

# Early Care and Education Program Highlights: Workforce Benefits Program Exemplars

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## Introduction

Offering a competitive benefits package is critical to an early care and education program's ability to recruit, retain, and support its staff. But creating the right benefits package is no small task, especially as each early care and education program operates in its own context and faces a unique set of circumstances, from different available funding sources to different local labor markets. The following examples highlight programs from across the country that, as of January 2025, are implementing various approaches to providing competitive benefits and additional supports to their employees. Most of the programs highlighted in this brief built comprehensive benefits to improve efforts to recruit and retain staff, and several programs have aligned to the benefits offered by local education agencies. Several programs shared that they invest in staff wellness as a critical component of overall program quality because prioritizing staff wellness improves the services they offer children and families. Overall, the benefits provided—which included health coverage, wellness benefits, paid leave, retirement, child care assistance, and professional development—improved working conditions such as ensuring adequate staffing, substitutes, and breaks and lowering adult-to-child ratios. The programs designed their benefits packages by regularly engaging employees to determine which benefits were most important to them and prioritizing these benefits in the programs' budget planning process.

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## Kai Ming Head Start Paid Leave and Health Benefits

Kai Ming operates Head Start Preschool and Early Head Start programs across 9 centers in San Francisco, serving over 300 children by combining federal, state, and local funding to support its programming and workforce initiatives. With a staff retention rate consistently over 90%, Kai Ming has established itself as a leader in supporting its workforce through comprehensive benefits and professional development opportunities. Its approach combines an competitive salary scale with a benefits package carefully designed through ongoing staff input and annual review processes. Kai Ming demonstrates particular support for professional development by offering paid release time for classes and dedicated paid study days during exam periods. This commitment to education helps create career advancement pathways while maintaining program quality.

Staff benefits begin on the first day of employment, with employees receiving 18 days of paid time off initially, increasing to 24 days based on tenure, plus 12 paid holidays annually. To manage staff coverage effectively, Kai Ming developed and serves as the programmatic hub for a substitute pool called Substitute Teacher Empowerment and Placement (STEP). STEP was established with an innovation grant from San Francisco's Department of Early Childhood and recruits, trains, manages, and places substitutes in early childhood programs across San Francisco. Since the program's inception, STEP has managed over 300 qualified substitute teachers who work in classrooms across 38 organizations and is sustained through a financial model where participating agencies and programs pay for substitute placements. The STEP program not only allows Kai Ming to guarantee qualified substitutes for its

program but also helps develop a skilled workforce and address early educator shortages across the San Francisco Bay Area.

Kai Ming covers 100% of health insurance premiums, including dental and vision coverage, for its employees and dependents. Employees can choose from three platinum-level health insurance plans. Kai Ming also offers coverage for chiropractic care and acupuncture to be responsive to the specific needs and preferences of its staff. Staff have access to mental health support 24 hours per day, 7 days per week, as well as access to financial advisors and wellness coaches through a third-party platform; coverage for services like meditation, personal training, and infertility treatment; and a traditional employee assistance program (EAP). Staff consistently report feeling more of a sense of belonging at Kai Ming than they do in the broader community. Regular communication between staff and management ensures that program policies meet staff needs.

## **Southern Oregon Head Start Improved Benefits**

Southern Oregon Head Start (SOHS) is operated by the Southern Oregon Child and Family Council and provides Head Start Preschool and Early Head Start services to almost 1,000 children in 27 centers across Jackson and Josephine Counties in Oregon. SOHS employs approximately 400 staff members and combines federal and state funding. Between 2020 and 2024, SOHS heavily marketed its benefit offerings to attract new talent. Improvements in provided benefits coupled with strong marketing have contributed to an improvement in teacher retention, with the program reporting that turnover dropped from 35% to 13% between 2020 and 2024. As of November 2024, SOHS was almost fully staffed.

SOHS prioritizes employee feedback by conducting pulse surveys three times per year and a benefits survey once per year. Staff use these opportunities to share their opinions on additional benefit needs. SOHS's comprehensive benefits package includes health coverage, child care assistance, paid leave, and retirement contributions, among other benefits. SOHS offers health insurance to full-time staff (those who work 30 or more hours a week) and the program covers over 90% of the health, vision, and dental premiums for eligible staff.

Staff also receive up to 31 paid days off per year, including 12 holidays, 8 winter break days, and 5 spring break days, as well as sick days and paid time off, which staff accrue throughout the year. The program offers these breaks as part of its benefits package to be competitive with its largest competitor, the local school district. To facilitate paid days off, SOHS employs floaters and has two substitutes on call who are both former teachers.

Another benefit offered in response to staff feedback is child care. The program reserves some of the over-income slots in both Head Start Preschool and Early Head Start for children of employees because this was a need consistently identified in monthly feedback meetings. The program operates in an area with few child care options, particularly for infants and toddlers. As of November 2024, SOHS has a wait list among staff for these reserved slots. Because SOHS does not allow parents to work at the same site where their child receives Head Start services, SOHS also created a 15-minute schedule flexibility so staff members can drop their children off at separate Head Start sites on the way to work. The program supports these benefits and outreach efforts by giving them priority during the annual budgeting process and actively soliciting feedback from current and former employees.

## **Ohio Heartland Community Action Commission Improved Compensation**

Ohio Heartland Community Action Commission Head Start covers 4 counties in central Ohio and served 26 school districts and 382 children in the 2024–2025 program year. The program previously faced enrollment challenges due to staffing shortages because it was unable to offer competitive compensation. Ohio Heartland worked with its Regional Office to submit a Change in Scope (CIS) application to reduce the number of seats in its program. After its CIS was approved, the program reduced the number of slots from 582 to 382. This enabled the program to increase teachers' wages by 21.5% for the 2024–2025 program year. Ohio Heartland was fully staffed for the 2024–2025 program year, which allowed the program to operate with all classrooms open and be fully enrolled as of November 2024. The program reported its turnover rate in the first 3 months of the 2024–2025 program year dropped to 10%, compared to 40% the prior year.

Ohio Heartland also offers a competitive benefits package, covering 75% of health insurance premiums for both program staff and their families. If staff opt out of health insurance coverage because they have coverage through a different source, they receive a 5% wage increase after 90 days of employment. Ohio Heartland also contributes 3% of employees' salaries to a 401k retirement account after 90 days of employment, which does not require an employee match. The program also offers paid leave. After 90 days of employment, staff receive 2 personal days. They also accrue 2.8 hours of sick leave every 2 weeks and 2.5 weeks of paid time off after 1 year, in addition to receiving paid holidays off.

To account for coverage for staff who are on paid leave, Ohio Heartland intentionally overstaffs each classroom and employs two full-time rotating lead teachers. Rotating lead teachers are on call to fill in and may work at a different program site each day. By overstaffing each classroom with one lead teacher and two assistant teachers, the program can ensure each classroom is meeting ratio requirements, even if one teacher is absent due to paid leave. Implementing a lower staff-to-child ratio serves a dual purpose of covering for staff on leave and responding to employee feedback. The program hosts regular employee feedback meetings and sends employee surveys to learn about staff priorities, which informs program policies and budget priorities. This also contributes to the program's "culture of wellness," where staff are encouraged to share concerns about well-being. Ohio Heartland also employs a full-time mental health clinician who supports staff by conducting classroom observations and consultations. Staff also have access to an EAP, which provides two free counseling sessions on a variety of topics.

## **Southern New Hampshire Services, Inc. / Community Action Partnership Hillsborough and Rockingham Counties Employee Engagement**

Southern New Hampshire Services, Inc. / Community Action Partnership Hillsborough and Rockingham Counties (SNHS/CAPHR) operates 60 programs across southern New Hampshire, including Head Start sites; Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children; Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program; workforce programming; and child care facilities. SNHS/CAPHR employs over 400 staff members and serves 352 children via Head Start Preschool and Early Head Start. The program offers health coverage, paid leave, and child care assistance to staff members, in addition to offering other benefits. The program uses compensation and benefits to help mitigate the effects of staff burnout and support staff retention.

SNHS/CAPHR collects regular employee feedback through surveys two times per year, which allows staff to share their questions and feedback about existing benefits and suggest new ones. Regular communication with staff through benefits fairs, professional development days, and staff meetings also allows the program to inform staff of new benefits or benefits they might not be aware of. The health insurance offerings have changed over time due to employee feedback. The program offers a no-cost option to employees and a sliding fee scale for coverage for their families. The program saw an increase in the number of employees who opted for family coverage when it implemented the sliding fee scale for health insurance premiums.

SNHS/CAPHR also changed its paid leave policy in response to employee feedback. Previously, employees would receive their vacation days after 1 year of employment. Now, employees receive their vacation days after 30 days of employment. Staff also receive paid sick time, and some staff are paid for the December and February break and April vacation. The program employs floaters to fill in for staff who are on leave.

As of November 2024, SNHS/CAPHR offers child care assistance to staff. The program was facing barriers to hiring and retaining teachers because other local early care and education programs offered child care benefits. Staff vacancies led to some classrooms having to close. Because SNHS/CAPHR directly operates child care facilities, the program determined that it can offer a 50% discount for up to 11 slots for children of staff. The program funds these and other benefits by prioritizing staff-level investments in the annual budgeting process, using funding from the variety of programs it operates.



## **Seneca Nation Promoting Staff Health and Wellness**

Seneca Nation serves children and families through two centers, the Seneca Arts and Learning Center and the Early Childhood Learning Center. Seneca Nation operates 14 classrooms—9 child care classrooms, 4 afterschool programs, and 1 Head Start Preschool classroom—with a focus on providing family-oriented programming to serve the needs of children and their families.

Seneca Nation can provide high-quality care and service to children and families because of its commitment to the wellness and well-being of its early care and education staff. These commitments include investments in physical spaces that promote well-being; a culture of wellness, respect, and support for staff; and a generous suite of benefits. Seneca Nation used its COVID-19 relief funds to create the Seneca Arts and Learning Center, a modern preschool facility intentionally designed to promote staff health and wellness. Seneca Nation also offers a wide range of benefits, including employer-sponsored health insurance and a robust EAP. Employees receive eight free counseling sessions per year under the EAP on a variety of topics. Further, if ongoing therapy is recommended, it may be covered under health insurance coverage.

Seneca Nation also offers paid leave for early care and education employees including vacation time, personal leave, and paid holidays. The number of paid vacation days staff receive increases with tenure. To cover for staff who are on paid leave, Seneca Nation intentionally overstaffs classrooms with more teachers than required by New York to make sure classrooms always meet teacher-child ratio requirements. The program employs four full-time floaters who are available to fill in during absences or when staff need to take breaks. The program also employs 12 afterschool program staff members who also are available to fill in during absences. Floaters and substitutes help build the program's culture of

wellness by allowing staff to take breaks and better manage the effects of burnout or behaviors that challenge adults.

Seneca Nation also demonstrates its commitment to professional development by providing free opportunities for child care staff to attend college and tying staff educational attainment directly to wage increases. Seneca Nation applied for and received grant funding through the Hope Grant at Bay Mills Community College for all child care employees to receive free education through the level of master's degree. Employees can pursue their studies on paid work time and at their own speed. As a result, every Seneca Nation child care staff member is in an education program, the child care program is fully staffed, and the child care program experiences very little turnover. With its holistic approach to supporting early care and education staff, Seneca Nation shared that it has seen improved staff well-being and fewer staff members calling out, and it recognizes that staff wellness is directly related to the quality of the care they provide to children and families.