



## **Digital Promise Joins Cohort of Researchers to Support Early Childhood Educators in Rural Communities**

*In partnership with the Ascendium Building Evidence to Increase Rural Learners Success initiative, the new research project will center training access and wages for Early Childhood Educators*

**May 18, 2023 | Washington, D.C.** – Global education nonprofit, [Digital Promise](#) is joining a select cohort of researchers and practitioners chosen by the [Ascendium Education Group](#), focused on a continued pursuit to better understand the experiences and aspirations of learners and postsecondary education providers in rural places. The 12-month project will center on training access and wages for Early Childhood Education (ECE) learners and workers. The new project will expand on Digital Promise’s prior research partnership with Ascendium that centers the experiences of Black, Latina/x, and Indigenous rural learners and the use of micro-credentials in promoting social mobility in rural communities. It also builds on findings from Digital Promise’s report, [Micro-credentials for Social Mobility in Rural Postsecondary Communities: A Landscape Report](#) (funded by Ascendium Education Group), by examining the impact of upskilling and wage increasing initiatives on rural ECE providers across the state of Tennessee.

Consistent with Digital Promise’s efforts to lead and promote equity-centered research and development projects, this endeavor addresses the growing demand for ECE providers that was only exacerbated by the pandemic. Ethnically and racially diverse females predominantly comprise the ECE workforce population and have historically received significant inequities in pay. Recent statistics from the [Department of Labor](#) state that women working full time, year round, are on average paid 83.7% of male salaries. For Black and Hispanic women, the disparity is more significant.

“Our goal is to inform the ECE field of best practices and methods to increase access to high quality skills training and higher wages for women—particularly Black, Indigenous, Latina/x, and immigrant women—who provide foundational education to children in rural communities,” says Dr. Jhacole LeGrand-Dunn, director of adult learning at Digital Promise.

Early childhood interventions lead to significant short- and long-term benefits for children, from healthy brain development to a greater likelihood of high school graduation, further substantiating the roles and impact of these workers. However, [research shows](#) that poor

compensation and benefits disproportionately impact women of color, especially Black, Latina/x, Indigenous, and immigrant women in rural communities. This is often exemplified in the field of ECE where, on average, full-time ECE providers in the United States earn about \$14 per hour— less than a living wage for many Americans. However, in rural communities, the median wage for an early childhood teacher is even lower at \$11.42 per hour, or about \$23,000 annually.

“For individuals, high-quality postsecondary education and workforce training are the best tickets out of poverty and low-wage work and into a rewarding and family-sustaining career. It's especially critical in rural communities struggling to maintain a foothold in a changing economy,” said Keith Witham, director of education grantmaking at Ascendium Education Group. “At Ascendium, we want to make sure rural learners can access good jobs in the places they live, stay near their families, and help communities grow and thrive for the long term. These seven research projects address promising strategies for eliminating barriers to postsecondary success for rural learners while contextualizing those strategies within the cultural richness of our country's diverse rural places.”

Over several months, Digital Promise will collaborate with Tennessee State University to review collected data connected to the implementation of WAGE\$, a program that promotes the continuity of care for preschool-aged children through the supplementing of wages for ECE workers, and to the Tennessee Early Childhood Training Alliance (TECTA), which supports the professional development of birth to age 12 childcare workers across Tennessee. This data will enable Digital Promise to compare outcomes for ECEs enrolled in their respective programs with those who were not. Additionally, researchers will facilitate conversations to garner insights about ECE worker experiences, as well as their desires and suggestions for improvement.

Keep up with the project’s progress by subscribing to the Adult Learning [bi-monthly newsletter](#). Contact the Digital Promise Adult Learning team at [adulthood@digitalpromise.org](mailto:adulthood@digitalpromise.org) to learn more about getting involved in the project.

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### **About Digital Promise**

Digital Promise is a global nonprofit working to expand opportunity for every learner. We work with educators, researchers, technology leaders, and communities to design, investigate, and scale innovations that support learners, especially those who've been historically and systematically excluded. Our vision is that every person engages in powerful learning experiences that lead to a life of well-being, fulfillment, and economic mobility. For more information, visit the [Digital Promise website](#) and follow [@digitalpromise](#) for updates.

### **About Ascendium Education Group**

Ascendium Education Group is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization committed to helping people reach the education and career goals that matter to them. Ascendium invests in initiatives designed to increase the number of students from low-income backgrounds who complete postsecondary degrees, certificates and workforce training programs, with an emphasis on first-generation students, incarcerated adults, rural community members, students of color and veterans. Ascendium's work identifies, validates and expands best practices to promote large-scale change at the institutional, system and state levels, with the intention of elevating opportunity for all. For more information, visit [ascendiumphilanthropy.org](#).