

NEBRASKA AEYC EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION APPRENTICESHIP PROGRAM

Year 1 Evaluation Report



Supporting early childhood educators across Nebraska to grow professionally, advance their education, and deepen their impact on young children and families.

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Funded By:

Early Educator Investment Collaborative & Buffet Early Childhood Fund

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report summarizes Year 1 (January - December 2025) implementation and early outcomes for the Nebraska AEYC Early Childhood Education (ECE) Apprenticeship Program, a program being implemented in partnership with RESPECT Across Nebraska. The ECE Apprenticeship Program focuses on AA apprentices who are degree-seeking toward an Associate of Arts (AA) in Early Childhood Education.



The evaluation draws on data from apprentices and mentors including demographic surveys, apprentice-mentor relationship surveys, mid-year and end-of-year apprentice interviews, mentor notes, and end-of-year mentor interviews. Employer survey data including workplace supports, scheduling flexibility, and retention conditions will be made available in a future report.

Across data sources, apprentices described strong commitment to the field and to completing their degree, while also reporting common barriers including time constraints, balancing work and family responsibilities, technology and learning platform challenges, and navigation of college systems. Mentors described providing both practical (planning, scheduling, resource connection) and relational (encouragement, accountability, normalization) supports and noted that consistent communication and trust-building were central to successful mentoring relationships and professional learning. Apprentice-Mentor relationship quality was generally high, characterized by positive communication and collaboration.

The first year of the program demonstrates strong early outcomes across all key domains: apprentice academic progress, professional growth, mentoring effectiveness, and programmatic support. Participants reported high levels of satisfaction, strong relationships, meaningful development in teaching practice, and a deepened sense of professional identity as early childhood educators.

KEY FINDINGS

1	All ten apprentices successfully completed their first year of the program, with most earning strong academic marks, including one apprentice invited to the National Society of Leadership and Success.
2	Apprentices reported significant growth in professional competencies, classroom practice, and personal confidence. A few reported transitioning from self-doubt to a strong sense of professional identity as early childhood educators.
3	Mentorship was identified as the single most impactful program element, providing academic, professional, and personal guidance tailored to each apprentice's context and needs.
4	Coursework was immediately applicable: apprentices introduced new classroom strategies, developed original assessment tools, and improved family and colleague communication as a direct result of their learning.
5	Program supports, including T.E.A.C.H. scholarships, stipends, flexible scheduling, and responsive staff, were essential in enabling apprentices to balance full-time work, coursework, and caregiving responsibilities.
6	Mentors also reported meaningful professional growth, strengthening their observation, feedback, and one-on-one leadership skills through the mentoring experience.
7	Both apprentices and mentors identified areas for program strengthening in Year 2, including clearer initial role orientation and structured reflection tools for apprentices.
8	Apprentices and mentors reported positive relationship, overall effectiveness was high both from mentors and apprentice – add something to that affect here

SECTION 1: PROGRAM DETAILS

1.1 Background and Purpose

The Early Childhood Education (ECE) Apprenticeship Program is a collaborative initiative supported through a partnership between Nebraska AEYC and the RESPECT Across Nebraska grant. Funding is provided through the Early Educator Investment Collaborative and the Buffett Early Childhood Fund.

The program was designed to address a critical need in Nebraska's early childhood workforce: supporting practicing educators to advance their formal education while continuing to work full-time in ECE settings. The apprenticeship pathway offers a structured, supported route for educators to earn an Associate of Arts (AA) degree in Early Childhood Education. A central feature of the program is the mentor relationship, which helps apprentices translate coursework into practice, build professional confidence, and persist through the demands of balancing work, school, and life.

1.2 Program Model

The ECE Apprenticeship combines on-the-job experience with formal academic coursework and individualized mentoring. Core program components include:

- T.E.A.C.H. Scholarship funding toward an AA degree in Early Childhood Education
- An annual stipend of \$2,400 per apprentice
- Regular, individualized mentoring from experienced ECE professionals
- On-the-job training integrated with coursework
- Individualized professional development planning
- Flexible course formats including online, hybrid, and in-person options

In alignment with the apprenticeship framework, the model also includes structured on-the-job training (2,000 hours) focused on the NAEYC Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators, related technical instruction (minimum 9 credits per year for AA degree-seeking apprentices), and engagement opportunities such as Community of Practice meetings. Employers of apprentices commit to supporting their participation throughout the program, including providing the required wage increases associated with apprentices' progression. In addition, apprentices receive a stipend, reinforcing both professional advancement and compensation growth.

1.3 Program Goals

The apprenticeship is designed to achieve the following outcomes for participants:

- Progress toward and completion of an AA degree in Early Childhood Education
- Growth in professional knowledge, skills, and classroom practice
- Increased sense of professional identity and belonging in the ECE field
- Development of leadership capacity within their workplace settings
- Reduced financial and logistical barriers to higher education

1.4 Mentorship Role

Mentoring is intentionally designed to be ongoing, practical, and tied directly to professional competencies. Each apprentice was assigned their own individual mentor. Mentors support apprentices by meeting at least two hours per month, maintaining weekly check-ins, and completing one observation each semester. Mentor responsibilities emphasize relationship-building and instructional growth through sharing strategies and experiences, engaging in goal setting aligned to NAEYC Standards and Competencies, providing constructive feedback, and encouraging apprentices as they implement changes in practice. Mentors also serve as a “success navigator,” helping apprentices manage the realities of work, school, and life balance.

Mentors were selected based on professional qualifications and experience in early childhood education. Preferred qualifications included higher education in early childhood education (bachelor’s degree preferred; associate degree accepted), 3–5 years of experience in early childhood settings or evidence of meeting professional field standards, prior coaching or mentoring experience, and completion of the Nebraska Coach Training program. Although Nebraska Coach Training was initially preferred, this requirement was later removed during the recruitment process. All prospective mentors also completed an interview as part of the selection process.

Mentors were matched with apprentices primarily based on geographic proximity to support accessibility and ongoing engagement. All mentors were external to the sponsoring program and were not employed by participating sites. Recruitment efforts included identifying and contacting a broad pool of potential mentors across multiple regions, with records maintained documenting individuals who were contacted, interviewed, selected, or dismissed throughout the screening process.

To ensure consistent support and documentation, mentors completed key participation steps (e.g., signing consent/agreements, using the Mentor Guidebook, setting meeting times) and document mentoring activities and competency attainment using program tools (including a Google Form and Nebraska AEYC-provided competency forms). Mentors also participated in ongoing engagement through monthly Community of Practice participation.

SECTION 2: EVALUATION APPROACH

This Year 1 evaluation used a mixed-methods approach to gather data from multiple perspectives across the program year. Eight of the ten mentors and all 10 apprentices consented to participating in evaluations. Data sources included:

Data Source	Description
Apprentice Experiences Survey (N=7) - Intake	Background, experience, caregiving responsibilities, and language use.
Mentor Demographic Survey (N=8) - Intake	Mentor qualifications, experience, current roles, and self-reported strengths.
Apprentice Mid-Year Interviews (N=3)*	In-depth interviews exploring program experience, challenges, and supports.
Apprentice End of Year Interviews (N=2)*	Reflective interviews examining growth, accomplishments, and outlook.
Mentor End of Year Interviews (N=3)*	Reflective interviews on their experience, apprentice growth, challenges, and recommendations.
Mentor Notes - Monthly	Structured records of mentor-apprentice interactions detailing structure and process.
Employer Survey - Annual	Pending; employer perspectives to be incorporated in supplemental reporting.

** 1/3 of apprentices/mentors were selected for interviews.*

Note: Qualitative interview data were analyzed thematically. Participant quotes included in this report reflect direct excerpts from interview transcripts, lightly edited for readability.

SECTION 3: PARTICIPANT PROFILE

3.1 Apprentice Demographics

Ten apprentices enrolled in the program's inaugural cohort, representing early childhood educators from across Nebraska. Apprentices were placed at community colleges in their respective regions, including Western Nebraska Community College, Metropolitan Community College (Omaha), Southeast Community College, Central Community College, and Northeast

Community College. All ten apprentices agreed to participate in the evaluations and seven completed the apprentice experiences survey. Interview and survey data were collected from those who consented; these data are included in this report.

Characteristic	Year 1 Cohort (N=7)
Gender	100% Female
Age Range	Ages 21-52
Racial/Ethnic Background	White: 72% Hispanic: 14% Native American: 14%
Primary Home Language	English: 86% Spanish: 14%
Language Used with Children/ Families	English: 100% Spanish: 14% (bilingual)
CDA Credential Held	Yes: 43%
Currently a Parent	Yes: 71%
Caregiving Responsibilities (Outside Work)	Children 0-12 yrs: 60% Children 13-19 yrs: 40% Adult Relatives: 20%
Non-Work Caregiving Hours per Week	11-24 hrs: 43% 30+ hrs: 43% None: 14%
Disability or Accommodation Need	0%

Professional Experience

Apprentices brought substantial professional experience to the program, with years of service in their current programs ranging from one to ten years, an average of approximately 5 years. This reflects a workforce of practitioners who are deeply embedded in their communities and workplaces, but who have had limited opportunity to formalize their expertise through higher education.

3.2 Mentor Demographics

Ten mentors supported the apprenticeship cohort with eight agreeing to participate in the evaluations. Mentors brought extensive experience in early childhood education, coaching, and professional mentoring. All mentors identified as female. Mentor ages range from 32 to 55 years at the time of data collection.

All mentors had prior experience as center-based ECE educators, and 88% had served as coaches in early childhood settings. Mentors were active professionals often holding multiple roles simultaneously, including college faculty, program coordinators, coaches, and consultants.

Characteristic	Mentor Group (N=8)
Gender	100% Female
Racial/Ethnic Background	White: 63% Hispanic/Latino: 25% Prefer not to answer: 12%
Primary Language	100% English
Highest Education Level	Associate's: 13% Bachelor's: 37% Some Graduate: 13% Master's: 13% Doctorate/Prof.: 24%
Undergraduate Focus	ECE: 63% Elementary Ed: 13% Child Development: 13% Other Ed-related: 38%
Years in ECE Settings (birth-5)	5–10 years: 10% 10+ years: 90%
Years Providing Mentorship	1–3 yrs: 10% 3–5 yrs: 10% 5–10 yrs: 30% 10+ yrs: 50%
Years Providing Supervision	3–5 yrs: 38% 5–10 yrs: 38% 10+ yrs: 24%
Additional Employment Outside Apprentice Program	Yes: 90%
CDA Credential	Yes: 10%
Teacher Certificate	0%

This distribution suggests that the mentor cohort is primarily composed of mid-career and experienced professionals. Such a range may support the program's goals by providing apprentices with guidance grounded in substantial professional and lived experience.

SECTION 4: APPRENTICE EXPERIENCE & GROWTH

Findings from year 1 combine information across all data sources.

4.1 Apprentice Goals and Areas of Focus

Mentor notes indicate that apprentices were working toward a consistent set of professional and academic goals, including:

- Strengthening observation and assessment practices
- Progressing through degree coursework and academic planning
- Improving time management and work-life balance
- Enhancing classroom environments and instructional planning
- Building family engagement and communication strategies
- Supporting children's social-emotional development
- Strengthening team collaboration and workplace relationships
- Developing professional confidence and leadership skills

These goals reflect a holistic approach to professional growth, extending beyond academic success to include workplace effectiveness and personal development.

4.2 Transition into the Program

Apprentices entered the program with a mix of excitement and apprehension. For many, returning to formal education after years away from academic settings represented a significant personal challenge. Initial feelings of nervousness and uncertainty were common, particularly around managing new coursework expectations alongside full-time work.

"I was very scared... I have no idea what to do; I was kind of just winging it." - Apprentice

Over time, however, participants consistently reported growing confidence as they became familiar with program expectations. Those with prior academic experience noted a smoother transition, while others described a gradual process of finding their footing. The consistent availability of mentors and program staff during this adjustment period was cited as essential.

"I've grown really in all aspects, like with the responsibility and just...learning how to be better with timing and you know." - Apprentice

“Especially when it's so scary because you don't necessarily know what you're getting yourself into. Everyone experiences things differently. And so when you have so many people in your corner helping you out, it makes the things a lot less scary.” - Apprentice

Mentors also cited in their notes as well at the increased confidence they witnessed in their apprentices, their leadership development, and a stronger professional identity.

“She (apprentice) is showing immense growth in her professionalism! She does a great job of welcoming children and families, and being fully present with her children.” - Mentor

4.3 Balancing Work, School, and Life

Balancing full-time employment in early childhood settings, coursework demands, and significant caregiving responsibilities outside of work was the most frequently cited challenge across all interview rounds. The majority of apprentices (86%) had caregiving responsibilities for children or adult family members outside of work, and 43% spent more than 30 hours per week on unpaid caregiving.

“Sometimes I’m going to sleep at 11 o’clock at night because I’m waiting until the last minute to submit something.” - Apprentice

Mentor notes reinforce the extent and consistency of these challenges. Across logs, mentors frequently documented conversations related to time constraints, workload, and the difficulty of managing responsibilities across work, school, and personal life. Time management and work-life balance emerged as one of the most consistently addressed areas of mentoring support, with mentors working alongside apprentices to develop schedules, prioritize tasks, and maintain progress in coursework.

“Working full time and going to school it’s not easy. Apprentice reflects on that and manage her time to be able to do it all.” - Mentor

“Finding a good routine so she (apprentice) doesn't feel burnt out.” - Mentor

“She (apprentice) was a little worried about navigating the online course and about being able to separate school and work life.” - Mentor

Apprentices developed personalized strategies to manage these competing demands, including establishing routines, setting personal boundaries, and planning ahead. Program features that

were especially helpful in reducing this burden included flexible and online course formats, T.E.A.C.H. hours, and responsive program staff.

“That was a challenge, but even having school, it's so, it's such a big blessing to be able to go online...” - Apprentice

“I think having the mentor has helped tremendously because if I've had any questions or any doubts, I'm able to reach out to her and she'll guide me or, you know, give me ideas on what to do different. So that has been tremendous help” - Apprentice

4.4 Academic Progress and Accomplishments

All ten apprentices completed their first year of the program. The seven who participated in the evaluations reflected genuine pride in their academic achievements, particularly those who had initially been uncertain about their ability to succeed in a college environment.

“I surprised myself... probably the only class I got less than an A in was math. I got invited to the National Society of Leadership and Success... so that was just like, oh, I can do this. I should believe in myself.” - Apprentice

“Honestly, just getting through it... I didn't really want to go back to school, so the fact that I even got through it made me really happy.” - Apprentice

These accomplishments represent more than academic milestones: for many apprentices, completing their first year of college, while working full-time and managing family and personal responsibilities, was a transformative personal achievement.

Mentors frequently noted apprentices' strong grades, successful course completion, and commitment to their educational goals. Several apprentices were recognized for academic achievements such as Dean's List honors while balancing full-time work, school, and personal responsibilities.

“Completed all college courses and is on the Deans List.” - Mentor

“She is doing GREAT!!!! She was very excited to share that she currently has all A's in her classes.” - Mentor

4.5 Professional Growth and Application of Learning

Apprentices consistently reported that coursework was directly applicable to their daily practice, and many implemented new strategies and tools in their classrooms as the year progressed. Areas of notable practical application included:

- Classroom Strategies: Introduction of process art, child-led activities, and social-emotional learning approaches directly informed by coursework.
- Assessment Tools: At least one apprentice developed an original classroom assessment instrument based on concepts from coursework, leading to measurable improvements in tracking student development.
- Professional Communication: Coursework in workplace communication and administration helped apprentices interact more effectively with coworkers, supervisors, and families, and increased their confidence in assuming leadership responsibilities.

“When I was in my expressive art class... we were talking about process art... something just clicked in my brain.” - Apprentice

“I was able to create my own assessment tool for when [children] age up to see where I need to begin with them... It’s actually going really well, and I have seen so much improvement.” - Apprentice

“I’ve connected so many dots just with how to communicate with my coworkers and my boss and even the parents.” - Apprentice

Mentor logs provide strong supporting evidence of this applied learning. Early meetings focused heavily on relationship-building and program orientation, while later interactions increasingly addressed specific competency areas aligned with NAEYC Standards. Across documented meetings, mentors engaged apprentices in multiple NAEYC competency areas (C), most frequently:

- C1: Child Development and Learning Context
- C2: Family–Teacher Partnerships and Community Connections
- C3: Observation, Documentation, and Assessment
- C4: Developmentally Appropriate Practice
- C6: Professionalism as an Early Childhood Educator

Mentor documentation also reflects apprentices actively developing skills in observation and assessment, classroom planning, responsive teaching practices, and communication with families and colleagues. These patterns align closely with apprentice self-reports and interview data, reinforcing that coursework was being translated into meaningful changes in classroom practice.

“Has been able to implement knowledge received from classes into her classroom.” - Mentor

“I observed (apprentice) for two hours in the toddler classroom. She is doing amazing, implementing what she has learned in her Infant Toddler Development course.” - Mentor

“...is showing immense growth in her professionalism! She does a great job of welcoming children and families, and being fully present with her children.” - Mentor

4.6 Shift in Professional Identity

One of the most significant findings from end-of-year interviews was the degree to which apprentices reported a deepened and transformed sense of professional identity. Several participants described moving from a view of early childhood work as relatively informal, or even dismissively described as “babysitting” by outsiders, to a clear-eyed recognition of the complexity, skill, and commitment that the work requires.

“I went into early childhood care thinking we were just glorified babysitters... this first year showed me we are definitely not... my respect for other childcare providers has gone up.”
- Apprentice

“It has shifted my perspective... my respect for everybody that does this work... there’s so much planning, so much responsibility... it goes home with you.” - Apprentice

Mentor notes further support this shift, with recurring documentation of increased confidence, reflective thinking, and initiative among apprentices. Mentors frequently noted apprentices taking greater ownership of their practice, engaging more intentionally with professional competencies, and beginning to demonstrate leadership within their classrooms and teams.

This shift in professional identity is particularly meaningful in the context of workforce retention and field-building: apprentices who see themselves as skilled professionals are more likely to remain in the field, advocate for quality, and mentor others in the future.

4.7 Mentor Perspectives on Apprentice Growth

Mentor interviews and logs further reinforced apprentices’ reports of increased confidence, reflective thinking, and professional growth throughout the first year of the program. Mentors consistently observed apprentices becoming more confident in their roles, asking more reflective questions, and demonstrating increasing leadership within their workplace settings. Even apprentices with extensive prior experience in early childhood education were described as becoming more open to new approaches and continued professional learning.

“She’s starting to ask questions... she sees a path for growth and doesn’t feel stuck in the rut of doing things because they’ve always been done that way.” - Mentor

“Watching her grow as an educator and realizing that just because you’ve done something for so long doesn’t mean you can’t change it... that was really the most rewarding for me.” - Mentor

SECTION 5 : MENTORSHIP EXPERIENCE & GROWTH

5.1 Role and Value of Mentorship

Across all interview rounds, mid-year and end-of-year, for both apprentices and mentors, mentorship was identified as the single most impactful element of the program. Mentors provided support across three interconnected domains: Academic, professional, and personal

- Academically, mentors provided guidance on course selection, assignment navigation, technology platforms, and understanding program expectations.
- Professionally, they offered feedback on classroom practice, assistance with workplace challenges, and help developing leadership skills.
- Personally, they maintained consistent check-ins on apprentice wellbeing, encouragement during difficult moments, and proactive outreach to prevent disengagement.

“If I ever need anything, I kind of just talk to her whenever.” - Apprentice

“She is always reaching out and asking if I’m okay... she doesn’t just wait for me to reach out with a problem.” - Apprentice

“She took the time to look through everything and then gave me her best advice about which classes would be best for the next steps.” - Apprentice

5.2 Mentor Communication Strategies

Mentors reported using multiple communication approaches to stay connected with apprentices, adapting their approach to individual preferences and circumstances. All mentors used both in-person and virtual face-to-face meetings, and all used text messaging, a strategy several mentors identified as particularly effective for maintaining flexible ‘no-stakes’, frequent contact.

“Texting really helped because it’s a no-stakes kind of thing... she could ask more questions than in person without feeling like she’s bothering me.” - Mentor

At the same time, mentor notes also document occasional challenges in maintaining consistent communication, including missed meetings or difficulty reaching apprentices. This finding aligns with survey data indicating variability in communication experiences across participants. Other communication methods included phone calls and email. Mentors emphasized the importance of adapting their style to the apprentice’s personality and communication preferences, particularly for apprentices who were more introverted or who lived at a geographic distance.

5.3 Mentoring Challenges

Although mentorship was described very positively overall, mentors also identified several challenges that affected the mentoring experience. The most cited challenges were:

- Time and Scheduling: Balancing mentoring responsibilities with full-time employment and personal obligations was a consistent strain, especially given that 90% of mentors held additional roles outside the program.
- Geographic Distance: Physical distance from some apprentices limited the ability to conduct informal check-ins and on-site observations.
- Variable Apprentice Engagement: Introverted apprentices or those managing significant personal stressors were sometimes harder to reach, requiring more proactive mentor outreach.
- Unclear Initial Expectations: Several mentors noted that clearer guidance on roles, responsibilities, and what to look for during early mentoring sessions would have strengthened the program’s start.

“It was a little unclear in the first month what I was supposed to be watching for or talking about beyond just getting to know her.” - Mentor

5.4 Mentor Professional Development

A notable finding was the degree to which mentors themselves reported professional growth through the mentoring experience. Mentors described strengthening their observation and debriefing skills, revisiting early childhood standards through a fresh lens, and reconnecting with the relational dimensions of leadership.

“I’ve strengthened my observation and debriefing skills... It’s refreshing to revisit standards and consider new ways of approaching teaching and mentoring.” - Mentor

“It helps me go back to one-on-one leadership... it feels more relevant and engaging when you see your mentee have a light bulb moment.” - Mentor

This bidirectional growth, where the act of mentoring develops the mentor as well as the mentee, represents an important and often underappreciated benefit of well-designed mentoring programs.

SECTION 6: APPRENTICE & MENTOR RELATIONSHIP SURVEY FINDINGS

6.1 Perspectives on Relationships

Apprentice perspectives (n=9)

To better understand the quality and consistency of mentoring relationships across the cohort, apprentices and mentors completed a structured survey in December 2025 (see *Figure 1*). The Coach Professional Relationship Scale survey assessed two key dimensions:

- **Joining:** the level of trust, connection, and interpersonal alignment
- **Communication:** the ability to openly share concerns, ask for support, and adapt interactions

Responses were measured on a 5 point scale (1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree)

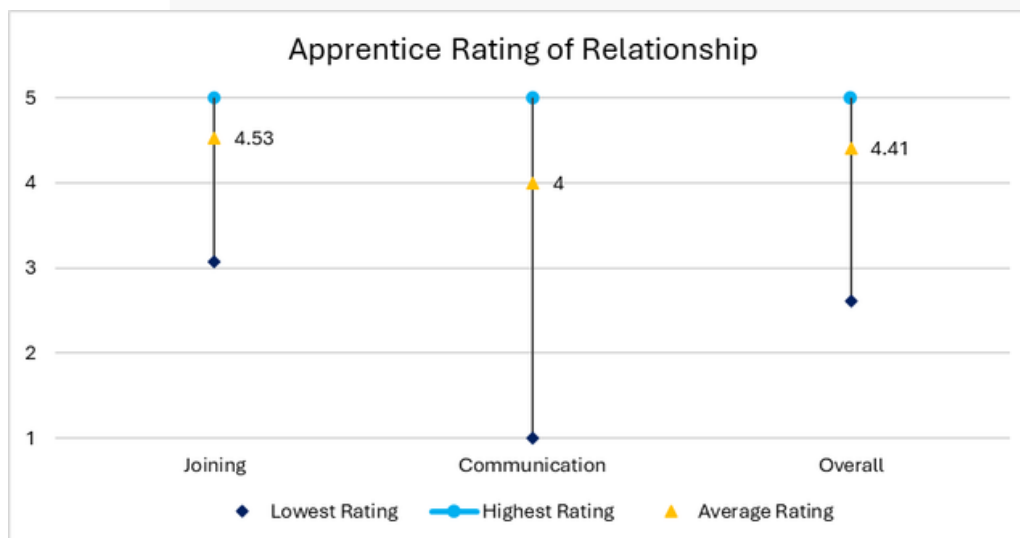


Figure 1

- Apprentices consistently experienced strong, trusting relationships with their mentors.
- Most felt comfortable reaching out and seeking support.
- However, the wider range in communication responses suggests that not all apprentices experienced communication equally, highlighting an opportunity for more structured support in this area.

Mentor Perspectives (N = 7)

Mentors reported similarly strong relationship quality, particularly in building trust and rapport with apprentices (see Figure 2).

Responses were measured on a 5 point scale (1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree)

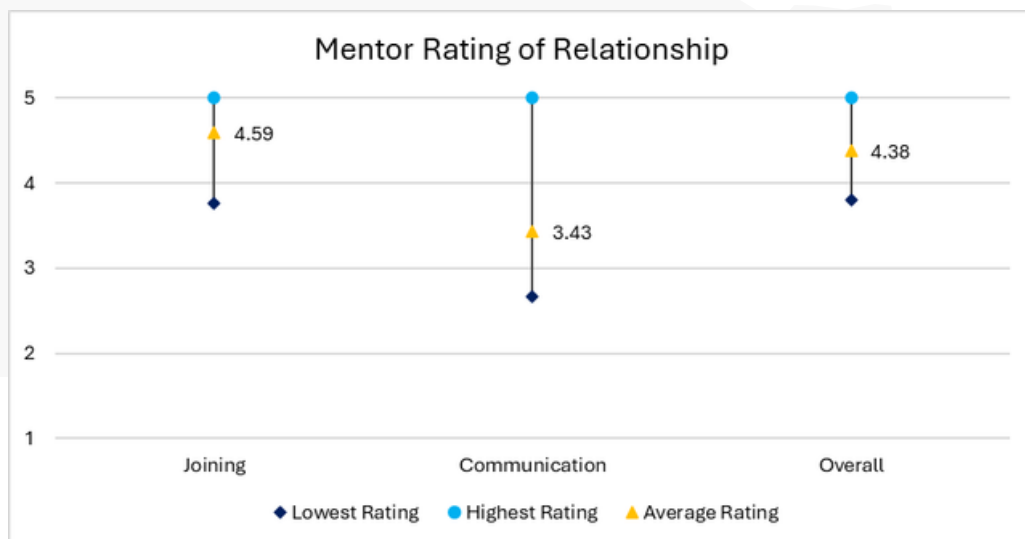


Figure 2

- Mentors reported similarly strong relationship quality, particularly in building trust and rapport with apprentices.
- Communication average was also lowest for mentor reports of their work with apprentices suggesting an opportunity for support.
- Mentors felt highly successful in building strong, supportive relationships.
- Communication was rated slightly lower than by apprentices, suggesting mentors may have experienced more challenges adapting communication across different apprentices.
- Overall, mentors viewed relationships as consistently strong and effective.

Key Takeaway: Strong Relationships, Emerging Communication Needs

Across both groups, findings show:

- High levels of trust and connection (Joining)
- Strong overall relationship quality
- Some variability in communication experiences

This aligns closely with interview data and reinforces mentorship as a core strength of the program, while also pointing to communication as a targeted area for refinement in Year 2.

6.2 Mentor Perspectives on Apprentice Engagement (N=7)

Mentors also reported on the engagement level of the apprentice during mentoring via the Consultancy Relationship Scale (CASTL, 2005) (e.g., shares own ideas without prompting; open to trying new things; asks follow-up questions, etc.) (see *Figure 3*).

Responses were measured on a 5-point scale (1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree)

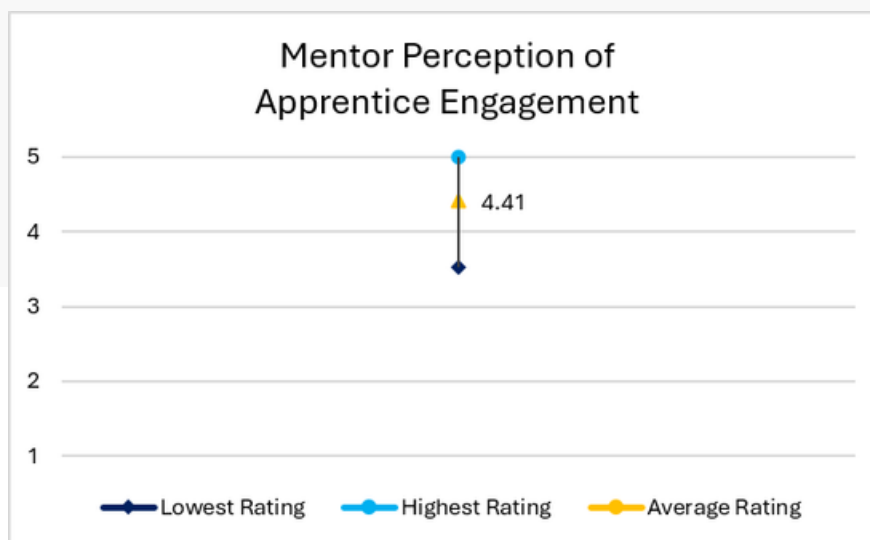


Figure 3

Mentors generally reported that apprentices were engaged in the mentoring relationship. They reported the apprentices generally shared ideas, were open to new ideas and approaches and engaged in conversation and planning.

6.3 Mentor Effectiveness

In addition to relationship quality, both apprentices and mentors assessed overall mentor effectiveness using the Consultant Evaluation Form (Erchul, 1987). 9 apprentices and 7 mentors completed assessment on the mentorship effectiveness (see *Figure 4*).

Responses were measured on a 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree).

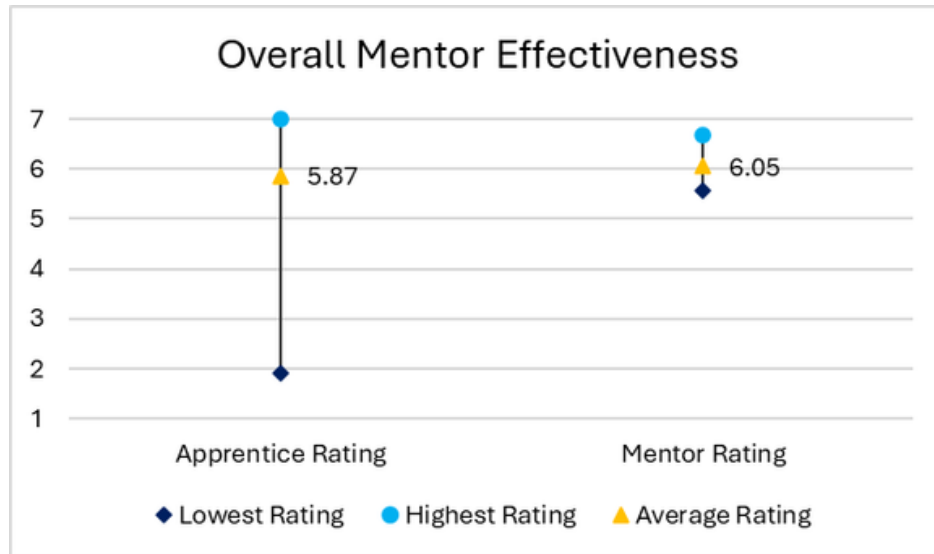


Figure 4

- Apprentices generally viewed mentors as highly effective.
- The wider range suggests variation in individual experiences, consistent with communication findings.
- Overall, mentors were seen as providing valuable guidance, resources, and support.
- Mentors reported consistently high confidence in their effectiveness.
- Low variability suggests a shared perception of strong performance across mentors.
- When asked about their primary strength as a mentor, relationship-building and active listening were the most frequently cited themes.

“Building relationships. I feel like this comes naturally to me. I have held so many different positions in a childcare setting across multiple settings so I can relate to them.” - Mentor

“I listen to understand and am not quick to fix, but guide with conversations, idea generation, and kindness.” - Mentor

“I am flexible and understanding when it comes to working with mentees. I focus on building relationships to keep them motivated.” - Mentor

Key Takeaway: High Effectiveness with Room for Alignment

- Both apprentices and mentors report high levels of mentor effectiveness
- Mentors rate themselves slightly higher and more consistently than apprentices
- This suggests an opportunity to strengthen:
 - Feedback loops between mentors and apprentices
 - Shared expectations and communication practices

6.4 Insights from Mentor Logs and Notes

Mentor logs and reflective notes were used as a supplemental qualitative data source to contextualize findings from interviews and surveys. A total of 58 mentor logs were analyzed, with an average of 5.8 logs submitted per mentor over the course of the first year. These notes provided ongoing documentation of mentoring interactions and supported triangulation of key findings across data sources.

Across logs, mentors frequently documented apprentices' growing confidence, application of coursework to classroom practice, time management challenges, and increasing professionalism. Mentor notes also captured recurring discussions related to work-life balance, leadership development, communication with families and colleagues, and engagement with NAEYC competencies. Collectively, these reflections provided valuable insight into apprentices' experiences over time and reinforced themes identified through apprentice interviews and survey data.

SECTION 7: PROGRAM STRUCTURE AND SUPPORTS

7.1 Financial and Logistical Supports

Financial support was consistently identified as a critical enabler of participation. T.E.A.C.H. scholarships covered tuition and related costs, and stipends helped offset the economic impact of time spent on coursework. Apprentices noted that stipend funds were often used directly to support their classrooms, a reflection of the program's integration into their professional lives.

“Honestly, all of it really is helpful...my mentor helps me in every way I possibly could ask for, and the money is always very helpful.” - Mentor

7.2 Program Navigation and Staff Responsiveness

Apprentices highlighted the importance of administrative support in helping them navigate college systems, program deadlines, and expectations. Program staff were described as accessible and highly responsive, which apprentices cited as a significant factor in their ability to stay on track.

“When challenges came up... it was pretty easy. My mentor and program staff were always accessible and responded quickly.” - Apprentice

The initial learning curve around navigating online learning platforms (particularly Canvas) and college-level expectations was mentioned as a challenge, but one that was consistently resolved through mentor guidance and staff support.

7.3 Flexibility and Course Access

The availability of online and hybrid course formats was a key factor in making the program accessible for apprentices managing full-time work and significant personal obligations. Flexibility in scheduling and course delivery allowed apprentices to remain engaged even during periods of heightened personal stress.

Community college placement allowed apprentices to attend institutions in or near their home communities, reducing travel demands and keeping them connected to their local professional networks.

7.4 Employer Support

Apprentices who discussed employer involvement described employers as supportive and accommodating, particularly in ensuring access to T.E.A.C.H. hours and flexible scheduling. Some employers were initially unfamiliar with program structures, but apprentices reported that once employers understood expectations, their support was strong.

“Just making sure I get that teach time... she really supports me in anything that I might need.” - Apprentice

Note: Employer perspectives will be incorporated into a supplemental Year 1 addendum and fully integrated into the Year 2 evaluation.

SECTION 8: RECOMMENDATIONS

While Year 1 outcomes are largely positive, both apprentices and mentors offered thoughtful feedback that points to opportunities for program improvement in Year 2. These are not indicators of program failure, but rather constructive insights from a first-year cohort that has tested the model and identified where it can grow.

Area for Growth	Recommended Action
Clearer onboarding for mentors on early-program expectations and observation frameworks	Develop a structured mentor orientation guide covering the first 60 days, including suggested discussion topics and reflection prompts
Structured reflection tools for apprentices	Introduce monthly self-reflection forms or check-in structures that help apprentices document and articulate their own growth
Clarification of mentor, mentee, and coach roles	Provide all parties with a clear roles-and-responsibilities document at program entry to prevent overlap or confusion
Support for introverted apprentices or those with lower engagement	Develop a tiered outreach protocol for mentors to use when apprentices are less communicative, including suggested text/email prompts
Guidance on pathways beyond the AA degree	Build career pathway mapping into Year 2 programming to help apprentices begin planning next steps (bachelor's degree, certification, leadership roles)
Pending employer survey data	Complete analysis of employer survey data and integrate findings into Year 2 planning and this report's addendum
Mentor notes analysis	Complete systematic coding of mentor notes by ECE competency domain to strengthen the evidence base for professional growth claims

SECTION 9: CONCLUSION & LOOKING AHEAD TO YEAR 2

Apprentices expressed strong enthusiasm and readiness for their second year, with several already beginning practicum placements and eager to gain experience across different age groups. The confidence, skills, and sense of professional identity cultivated in Year 1 position this cohort well for continued success.

“I’ve already started my practicums... getting to work with infants and toddlers... I’m just so excited because I get the experience and I get to know what that teacher goes through.”

- Apprentice

Year 2 evaluation efforts will build on the foundation established in Year 1, with expanded data collection to include:

- Employer survey data (analysis pending from Year 1; fully integrated in Year 2)
- Systematic analysis of mentor notes coded by ECE competency domain
- Tracking academic milestones, including credit hours completed and GPA trends
- Longitudinal comparison of apprentice professional growth from Year 1 to Year 2
- Assessment of program reach and potential expansion opportunities

The first year of the **Nebraska AEYC Early Childhood Education Apprenticeship Program** has demonstrated proof of concept: with the right combination of financial support, mentoring, flexible coursework, and responsive program infrastructure, practicing early childhood educators can pursue and succeed in higher education, without sacrificing their careers or their students.

All ten early childhood educators from across Nebraska, women with years of professional experience and significant personal responsibilities, enrolled in a supported degree pathway and completed their first year with strong results.

They grew as professionals. They improved their classrooms. They began to see themselves differently, not as “babysitters,” but as skilled educators doing complex, consequential work. And they did it while working full-time, caring for children and family members, and navigating the challenges of returning to formal education.

The program’s success in Year 1 is a testament to the design of the model, the dedication of the mentors, the responsiveness of program staff, and above all, the determination of the apprentices themselves. The Nebraska AEYC Early Childhood Education Apprenticeship Program is not just preparing educators for degrees, it is building a stronger, more skilled, and more confident early childhood workforce for Nebraska’s children and families.

APPENDIX: DATA NOTES AND LIMITATIONS

Sample Sizes

This report reflects data from the program's first cohort (N=7 apprentices; N=8 mentors). Sample sizes for qualitative interviews ranged from N=2 to N=3 per round. While the small sample limits generalizability, the consistency of themes across participants, and across data sources, increases confidence in the findings.

Pending Data

Employer survey data including workplace supports, scheduling flexibility, and retention conditions will be made available in a future report.

Interpreting Percentages

Percentage figures throughout this report are rounded and may not sum to exactly 100% due to rounding or because participants could select multiple responses. Where noted, N= figures refer to the number of respondents for a specific question, which in some cases differs from the overall survey sample.

Quote Attribution

All participant quotes are drawn from recorded and transcribed interviews. Quotes have been lightly edited for readability (e.g., removal of filler words) but not altered in meaning. No identifying information is included in this report.

References for Surveys:

Apprentice-Mentor Survey: *Based on the Consultant Evaluation Form (CEF) modified. Erchul, W. (1987). A relational communication analysis of control in school consultation. Professional School Psychology, 2(2), 113–124.*

The Coach–Professional Relationship Survey (El-Site Coach version). H. S. Vickers & Kathleen M. Minke (1995). Exploring parent–teacher relationships: Joining and communication to others. School Psychology Quarterly, 10(2), 133. Adapted and used in G. Jayaraman, Lisa Knoche, Carolyn Marvin, & Scott Bainter (2014). Evaluation of early childhood coaching in Nebraska – Technical Report Vol. 2. (Revised)

Mentor-Apprentice Survey: *Based on the Consultant Evaluation Form (CEF) modified. Erchul, W. (1987). A relational communication analysis of control in school consultation. Professional School Psychology, 2(2), 113–124.*

The Coach–Professional Relationship Survey (El-Site Coach version). H. S. Vickers & Kathleen M. Minke (1995). Exploring parent–teacher relationships: Joining and communication to others. School Psychology Quarterly, 10(2), 133. Adapted and used in G. Jayaraman, Lisa Knoche, Carolyn Marvin, & Scott Bainter (2014). Evaluation of early childhood coaching in Nebraska – Technical Report Vol. 2. (Revised)

Coach Professional Relationship Scale

5-Point Likert (1=Almost Never-5=Almost Always

Vickers, H. S., & Minke, K. M. (1995). Exploring parent-teacher relationships: Joining and communication to others. School Psychology Quarterly, 10(2), 133.

Jayarman, G., Knoche, L., Marvin, C., & Bainter, S. (2014). Evaluation of early childhood coaching in Nebraska – technical report vol. 2: Key findings from participant observational and self-report data (R2Ed Working Paper No. 2014-6). Retrieved from the National Center for Research on Rural Education: r2ed.unl.edu

The Center for the Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning. (2005). My Teaching Partner Consultancy Relationship Scale [Measurement instrument].