

A PROGRAM LEADER'S GUIDE

---

# GROW YOUR OWN

*A Director's Guide to Staff Quality and Retention*

*Practical, low-cost strategies for keeping the staff who make your program work.*

## Welcome

---

You already know the cost of losing a strong teacher. There's the time spent re-recruiting, the weeks a classroom runs short-staffed, the onboarding hours that pull you out of the rest of your job, and the children who feel the disruption most. Replacing staff is expensive in ways that rarely show up as a single line item, but add up across a budget year.

This guide is built around a simple idea: people leave bad bosses and broken systems, not jobs. Salary matters, but it is rarely the deciding factor when a strong teacher chooses to stay or go. The deciding factor is usually whether the program feels worth staying in.

What follows are practical, low-cost practices that early childhood programs use to build that kind of program — covering professional growth, recognition, support, and flexibility. None of it requires a bigger budget. Most of it requires writing down what you already believe about your staff and making it part of how your program runs.

How to use this guide: read through the six strategies, note which ones your program already does well, and use the 30-day checklist at the end to pick two or three to put in writing this month.

## Why Retention Comes First

---

Staff turnover is one of the few program-quality variables a director has direct control over — and it is one of the most expensive to ignore. Four things are worth keeping in front of you as you read the rest of this guide:

- **Retention is the lower-cost strategy.** It is cheaper to keep a teacher than to hire one. Recruiting, interviewing, onboarding, and bringing a new hire up to your program's standard of practice all cost real time and money — and a program runs short-staffed for most of that window.
- **Salary is part of the picture, not the whole picture.** Compensation matters, but it is not the deciding factor for most ECE staff. Teachers who leave often cite feeling unsupported, unseen, or unable to grow — not pay alone — as the reason they left.
- **People leave bad bosses, not jobs.** This is the pattern across most exit interviews and workforce research in early childhood: staff leave leadership and culture, not the work itself.
- **Your staff are your program.** Continuity of care, consistent teacher-child relationships, and curriculum fidelity all depend on staff staying long enough to build skill and relationships. Your staff are not a cost center — they are the asset that determines program quality, your QRIS standing, and your family enrollment.

## Six Strategies to Build a Program Staff Want to Stay In

---

### 1. Provide Meaningful Professional Growth

Professional development that checks a licensing-hours box is not the same as professional growth that makes a teacher feel like they have a future in your program.

- Offer professional development that builds toward something — a credential, a specialization, a new role — not just hours logged.
- Build growth paths inside your own program: mentor teacher, lead teacher, curriculum coordinator. Staff who can see a next step are more likely to wait for it instead of looking elsewhere.
- Put these pathways in your staff handbook. Writing them down makes the commitment official, gives staff something concrete to ask about at review time, and signals — in a document new hires read on day one — that you invest in the people who work for you.

### 2. Build Food Into Your Staff Rituals

This is one of the lowest-cost, highest-return practices on this list.

- A weekly staff breakfast, lunch, or snack rotation gives your team a predictable, informal touchpoint that has nothing to do with a performance review or a compliance deadline.
- Consistency matters more than scale. A modest weekly ritual that happens every week beats an elaborate one that happens twice a year.

### 3. Create Fellowship Opportunities

Social connection is one of the strongest predictors of whether someone stays in a job, in any field — early childhood included.

- Staff who have genuine relationships with their coworkers are more likely to push through a hard week instead of walking away from it.
- Look for low-lift ways to build those connections: shared planning time, team outings, a staff appreciation event timed to the school year calendar.

### 4. Put Supportive Practices in Place

How your program handles pressure says more to staff than any mission statement.

- Build scheduled breaks into the daily routine — not just on paper, but in practice.
- Keep an open-door policy real. If staff cannot reach you when something is wrong, the policy does not function.
- Run evaluations as a supportive conversation about growth, not a punitive checklist. Staff who fear their review will not bring you problems early, when they are still easy to solve.
- Have a clear, fair process for handling parent complaints that does not leave staff feeling exposed or unsupported when a family pushes back.

### 5. Recognize Staff Specifically and Often

Generic recognition (“great job, everyone”) does not land the way specific recognition does.

- Gift cards and small tokens of appreciation matter, but they work best paired with a specific reason.
- Use social media and program communications to highlight staff by name when appropriate — with their consent.
- Be specific about what you are recognizing: a strong family interaction, a creative solution to a classroom challenge, a professional growth milestone met. Specific recognition tells a teacher you are actually paying attention to their practice, not just handing out a routine perk.

## **6. Offer Real Flexibility**

Flexibility does not have to mean a complete schedule overhaul. Even modest accommodations — a swap system for appointments, predictable advance notice on schedule changes, flexibility around family obligations — signal that your program treats staff as adults managing full lives, not just shift coverage.

## **Put It In Writing**

---

Every strategy in this guide works better, and lasts longer, when it lives in your staff handbook rather than in informal practice alone. A handbook that documents your professional growth pathways, your recognition practices, and your supportive policies does two things at once: it gives your team something concrete to point to, and it gives you documentation that holds up if a QRIS reviewer or grant funder ever asks how your program supports staff qualifications and retention.

If your handbook hasn't been updated to reflect what your program actually does for staff, that is worth fixing before your next licensing renewal or grant cycle — not after.

## Your 30-Day Quick-Start Checklist

---

You don't need to do all six strategies at once. Pick two or three that fit your program right now, and use this checklist to get them moving.

- Identify one current staff member who could begin mentoring a newer teacher this month.
- Pick a recurring day and time for a weekly staff breakfast, lunch, or snack — and put it on the calendar.
- Review your evaluation process: is it framed as growth-focused, or does it read as punitive? Adjust the language if needed.
- Confirm scheduled breaks are happening in practice, not just written into policy.
- Choose one staff member to recognize specifically this week, citing a concrete example of their practice.
- Draft language for your staff handbook describing your professional growth pathways and recognition practices.
- Ask your team directly: what would make you want to stay here for the next three years? Listen for patterns across answers.

## Want Help Turning This Into Policy?

---

Reading this guide is the easy part. Translating it into a staff handbook that holds up to a QRIS review, a licensing renewal, or a grant application is where most directors run out of time.

Early Ed Essentials works with ECE program leaders outside Maryland on exactly this kind of compliance and retention documentation — reviewing what you have, identifying the gaps, and building replacement language you can put in front of your team with confidence.

**If you want a second set of eyes on your staff handbook or your retention practices, book a call and we'll talk through where your program stands.**

**BOOK A CALL WITH EARLY ED ESSENTIALS**

---

*Early Ed Essentials provides grant support, compliance advisory, and professional development tools to ECE program leaders outside Maryland. This guide is informational and is not legal advice. Regulatory and QRIS requirements vary by state and change over time — always confirm current requirements with your state licensing agency.*

© 2026 Early Ed Essentials LLC. All rights reserved.

This guide may not be reproduced, distributed, or resold without written permission from Early Ed Essentials LLC.

[earlyedessentials.com](https://earlyedessentials.com)