of this work, ECEPTS is building an ECE apprenticeship network that reaches stakeholders across the country, building field knowledge, influencing policy, practice, and public awareness, and sharing a deep well of experience, strategies, and practical lessons. With the support of ECEPTS, communities looking to start or strengthen ECE apprenticeships don't have to begin from scratch or navigate the process alone.

3. ECEPTS' Multifaceted Roles

While certainly not the only model for ECE apprenticeship or for ECE preparation and career advancement, the scope, reach, and influence of ECEPTS over a relatively brief period of time is unique, particularly given its multifaceted role of sponsor, intermediary, and field builder.

Figure 2. Visualizing the Multifaceted Roles of ECEPTS



Source: CSCCE, 2025

These roles emerged organically from the realities of implementing apprenticeships specifically for the ECE workforce. From the outset, ECEPTS approached sponsorship through the lens of what early educators, employers, and ECE preparation systems need. ECEPTS drew from more than a decade's worth of research about the conditions to facilitate successful participation in and completion of higher education and training among early educators, the core of which is ensuring educators have the opportunity to simultaneously work, learn, and strengthen their practices (Copeman Petig et al., 2019; Dukakis et al., 2007; Whitebook et al., 2013). In the course of sponsoring their first Registered Apprenticeships and developing new ones, ECEPTS

developed a comprehensive and supportive model of sponsorship that extended beyond compliance with the required elements of RA.

At the same time, the broader apprenticeship field began using terms like “regional intermediary” to describe organizations that supported apprenticeships across industries within a particular geographic region. ECEPTS, however, saw itself as something different: a sector intermediary focused specifically on early care and education, but not limited to a region or place. While the concept of an industry or sector intermediary is not new, the DOL turned greater attention to this role in the early 2020s, committing $17 million in 2023 to “promote Registered Apprenticeships in emerging industries where they have not been scaled traditionally and to continue to expand in industries where they exist currently” (U.S. DOL Employment and Training Administration, 2023). Before the DOL initiative was launched, ECEPTS had already stepped into this space informally, offering technical assistance, convening stakeholders, and sharing tools and lessons learned.

In many ways, ECEPTS invented its own role before there was a formal space to fill. It had the right expertise in the right place at the right time. What began as a sponsor role evolved into a layered presence that now includes intermediary and field-building functions. The sections that follow break down each of these roles, how they developed, and what they mean for the ECE field.

3.1 Sponsor

One of ECEPTS’ initial roles was serving as a Registered Apprenticeship sponsor in California. This function proved foundational, enabling ECEPTS to test and refine strategies, build relationships, and demonstrate what an effective apprenticeship could look like in practice. As an active program sponsor in California, ECEPTS is responsible for overseeing program compliance, as well as shaping and establishing a model that addresses the challenges and opportunities that are unique to the ECE sector.

What are the responsibilities of an apprenticeship sponsor?

A Registered Apprenticeship sponsor is responsible for overseeing program operations, program design, enrollment, apprentice progress tracking, data collection, and reporting. A sponsor can be a single business, a consortium of businesses, a college or community organization, or a workforce intermediary like ECEPTS (Palmer et al., 2023; U.S. DOL, n.d.-d).

Program Registration and Administration

A core function of ECEPTS' role has been to develop apprenticeship standards for various industry-recognized ECE occupations and to successfully register those standards with the U.S. Department of Labor and the California Division of Apprenticeship Standards. Such registration is essential to ensuring that apprenticeships meet the required standards of the federal apprenticeship system and appropriately address the needs of employers, educators, and the broader ECE system. The U.S. DOL also certified ECEPTS' standards for six ECE occupations as National Guidelines Standards in 2024:

- ECE Associate Teacher;
- ECE Teacher;
- ECE Lead Teacher;
- ECE Infant-Toddler Teacher;
- Expanded Learning Program Leader; and
- Home Visitor.

While there are multiple models for delivering instruction in RAs, ECEPTS-sponsored apprenticeships partner with institutions of higher education (though not required to do so). As a result, apprentices earn college credit that can be applied toward degrees. Other RA sponsors—including ECEPTS, if they expand their sponsorship of apprenticeships beyond California in the future—may elect other industry-recognized credentials, such as the Child Development Associate (CDA), which may or may not be credit-bearing.

Regardless of the specific credential, the ability to earn college credit through apprenticeship is meaningful. Many early educators are members of groups historically excluded from higher education and better-paying jobs in the sector. Access to credit-bearing preparation can open the door to higher wages. In California, for instance, moving from an Assistant Teacher to a Lead Teacher increases average wages by $3.10 an hour or $6,448 per year for full-time work (Kim et al., 2024). While these wage increases are not directly tied to RA completion, they illustrate the financial potential of advancement, provided that educators aren't burdened with debt in the process. That's why a central commitment of ECEPTS' Registered Apprenticeships is providing education, training, and related supports at *no cost* to participants.

Participant Supports

A hallmark of ECEPTS-sponsored Registered Apprenticeships is the integration of research-based supports designed to remove barriers and facilitate participant success. Dr. Wolfe has long referenced these supports in her professional work, dating back to at least 2007 and her reading of *Chutes or Ladders? Creating Support Services to Help EC Students Succeed in Higher Education* (Dukakis et al., 2007). This seminal report was among the first of several

studies to focus on a range of supports frequently needed to remove barriers and support success in higher education among early educators. Although they benefit all participants, these crucial supports are grounded in evidence and aligned with what is known to foster success for "non-traditional" learners.

These supports meet multiple needs and can be categorized under any number of different headings. For the purposes of this paper, we have organized them into three core categories:

1. **Academic Supports:** Staffing and resources designed to help apprentices successfully navigate higher education and regulatory systems and acquire new knowledge and competencies:
    - Embedded tutoring for academic content support;
    - Dedicated academic counselor;
    - Transferable and degree-applicable coursework;
    - Digital skills training; and
    - Payment of tuition and fees.
2. **Structural Supports:** Resources and services designed to address the logistical and financial challenges that often hinder or prevent participation or completion:
    - Success Coordinators;
    - Textbooks, laptops, and other equipment needed to engage in learning (e.g., hotspots);
    - Child Development (CD) Permit application fees and processing;[2]
    - State-required background checks and fingerprinting;
    - Flexible community-based locations and accessible hours;
    - Stackable apprenticeships;
    - In-program child care services; and
    - Access to mental health services.
3. **Relational Supports:** Program structures designed to foster a sense of belonging, shared purpose, and peer accountability through:
    - Learning community cohorts; and
    - On-the-job training strengthened with mentorship relationships and reflective supervision.

[2] The Child Development Permit is specific to California, see https://www.ctc.ca.gov/credentials/leaflets/child-development-permits-(cl-797).

A hallmark of ECEPTS-sponsored Registered Apprenticeships is the integration of research-based supports designed to remove barriers and facilitate participant success.

ECEPTS works with its implementation partners during program design to embed these research-informed strategies so that educators don't just enroll in an apprenticeship, but are set up to thrive. However, the degree to which these supports can be implemented does depend on available funding, and in some cases, roles may have to be combined—such as mentors doubling as success coordinators—or added in later as programs grow. As a sponsor, ECEPTS plays a central role in coordinating with local partners to integrate as many of these elements as possible and to plan for sustainability and expansion over time.

Implementation and Building Blocks

As of this writing, ECEPTS' role as a sponsor has been solely focused on California; it does not actively sponsor any RAs outside of the state. At the present time, ECEPTS sponsors 36 Registered Apprenticeship Programs (RAPs), implemented by 23 apprenticeship partnerships (i.e., committees) in rural, suburban, and urban communities throughout the state. In each of these programs, ECEPTS plays a central coordinating role as the sponsor, managing relationships with employers, community colleges, community-based organizations, local funders, and state and federal registering agencies. These partnerships span a range of institutions, including school districts, independent and multisite nonprofits, colleges, local government agencies, unions, and private philanthropic organizations.

In practice, this coordinating role goes beyond logistics. It often requires helping institutions adapt in order to fully participate in and support apprentices. For higher education partners, this adaptation has sometimes meant adjusting when and where courses are offered, delivering instruction in additional languages, or modifying curriculum and practicum experiences to align more closely with work-based learning. For employers, it has involved developing on-the-job mentorship structures and establishing wage scales that previously didn't exist. ECEPTS is not only coordinating participation, it is helping reshape systems to make apprenticeship work.

This hands-on experience as a sponsor provided ECEPTS the opportunity to pilot and then improve its approach. It also generated a platform for capturing lessons learned and sharing knowledge with others. While its primary role in California is that of sponsor, ECEPTS simultaneously assumed responsibilities typically carried out by Industry Intermediaries. These included helping communities assess their readiness and providing technical assistance around engaging employers, outreach and recruitment of apprentices, and RA program design. As

such, from the earliest stages, ECEPTS' work in California signaled its potential to serve a broader, field-building function.

The experience in California has laid the foundation for ECEPTS to formally develop its triple role, and in this capacity, ECEPTS aims to reduce duplication of effort and accelerate implementation for other sponsors. By grounding its work not just in theory and research, but in lived operational experience, ECEPTS has eliminated the need for communities interested in apprenticeship to start from scratch and reinvent the wheel in their efforts. Instead, new apprenticeship programs can draw on the ECEPTS roadmap shaped by real-world experience, challenges, and solutions.

3.2 Industry Intermediary[3]

What is the role of a Registered Apprenticeship Industry Intermediary?

Generally speaking, industry intermediaries have flexibility in the specific services and activities they offer within three critical roles in the development of apprenticeships for the industry with which they are affiliated:

- Encouraging the rapid development and implementation of Registered Apprenticeships;
- Providing technical assistance to develop standards and helping coordinate local partners to leverage relationships and resources; and
- Supporting an “Apprenticeship Pipeline for all Americans.”

Notably, whereas other industry intermediaries may charge fees, DOL-contracted Industry Intermediaries (such as ECEPTS) cannot charge stakeholders for their services as an intermediary.

[3] When ECEPTS was awarded their contract in 2023, the third stated purpose of a Registered Apprenticeship Industry Intermediary was “helping to ensure a diverse and inclusive apprenticeship pipeline.” This purpose was removed and replaced with “supporting an Apprenticeship Pipeline for all Americans” at the direction of Executive Orders issued by President Trump in January 2025. At the time of this writing, while the language has been replaced on the government website, legal challenges to the orders continue.

Capacity-Building Strategies

ECEPTS developed and refined a suite of capacity-building strategies to support new and developing RA partnerships. These include, though are not exclusive to, Boot Camps, Apprenticeship 101, and ongoing technical assistance (TA). Over time, these components have evolved in structure, scope, and delivery to better meet the diverse and evolving needs of the ECE sector. Collectively, the strategies provide different entry ways for learning about apprenticeship in ECE and varied levels of depth to align with the wide range of learning needs across the sector, from being introduced to what apprenticeship is, to being trained in apprenticeship implementation and sustainability.

Boot Camp and Other Learning Sessions

The first version of what is now the ECEPTS Boot Camp was a 12-month Institute held with stakeholders planning for RAs in California. The initial Institute met monthly for one year. After it concluded, ECEPTS staff agreed with feedback from participants that 12 months was too long: partners were eager to learn and start up more quickly. ECEPTS adjusted the Institute to meet monthly for six months, yet this still didn't meet the needs of participants who had to move fast to build local momentum. In addition, ECEPTS staff noticed they were spending several hours after each monthly training providing individualized TA to Institute participants. As a result, the Institutes gave way to a two-day training format, the ECEPTS Boot Camp, with options afterwards for participants to engage in ongoing learning activities with individualized and contextualized TA. In addition to being responsive to community timelines, the Boot Camp model is more efficient for providing essential information to larger audiences than one or two Institutes could reach in a given year.

> "The more we do, we tweak to figure out what works, and we add on, we change, we constantly assess."
>
> — *ECEPTS Staff Member*

The ECEPTS Boot Camp of today serves as an introductory experience for teams interested in exploring or launching an ECE Registered Apprenticeship Program. A central focus of the Boot Camp is to help participants understand the structure, requirements, and regulations of the national RA system, along with the complexities of state-specific systems. Apprenticeship and the ECE sector each bring their own regulatory and cultural intricacies and challenges, and Boot Camp helps participants decipher how to align the two. Through this lens, Boot Camp becomes not only an informational session, but a translation of systems.

Participants are also introduced to ECEPTS' research-based model, with a focus on access, equitable recruitment and enrollment, and the importance of grounding apprenticeships in

community needs. Boot Camp content emphasizes participant supports and highlights how thoughtful design and implementation choices can directly impact apprentice success.

Participants are encouraged to attend Boot Camp as part of a team, ideally with at least one other person from their community. Encouraging attendance by multiple stakeholders underscores the importance of building strong relationships and valuing knowledge and expertise from diverse viewpoints in the ECE ecosystem within a community. Teams are guided in identifying key stakeholders from the start, recognizing that sustainable apprenticeships depend on collaboration among employers, higher education and other training partners, workforce systems, and community organizations. The goal is for participants to leave Boot Camp with a clear understanding of what's required to launch or expand a program and a roadmap for next steps, including the option of continuing to work with ECEPTS as an Industry Intermediary and receive ongoing technical assistance.

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As part of its adaptive technical assistance model, ECEPTS has also customized Boot Camps for specific audiences. In Connecticut, for example, ECEPTS designed a state-specific Boot Camp and is providing ongoing monthly TA to the RA sponsor and employer partners as they implement a state-funded initiative to build a statewide ECE apprenticeship network. In another case, ECEPTS convened a State Leaders Boot Camp with teams from five states, each exploring different funding strategies and implementation models for statewide systems. Following that tailored Boot Camp, ECEPTS continued working with three of the participating states.

As a shorter and more basic introduction—and for some, a precursor to the Boot Camp or other knowledge-building activities—ECEPTS provides Apprenticeship 101. Initially offered as a pre-conference Institute at the Annual ECEPTS National Conference, the Apprenticeship 101 trainings have been delivered and tailored for specific audiences, such as Head Start and state-level ECE leaders. Reflecting the core principle of Continuous Learning, ECEPTS most recently introduced Apprenticeship 201 as a learning space for those already engaged, to "share experiences, discuss challenges, and coalesce around best practice" (ECEPTS, 2025). As ECE-focused apprenticeship remains fairly new for most communities and the context constantly changes and evolves, leveraging the role of intermediary for continuous learning is an important strategy for success.

Given the variation in regulatory and funding systems that drive such factors as educator requirements, compensation, and professional development resources, the knowledge and flexibility to adapt content to specific audiences is a practical facilitator to move communities from inquiry to action.

> "[Dr. Randi Wolfe has] really coached her organization to think through how to evaluate, meet people where they're at."
>
> —*Boot Camp Participant*

Over the course of eight Boot Camps and two customized Apprenticeship 101 sessions from October 2023 through March 2025, more than 306 stakeholders have participated, representing 169 organizations from 30 states and territories.

Technical Assistance

A core element of ECEPTS' role as an Industry Intermediary is its delivery of responsive TA. While stakeholders may engage with events like Boot Camp or Deep Dive webinars—hour-long, publicly available sessions focused on specific aspects of creating, expanding, or sustaining apprenticeships—ECEPTS' technical assistance goes beyond one-time events. It is not so much a product as it is a relationship. What distinguishes ECEPTS' approach is its facilitative, rather than prescriptive, support across eight core components of TA that guide partners from early ideas and design, through registration and implementation, to long-term sustainability (see **Figure 3**).

Figure 3. ECEPTS Pathways to Success



Source: ECEPTS, 2025

Through this model, ECEPTS shares evidence-based guidance, tools, and recommendations, while local teams are the decision makers. This approach allows local programs to retain ownership and build internal capacity while benefiting from ECEPTS' expertise and experience.

The dosage of TA is responsive to local context and needs. Some partnerships engage ECEPTS for time-limited, targeted support, while others sustain deeper collaborations that may span several years.

Additionally, ECEPTS plays a role in creating apprenticeship standards that support the quality and consistency of ECE apprenticeships across communities. As described above, in its sponsor role in California, ECEPTS developed standards for six ECE occupations that have been certified as National Guidelines Standards by the U.S. Department of Labor. While local programs are not required to use these standards, they are fully available and can be adopted as is or modified by up to 25 percent, thereby offering new programs a framework that balances local flexibility with national alignment.

When appropriate, ECEPTS also refers potential partners to other organizations or resources (e.g., State Apprenticeship Agencies, national workforce development organizations) that may be a better fit. Ultimately, taking this values-aligned approach is likely to ensure that TA is meaningful for the partners and that ECEPTS' resources are being used effectively.

3.3 Field Builder

ECEPTS' role as a field builder is not a discrete function; it's a throughline that informs and is informed by its work as both sponsor and intermediary. Field building, in this context, means cultivating the conditions, knowledge, relationships, and infrastructure necessary for ECE apprenticeships to thrive and scale. From the beginning, ECEPTS recognized that building strong programs alone was insufficient; advancing a sustainable national network and implementing coherent systems change requires shared language, open access to tools, and a community of mutual learning and practice.

ECEPTS exercises its field-building role in several interrelated ways. It convenes stakeholders, develops resource documents, and disseminates what it learns in order to help others build on successful approaches. A key example is the Annual ECEPTS National Conference on ECE Apprenticeship. First launched virtually in 2021 and held in person since 2022, the conference became a vital gathering for practitioners, policymakers, funders, and systems leaders. The 2025 conference was hosted in Texas, marking the first time it was held outside of California, and drew a greater share of non-California participants than in previous years, signaling both growing national interest and the expanding relevance of ECEPTS' work.

Advancing a sustainable national network and implementing coherent systems change requires shared language, open access to tools, and a community of mutual learning and practice.

ECEPTS further produces content for the ECE field that builds shared understanding of how to develop, implement, and sustain ECE apprenticeships. The ECEPTS podcast, *Early Care and Education: All Things Workforce,* spotlights voices from across the field, while the ECEPTS Library offers tools, case studies, and program evaluations reflecting different stages of program development, lessons learned from pilot projects, and the impact of specific aspects of program design (e.g., learning community cohorts). These resources, along with presentations at meetings and conferences across the country, help communities translate broad apprenticeship concepts into actionable strategies rooted in local realities.

ECEPTS' field building is not additive. It is woven into how the organization shares what it learns, how it supports others, and how it helps to shape the apprenticeship ecosystem. Through this commitment, ECEPTS is not just helping individual programs succeed, it is building the conditions for a more cohesive, equitable, and sustainable approach to early educator workforce development nationwide.

4. Collective Impact and Leadership

With every new sponsorship, each conference convening, and each Boot Camp delivered, ECEPTS continues to refine its approach and evolve its role in the field. What began as a sponsoring organization has matured into a trusted intermediary and nationally recognized field-builder, shaped by the needs of the ECE workforce and ECEPTS' own growing body of experience.

Over time, ECEPTS has scaffolded its own learning just as it scaffolds learning for the field. The resulting multilayered system of engagement is collectively designed to build knowledge, strengthen capacity, and support implementation of ECE Registered Apprenticeships. A recent survey of 10 apprenticeship partnerships working with ECEPTS showed that all had engaged in at least two ECEPTS offerings: nine had attended a Boot Camp, eight received one-on-one TA, seven joined a Deep Dive Webinar, and six had attended the national conference. These overlapping modes of engagement reflect the integrated, sustained, and responsive nature of ECEPTS' support.

At the same time, each engagement feeds back into how ECEPTS works, helping to shape the tools, frameworks, and strategies it develops and shares. In Connecticut, for example, the ripple effect of the national conference led a state administrator to begin exploring how Registered Apprenticeship could address workforce needs. In response, ECEPTS adjusted its approach, offering more intensive and specially tailored technical assistance than any previous partnership. In Louisiana, a coalition of early educators who have been organizing and working on systems changes together for more than two decades participated in multiple Boot Camps before deciding they wanted to jump into creating a statewide RA initiative. In this case, ECEPTS has offered advisement on the scale and staging of their work in order to make it sustainable. These partnerships reflect the reciprocal nature of ECEPTS' work: just as it supports others, it continues to evolve based on what it learns from the field.

4.1 Charting the Path Ahead

Given the course it has charted thus far, we can expect ECEPTS to continue to evolve, reaching more stakeholders and communities and, ultimately, enabling more early educators to access the support and conditions necessary for their own learning and development as professionals.

Nonetheless, many of these educators may still leave the field, and promising RA systems that start strong may remain small pilots, have limited reach, or stall entirely. These outcomes are not inevitable, but they are real possibilities in the absence of dedicated and sustained funding. It's what the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (2020) has identified as the "hole in the bucket problem." Workforce development investments are lost as long as wages and the well-being of educators remain inadequate.

ECEPTS has long advocated for greater public investment in early care and education. Indeed, Dr. Wolfe leveraged her time as a member of the U.S. Department of Labor's Advisory Committee on Apprenticeship to push for the DOL and other government agencies to be partners in solving the lack of federal funding for the sector. She has likewise argued that the issue often referred to as a "wage problem" should be reframed as a "funding problem." Nevertheless, ECEPTS is not positioned—nor should it be—to solve the funding problem plaguing the ECE sector.

Ultimately, teaching and caring for young children must be a good job, one that offers family sustaining wages and benefits. Under our current models of financing early care and education, parents shoulder the majority of the costs, and public programs like child care subsidies and Head Start remain underfunded. This status quo undermines the progress made by ECEPTS and like-minded partners. Without systemic change in how we value, fund, and structure ECE, the workforce strategies we know are effective and promising today may never reach their full potential tomorrow.

Yet these conditions are not fixed in place. They are the result of public policy choices, and different choices can be made (McLean et al., 2024). ECEPTS' journey—and the increased recognition of ECE as a growing and necessary sector of employment—demonstrates that real progress in changing ECE workforce development systems is possible. With political will and resources aligned to the true value and cost of preparing and properly compensating early educators, this journey can lead to a future where high-quality early education is both accessible to families and built on a stable, prepared, supported, and respected workforce.

The ECEPTS approach to apprenticeship—when paired with appropriate funding for educators and systems—offers one promising model for how that future can be built, not as a singular solution, but as part of a broader strategy to transform workforce development in early care and education, one partnership, one policy shift, and one apprenticeship at a time.

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