



Where We Stand, Where We're Going

The ESD Community Speaks:
Truth to Power. Stay Grounded. Fight Forward.

“ESD taught me to speak truth to power and to stay grounded when I need to speak about something that might be awkward or scary. So that’s what I’m trying to do.”

— Survey Respondent, 2026

This is a community report. It was built from the voices of 22 people who do this work — teaching, leading, organizing, advocating, and sustaining ESD programs across the globe — and who saw benefit in responding to the survey.

It is offered not as the final word on anything, but as an honest first reading: here is what the field said, here is what it means, and here is what we might do together next.

Read it in the spirit in which it was made. Speak truth to power. Stay grounded. Fight Forward.

A Note Before You Read

IAESDP does not agree or disagree with any of the quotes included in this report. We are reporting what respondents said, exactly as they said it, without editorial judgment. We do not take sides. Our role here is to hold the mirror up to the field — to reflect the community's voices back to itself as faithfully and transparently as possible, and to create the conditions for the conversations that need to happen.

This report contains unedited quotes from survey respondents who gave permission to be quoted anonymously. All quotes for which permission was granted have been included in full, without editing, selection, or omission. That is an intentional choice and a principled one.

Some of what you will read here is affirming. Some of it is uncomfortable. Some of it may land differently depending on who you are, where you come from, and what you carry into this work. That is exactly why it matters. The ESD community teaches people to trust their instincts, name what they see, and stay grounded in their values even when things get hard. This report asks the same of its readers.

As you read:

- ✔ Trigger warnings are in effect. Some responses address race, power, geopolitics, identity, and institutional harm directly and without softening. We recommend that you read them anyway.
- ✔ Assume good intent — from those who shared their thoughts and from those who compiled this report. This survey was designed to take the industry's temperature, not to adjudicate it.
- ✔ Reflect before reacting. When a quote lands uncomfortably, sit with that for a moment before deciding what it means. Discomfort is not the same as harm, and naming a problem is the first step toward solving it.
- ✔ Recognize that this is a beginning. One survey of 22 people cannot capture the full complexity of a global field. What it can do — what it does do — is open the conversation.

We are all, in our own ways, trying to speak truth to power and stay grounded while doing it. Let's extend that same grace to one another.

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About This Report: Methodology & Transparency

How the Survey Was Conducted

The 2026 State of the ESD Industry Survey was developed and administered by IAESDP as the first baseline assessment of the Empowerment Self Defense field. The survey was distributed via a Microsoft Forms link sent directly to the IAESDP membership email list and shared more broadly through social media platforms and practitioner chat groups to invite wider community participation. The data collection window was open for two weeks, from March 18 to April 1, 2026. Twenty-two responses were received. Respondents included provider organization leaders, independent ESD instructors, allied educators, and organization staff working in or adjacent to the ESD field.



This report should be read as a directional baseline, not a statistically representative census of the global ESD field. The sample is small, the survey was distributed through primarily English-language networks, and many respondents likely occupy multiple roles simultaneously. With that said, the consistency of patterns across questions makes the results meaningful as an early community benchmark — a starting point for shared learning rather than a definitive verdict.

This survey is still open to participation. If you read this report and want to add your voice, please reach out to liz@esdprofessionals.org to request access to the survey. Your responses will be reviewed and, if 50 or more total responses are received, IAESDP will publish a full Version 2.0 of this report in the Fall of 2026. If participation grows but does not reach that threshold, an addendum will be released to update the existing findings with any new responses, additional quotes, and emerging issues raised by the community.

A Note on AI Assistance and Structural Analysis

In keeping with IAESDP's commitment to transparency and its awareness of ongoing conversations within social justice communities about the use of artificial intelligence in the production of community research, we are disclosing the following about how this report was produced.

AI assistance was used in two limited capacities: first, the compilation, counting, and sorting of survey data from the raw survey responses; and second, the generation of suggested draft language for this report. All AI-suggested wording was reviewed, revised, and approved by a human editor. All editorial choices, framing, analysis, and assessment reflected in this report were human-controlled.

The final voice, structure, and conclusions of this document are the product of human judgment and human values, not algorithmic output.

Strict instructions were provided to use Structural Analysis — a framework that examines systems, power dynamics, root causes, and structural barriers rather than surface-level statistics — as the organizing lens for this report. This approach was chosen deliberately, guided by the strictest social justice principles, to ensure that findings center equity, access, and the lived experiences of practitioners across different levels of resources, geographies, and identities. The goal was to surface not just what people said, but what those patterns reveal about the structures shaping this field.

The terms Predator Culture and Support Culture appear throughout this report. These are original IAESDP terms, developed to name patterns of behavior clearly and without euphemism, and to point toward what we are collectively building instead. Predator Culture describes the toxic beliefs and behaviors — the gatekeeping, undermining, hierarchy, and harm — that hold the field back. Support Culture describes the values-aligned, community-sustaining way of operating that the ESD community is working to build both internally and in the world it serves.

Foreword

This first State of the ESD Industry report is offered by the International Association of ESD Professionals as a service to the field. It reflects what 22 respondents chose to share about their work, their challenges, and their hopes for the future. That is not the whole industry. It is, however, a meaningful starting point.

Empowerment Self Defense has grown through the commitment of people who teach, organize, advocate, mentor, and hold community — often in under-resourced conditions, often without the kind of institutional support that more established professions take for granted. Many in this field came to the work through social justice, education, violence prevention, mental health, martial arts, and survivor support — not through business training or formal industry development. This report is meant to help bridge that gap gently, by turning lived experience into a clearer picture of what the field needs.

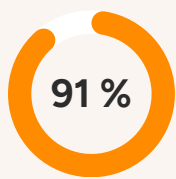
IAESDP is publishing this report not to define the field from above, but to listen, learn, and contribute something useful in return. The intention is to repeat this process annually so that, over time, the ESD community has stronger shared data, a clearer sense of direction, and a better way to name both the strength and the strain in this work.

The field is worth that investment. So are the people holding it up.

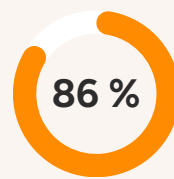
Executive Summary

The 2026 State of the ESD Industry Survey shows a field with deep commitment, real demand, and real strain. Respondents described ESD-related work happening across community settings, schools, colleges, workplaces, social service spaces, and private programs. They also described financial fragility, public misunderstanding, burnout risk, and a strong desire for clearer standards and stronger mutual support.

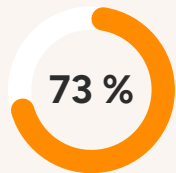
Five numbers tell most of the story at a glance



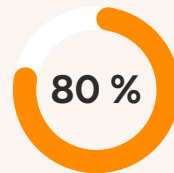
of respondents reported that **demand for ESD services was stable or growing** over the past 12 months.



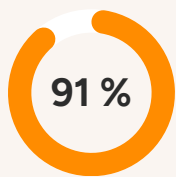
said public understanding of ESD is weak or very weak.



said formal **credentialing and professional standards are very important** or essential to the field's future.



of individual respondents reported **earning under \$15,000 annually** from ESD work.



said clients rarely or never ask for proof of qualifications, training, or credentials.

What those numbers mean together is this: **ESD is doing the work.** The public is not yet meeting it where it is. And the people doing the work are carrying more than the system currently supports.

The structural picture is one of a field that has grown through passion and necessity and is now reaching the point where passion alone is not enough to sustain it. What the community is asking for — clearly, consistently, and across every part of the survey — is not rescue. It is infrastructure: shared language, shared standards, shared tools, and enough practical and financial support to make staying in the work feel possible.

That is what Fight Forward means. It's not just a campaign. It's a direction. A commitment. A way of building something together that is as strong as the people already holding it up.

“Unless the publicity and awareness improves, it is hard to deal with all the rest.”

— Linda, ESD Czechia

Who Responded: A Snapshot of the Field

The respondent pool skewed toward active practitioners and organizational leaders — which is to say, the people most deeply embedded in doing this work right now. Nine respondents (41%) identified as owners, directors, or leaders of ESD provider organizations. Six (27%) identified as independent ESD instructors or practitioners. Three (14%) were trainers or educators in related fields who incorporate ESD, and four respondents (18%) identified as organization staff or selected “other.”

The survey reached beyond the United States. Twelve respondents (55%) were U.S.-based, with the remaining responses coming from Canada, Australia, Israel, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, the United Kingdom, and Ukraine, as well as respondents working across multiple regions. This international spread matters: it is a reminder that ESD is not a single-country conversation, even if some of the loudest structural debates have been shaped by U.S.-centric assumptions.

The field is not made up of newcomers. Fourteen respondents (64%) reported at least six years of work in ESD or empowerment-based self-defense, and several reported more than 20 years. That depth of experience is an asset. It is also, as the data will show, a source of some of the field’s current tension: when experienced people hold on to structures that no longer serve the community, longevity can become a barrier rather than a bridge.

*“A review of “what are you actually teaching”?
ESD can mean different things to each instructor.”*

— Jess Gordon, Arise Self-Defense

Learning from this section

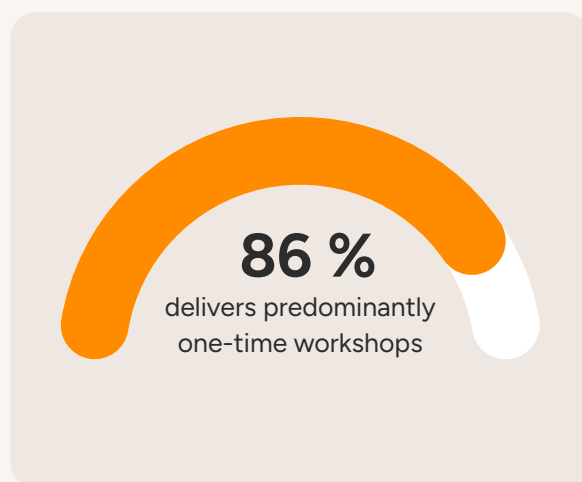
This first response pool is strongest as a picture of the committed core of the field. Future reports will be stronger if they reach more regions, newer practitioners, practitioners working in languages other than English, and voices that do not yet feel well connected to existing networks. Widening the circle is part of the work.

Demand and Delivery: The Field Is Working

The good news is real: ESD is in demand. Twenty respondents (91%) reported that demand for their services was stable or higher than it was 12 months earlier. No one reported lower demand. This is meaningful. It suggests that communities are looking for what ESD offers, even when they don't yet have the language to ask for it by name.

The field is also working across a remarkable range of settings. Community classes were by far the most common service context, with 20 respondents (91%) serving them in the past year. Nonprofit and social service organizations followed at 77%, with colleges and universities at 59%, K-12 schools at 55%, and both workplace settings and private clients at 50%. This breadth is one of ESD's genuine strengths — and one of its structural challenges, because a field that serves so many different contexts in so many different ways needs shared language all the more.

Audiences were equally diverse. The most commonly served populations were adults, women and girls, the general public, LGBTQ+ communities, survivors of violence, and teens. Delivery was dominated by one-time workshops, which appeared in 19 of 22 responses, with multi-session courses a more distant but important second at 10. This pattern likely reflects the reality that many providers are still gaining access through shorter entry-point formats rather than longer-term embedded programs — not because they prefer it that way, but because that's the door that opens first.



The strongest-demand service categories were workplace training and community classes (12 respondents each), followed by youth or school programming (8) and college or campus programming (6). That workplace demand is notable: it represents an opportunity for the field to grow into a context that carries more financial sustainability than many community settings, if the field can make the case clearly enough.



Get past jargon and factions. Scale the message and the access to more people.

— Survey Respondent

The structural takeaway

ESD is not a niche. It is not confined to one lane, one audience, or one format. The data show a field already present across schools, communities, social service settings, workplaces, and private client spaces. That breadth is a strength — but it also means the field urgently needs clearer public language so that people understand what ESD can look like across all of those contexts, not just in a single workshop format.

Economics and Sustainability: The Work Is Real, The Support Is Not

If there is one structural truth that the 2026 survey makes impossible to ignore, it is this: the ESD field is powered by people who have committed deeply to this work in conditions that do not sustainably support them. That is not a personal failing. It is a structural one — and naming it clearly is the first step toward changing it.

Among the 20 respondents who reported individual income, 16 (80%) reported earning under \$15,000 annually from ESD-related work. Only two respondents reported that more than half of their personal income came from ESD work. At the organizational level, 15 of 17 respondents who reported a budget (88%) reported less than \$50,000 annually in ESD-related revenue. Most organizations operate with one to five active instructors and zero or one paid administrative staff.



This is the economic reality of a field doing essential violence prevention work. And it explains nearly everything else the survey revealed: why marketing capacity is limited, why burnout is a persistent risk, why standards are hard to engage with when practitioners are stretched too thin, and why the field has not yet developed the infrastructure that more established professions take for granted.

“What would help is local support and funding because right now...it feels like we are going it alone.”

— Lisa Evans, Empowered Today, Australia

The most common barriers to growing ESD work were limited public awareness (14 respondents), limited marketing capacity (11), pricing resistance (9), burnout or workload (7), and difficulty explaining what makes ESD distinct (7). Revenue sources reflect a patchwork economy: class fees paid by participants, corporate contracts, contracts with nonprofits, philanthropic grants, and individual donations. Many providers are piecing sustainability together from several channels without a shared or stable model to build from.

The structural takeaway

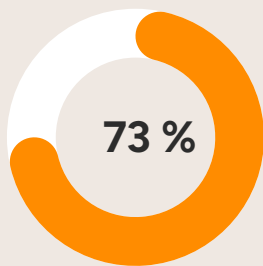
Financial sustainability is not a separate conversation from violence prevention. It is part of the same work. A field that burns out its practitioners cannot serve the communities that need it. Support Culture means treating the sustainability of ESD workers as a community priority, not a private problem.



“We are all trying to figure out how to make income from this work, and I think that a lack of business training and support is really impacting our ability to be sustainable. I think that the burnout we see instructors facing comes from the “starving artist” mentality that we all seem to have.”

— Kayla Berry, We Are Safer Together LLC

Standards, Credibility, and the Public Understanding Gap



said formal credentialing or recognized professional standards are very important or essential to the future of ESD.

The field wants professional standards. The strongest calls for field-wide standards were in trauma-informed practice (15 respondents), accessibility and inclusion (11), ethics (10), instructor qualifications (10), and continuing education (9).

But there is a gap — and it matters. When respondents were asked what clients and the public use to judge credibility, the answers had almost nothing to do with formal credentials. The top signals were word of mouth and reputation (20 respondents), brand visibility or online presence (12), years of experience (11), trauma-informed approach (10), and personal background or story (10). Only seven respondents mentioned professional credentialing as something the public looks for. And 20 of 22 respondents said clients or partners rarely or never ask for proof of qualifications, training, or credentials.

This is not an argument against standards. It is an **argument for doing the public education work that makes standards meaningful.** When the public does not yet know to look for credentials, and when practitioners do not yet have shared, accessible credentials to point to, the gap between internal values and external recognition stays wide.

“**Bringing ESD professionals together. Setting standards for growth and continued learning. Better marketing.**”

— Jess Gordon, Arise Self-Defense

Some standards infrastructure is already in place. The most commonly reported organizational standards were written codes of ethics (12 respondents), trauma-informed training standards (12), safeguarding or abuse-prevention policies (11), and background-check processes (11). Still, three respondents reported having none of the listed organizational standards in place, reinforcing that the field remains uneven in its operational maturity.

The structural takeaway: **Standards without public education are an internal conversation.** The field’s work on credentialing must be paired with clear, accessible, values-aligned language that helps clients, funders, schools, and employers understand why it matters who teaches ESD and how they teach it. That is not branding for branding’s sake. It is the **education work that makes the standards real.**


Opportunities and Risks: What the Field Sees Ahead

Respondents were not pessimistic. They named real growth openings — if the field can address its foundational challenges at the same time.

The top opportunities identified were:

- ✓ public awareness campaigns (15 respondents);
- ✓ workplace and organizational demand (14),
- ✓ research and evidence-building (14),
- ✓ partnerships with allied professions (13),
- ✓ growth in schools and youth prevention programming (12).

The risks were equally clear-eyed. The most commonly named threats were underpricing and unsustainable business models (17 respondents), public misunderstanding of ESD (15), economic instability (14), fragmentation in the field (13), weak or inconsistent standards (11), and instructor burnout (11).



Read together, the opportunities and risks tell the same story: the field has a real opening to grow, and the things most likely to close that opening are internal. Fragmentation, unsustainable economics, and the failure to make a clear public case for ESD — these are the forces that could prevent the field from meeting the demand that already exists.

“In the US and elsewhere, culturally- and politically-targeted threats to safety and wellbeing are intense. This means that folks with immigration, political dissent, LGBTQ identity, and gender-targeted (women especially) concerns are keyed in to safety. We as an industry must respond.”

— Survey Respondent

That quote deserves to sit for a moment. The world outside ESD is changing rapidly, and the communities ESD serves are navigating real, escalating threats. The field’s ability to respond is directly tied to its internal health: how unified it is, how sustainable its practitioners are, how clearly it can explain itself, and how effectively it can reach the people who need it most.

Instructor Concerns: What We Need to Talk About

This section is the heart of the report. It is where the survey moved beyond numbers and into the harder, more human territory of what practitioners actually think — what frustrates them, what they are afraid of, what they believe is holding the field back, and what they want to see change.

The responses are included in full, in the spirit of transparency. Grouped by theme, they paint a picture of a field that knows what it needs. The question is whether it is willing to have the conversations required to get there.



1. The Awareness Gap: Visibility as a Structural Problem

More than any other single concern, respondents named the field’s invisibility as the root challenge. Public awareness was named as a barrier, a threat, and a priority in virtually every response. This is not a marketing problem. It is a structural one: when communities do not know that ESD exists, when they cannot distinguish it from generic self-defense, and when the field cannot agree on shared language to describe itself, access to ESD becomes a privilege of proximity — something you have to already know about to find.

That is a justice problem. The communities with the greatest need for ESD are often the furthest from the networks in which it circulates. Solving the awareness gap is not just good for the field’s growth; it is essential to the field’s mission.

“Unless the publicity and awareness improves, it is hard to deal with all the rest.”

— Linda, ESD Czechia

“Greater visibility + hard, irrefutable data about our efficacy.”


— Survey Respondent

“Clarity on what it is and how it benefits clients. ESD-specific marketing.”

— Bianka, ZA SEBA

“A national marketing campaign to promote ESD as a violence prevention tool.”

— Survey Respondent



“There is still a great deal of misinformation to address in this field. We’re still barraged with poor and/or unproven safety advice; and I hear far too often the old chestnuts, “I couldn’t do anything to fight back,” “it would only make an attacker madder,” and “it’s all about stranger danger.” We will benefit from more research and data in order to disrupt those myths about how different groups of people experience violence, and about the efficacy of ESD training.”

— Survey Respondent

What the community can do

Commit to shared, plain-language descriptions of ESD that can be used across organizations and lineages. Challenge misinformation publicly and consistently. Prioritize outreach to communities that are not already in existing networks.

How IAESDP is supporting this:

The #FightForward public awareness campaign, launching Summer 2026, is the Association’s direct response to this challenge. It is designed to be field-wide, not IAESDP-specific — a shared message that any ESD professional or organization can carry. The ESDP Directory and public-facing educational resources are part of the same effort to make ESD findable, legible, and accessible to people who do not yet know to look for it.

2. Fragmentation, Gatekeeping, and Predator Culture Behaviors

The second theme is the one the field finds hardest to talk about: the ways that ESD professionals harm each other. Fragmentation — the splintering of the field into competing coalitions, the undermining of practitioners by other practitioners, the use of lineage and tenure as weapons of exclusion — was named as both a structural threat and a moral failure by multiple respondents.

These are **Predator Culture behaviors**. They are the internal equivalent of the dynamics ESD teaches participants to recognize and resist in the world: the use of power and proximity to diminish, control, and exclude rather than to build, support, and expand. When these behaviors show up inside the ESD community itself, they do more than damage individual practitioners. They fracture the field’s credibility, drain its collective energy, and make it harder to build the kind of shared trust that professional standards require.

The structural truth here is that fragmentation is not just interpersonal friction. It is a mechanism that keeps the field weak, keeps resources scattered, and keeps new practitioners from finding clear pathways in. Governance confusion — the lack of clarity about how different organizations relate to one another — is both a cause and a consequence of this fragmentation.

What the community can do

Name Predator Culture behaviors when you see them, including when they come from established voices. Refuse to participate in coalition-building whose purpose is exclusion rather than shared mission. Seek clarity on governance structures and ask questions when they are unclear rather than assuming the confusion is your fault.

How IAESDP is supporting this:

The Association's work on standards, credentialing, and governance transparency is directly aimed at reducing the ambiguity that Predator Culture feeds on. Clear standards, open processes, and publicly accessible information about who IAESDP is and what it does are Support Culture in action. No practitioner or organization should receive different treatment because of how long they have been around.

“Industry-wide cohesion and support amongst each other.”

— Lauren Lopp, IAESDP / Asserthor

“Address the fragmented atmosphere of ESD.”

— Kim Rivers, Labrys ESD

“Stop undermining one another and forming different coalitions. Accept that we all do things differently but no one is “better.”

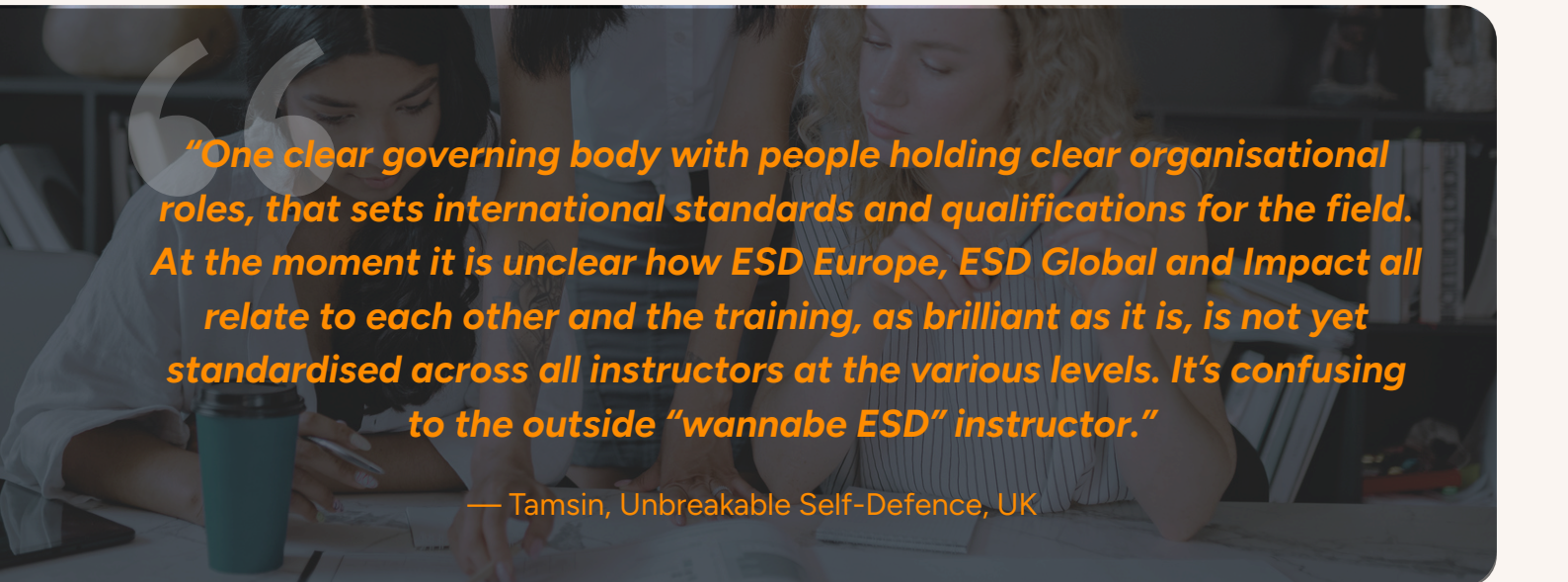
— Krista, We Are Safer Together

“Stop gatekeeping.”

— Dez Shallenberg

“Not grandfather any organizations or people through processes because they have been a part of the field for a while or are more established. Frequently these are the organizations that are doing the most harm in the industry.”

— Kayla Berry, We Are Safer Together



“One clear governing body with people holding clear organisational roles, that sets international standards and qualifications for the field. At the moment it is unclear how ESD Europe, ESD Global and Impact all relate to each other and the training, as brilliant as it is, is not yet standardised across all instructors at the various levels. It’s confusing to the outside “wannabe ESD” instructor.”

— Tamsin, Unbreakable Self-Defence, UK

3. Decolonizing ESD: Racial Justice, Intersectionality, and the Reckoning the Field Needs

This section reflects perspectives shared by members of the ESD practitioner community. These are not institutional positions or accusations. They are the views of practitioners who chose to respond to this survey — people doing this work, thinking critically about it, and bringing their full experience and perspective to the conversation. It is an act of transparency, and an invitation to engage.

The following quote is reproduced in full, with the respondent's permission, and without editing:

“Acknowledging how racial issues are intertwined with this work more. I’m worried about ESD’s ties with Zionism and the weaponization of self-defense (and very real trauma — I understand anti-Semitism and holocaust history) in Israel in order to commit genocide in Palestine. I think there are a lot of good ideas and great people involved in this work, but there’s a reckoning that needs to happen with white supremacist culture within the organization — this also includes moving on from second wave feminism and ‘white women being uncomfortable’ into a truly more intersectional kind of work. I also think that it is dangerous to have gatekeepers and funding sources that, if they disappear, cause organizations to struggle or also disappear. ESD taught me to speak truth to power and to stay grounded when I need to speak about something that might be awkward or scary. So that’s what I’m trying to do.”

— Survey Respondent

This response will produce different reactions in different readers. Some will feel seen. Some will feel accused. Some will feel uncertain about what to do with it. All of those reactions are valid. What is not valid is to dismiss it, to treat the discomfort it produces as evidence that it should not have been included, or to reach for the language of harm as a way to avoid engaging with the substance of what was said.

The respondent is raising interconnected structural concerns. They are concerns about racial justice and whose bodies and whose safety are centered in ESD training lineages and institutional partnerships. They are concerns about the hold that a particular cultural framework — second-wave, Anglo-centric feminism — has on the field’s dominant narrative, and about what gets crowded out when that framework goes unexamined. They are concerns about financial dependency and how funding structures can function as a form of Predator Culture: concentrating power and creating vulnerability in the organizations most willing to challenge it.

These are not fringe concerns. They are the concerns of a field that has always claimed to be in service of the most vulnerable, now being asked whether its structures actually reflect that claim.

Decolonizing ESD is not a threat to ESD. It is an expansion of it — toward a practice that is genuinely intersectional, that centers the full range of bodies and experiences that face violence, and that is not dependent on any single cultural framework to define what safety looks like or who deserves it.

What this looks like in practice means examining whose voices, whose training lineages, and whose institutional relationships shape the field's standards and governance. It means creating space for practitioners from Global Majority communities to lead, not just participate. It means being willing to sit with the discomfort of organizational self-examination without defaulting to defensiveness. And it means democratizing the development of ESD itself — releasing the U.S.-centric grip on what ESD is supposed to look like, and trusting that ESD practiced in Slovakia, Ukraine, Australia, or Brazil does not need to be a copy of what ESD looks like in the United States. Every culture, every community, every region brings its own understanding of safety, body, power, and resistance. A truly global ESD field makes room for all of it.

What the community can do

Engage with this response as an invitation rather than an attack. Ask your organization what its funding relationships require of you. Ask whose voices are absent from your lineage, your curriculum, and your governance. Begin that conversation even before you feel ready for it.

How IAESDP is supporting this:

The Association is committed to developing its standards, credentialing, and governance processes in ways that are explicitly intersectional and anti-racist. That work is in progress. It will not be done perfectly. It will be done openly, with accountability to the community it serves.


4. Sustainability and the “Starving Artist” Trap

Burnout is not a personal failing. It is what happens when people with strong values are asked to sustain a demanding practice without adequate structural support. The ESD field has normalized a model in which practitioners are expected to carry enormous emotional, educational, and logistical labor in exchange for income that would not sustain most households. The survey data make this visible.

The “starving artist” frame — named directly by one respondent — is worth sitting with. It describes a dynamic in which the work's value is recognized emotionally but not materially: everyone agrees it matters, and yet the economic structures around it treat it as optional, as something people should do out of passion regardless of whether it pays. That framing is itself a form of Predator Culture, applied to labor: extracting value from people's commitment without building the infrastructure to sustain it.

“We are all trying to figure out how to make income from this work, and I think that a lack of business training and support is really impacting our ability to be sustainable. I think that the burnout we see instructors facing comes from the ‘starving artist’ mentality that we all seem to have.”

— Kayla Berry, We Are Safer Together LLC



“Funding for regional networks; coordinated strong social media presence; fundraising at central level for distribution in the regions.”

— Survey Respondent

“Not sure about elsewhere, but down here in Australia...What would help is local support and funding because right now...it feels like we are going it alone.”

— Lisa Evans, Empowered Today, Australia

The structural takeaway is simple: sustainability is a justice issue. Instructors who cannot sustain themselves financially leave the field. When they leave, the communities they serve lose access. The communities with the least institutional access to ESD are the ones most dependent on independent instructors who are operating on the smallest margins.

What the community can do

Stop treating undercharging as a virtue. Recognize that pricing your work at a rate that sustains you is not greed — it is professional integrity and a commitment to staying in the field long term. Seek out and share business education resources. Build local and regional networks that share marketing, administrative, and organizational burden.

How IAESDP is supporting this — and what we need from you

IAESDP is actively building the shared infrastructure that makes sustainability more possible: practical pricing guidance, business education resources, referral and directory tools, and the marketing and organizational support that no individual instructor should have to carry alone. But here is the honest truth — we cannot be everything to everyone everywhere all of the time. This Association is a network, and a network only works when people plug into it. Sustainability in this field is not something IAESDP can deliver to you. It is something we build together. That means showing up: joining, participating, sharing, contributing, and investing in the collective as if your future as an instructor depends on it — because it does. Support Culture is not a service. It is a practice. And it requires all of us.

Standards, Governance, and the Clarity the Field Deserves

The desire for standards is real and consistent. But standards without clarity are another form of Predator Culture: they create the appearance of professionalism while leaving the actual rules opaque enough that established players can interpret them in their own favor. Respondents named governance confusion, credential confusion, and the disconnect between what different organizations teach as persistent structural problems.

“A review of ‘what are you actually teaching’? ESD can mean different things to each instructor.”

— Jess Gordon,
Arise Self-Defense

“One clear governing body with people holding clear organisational roles, that sets international standards and qualifications for the field.”

— Tamsin,
Unbreakable Self-Defence,

“If people expanded what and how they teach (non-physical classes, doing talks, doing emergency preparedness trainings, etc.) then I think we could find more success.”

— Krista,
We Are Safer Together

Standards in Support Culture are not walls — they are floors. A floor that every practitioner can stand on, that protects participants, that ensures quality without eliminating diversity, and that is transparent enough for anyone — new or experienced, inside the field or looking in — to understand. That is what the field is building toward. It will not happen overnight. But it must happen with clarity, transparency, and accountability rather than inside closed conversations.

What the community can do

Engage with credentialing and standards processes rather than opting out of them. Ask questions about governance structures. If the answers are not clear, say so. Advocate for clarity as a community value, not just a logistical preference.

How IAESDP is supporting this

Standards and credentialing development is a core Association priority. The process is and will remain transparent, inclusive, and grounded in the principle that standards serve practitioners and participants — not the other way around



Research, Evidence, and Myth-Busting as Equity Work

Evidence is not neutral. In a field like ESD — where harmful myths about violence, self-defense, and survivor behavior are still widely circulated — the absence of strong, accessible evidence is not just an academic gap. It is a structural barrier that leaves the most vulnerable people operating on bad information.

“Greater visibility + hard, irrefutable data about our efficacy.” — Survey Respondent

“We need more case studies.” — Linda, ESD Czechia

“Success members” — Kim Rivers, Labrys ESD

“Continued research to update curriculum.” — Survey Respondent

When communities cannot access proof that ESD works, they rely on the myths that have always circulated: that resistance makes things worse, that only certain bodies can defend themselves, that violence is random and therefore unpreventable. Those myths disproportionately harm the communities ESD is most committed to serving. Building and disseminating a robust evidence base is a justice project, not just a credibility play.

What the community can do

- ✔ Document outcomes.
- ✔ Share case studies, even small ones.
- ✔ Engage with researchers.
- ✔ Ask your clients what changed for them and write it down.
- ✔ Collective evidence starts with individual practice.

How IAESDP is supporting this

Research and data is a named Association **priority**. That includes investing in shared outcome measurement tools, supporting and securing academic partnerships, and building a public-facing evidence base that practitioners can use to make the case for ESD in any room. It is worth being specific about what kind of research we will back: global, multi-cultural, multi-national research that spans socio-economic and demographic lines. There is existing research on the experiences of U.S.-based Anglo women on college campuses, though even that body of work is older and in need of updating. What the field lacks — and what will make the biggest difference — is comprehensive, representative research that reflects the full diversity of communities ESD serves around the world. That is the research IAESDP is committed to supporting.

Looking Forward: What the Field Is Building

The 2026 survey does not show a field in crisis. It shows a field in the hard, generative work of becoming. The practitioners who responded are not asking for someone to rescue them. They are asking for the kind of infrastructure that makes doing this work together more possible, more sustainable, and more powerful than doing it alone.

Across all the data, seven directions for shared work emerge:



Keep the Annual Benchmark and Widen Participation

This report needs to become a recurring community resource. Participation needs to grow — not just in numbers, but in reach: more regions, more languages, more practitioners who do not yet feel connected to existing networks. Annual repetition builds trust, and trust builds data.



Make Public Understanding a Shared Priority

The public awareness gap is the field's most consistent structural challenge. Solving it requires shared language, shared campaigns, and shared willingness to put ESD where people can find it. #FightForward is the start of that conversation, not the end of it.



Pair Standards with Practical Supports

Strong standards that practitioners cannot access or afford are not strong. Every step toward credentialing and professional development must be paired with practical, accessible tools that make participation possible for practitioners at every resource level.



Treat Sustainability as Part of the Mission

Business education, pricing support, regional networks, and funding development are not separate from violence prevention work. They are what makes violence prevention work sustainable. IAESDP is committed to building this infrastructure — and to building it with the community, not just for it.



Build Support Culture — Together

The field has named the Predator Culture dynamics that hold it back: fragmentation, gatekeeping, the grandfathering of harmful organizations, the use of tenure as a shield. The alternative is Support Culture, and it starts with each practitioner choosing it in their own practice, their own coalitions, and their own interactions with the wider field.



Decolonize and Expand

ESD's mission is the safety of the most vulnerable. Living that mission fully means building a practice that is genuinely intersectional — one that sees and serves the full range of people who face violence, not just those closest to the center of the field's historical networks. It means letting go of the idea that there is one right way to teach ESD, one right cultural framework, one right set of assumptions about what safety looks like. Communities in Slovakia, Brazil, Ukraine, and Australia face different contexts, different threats, and different cultural realities than communities in the United States. A global ESD field honors those differences. It allows ESD to be shaped by the communities it serves, not just exported to them. That ongoing work is not optional. It is the work.



Invest in Evidence

Good research is an equity tool. The field needs to build it collectively, share it accessibly, and use it to dismantle the myths that still prevent communities from accessing ESD and trusting what it offers.

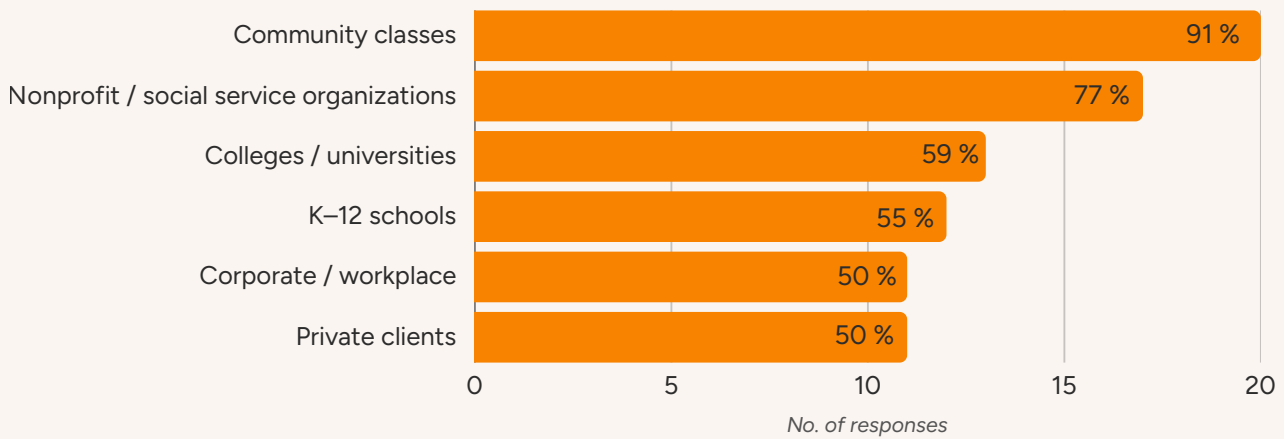
None of this is easy. All of it is possible. The people in this survey are already doing it — in Ohio and Colorado, in Czechia and Australia, in the UK and Ukraine, in workplaces and community centers and school gymnasiums. The field has everything it needs to Fight Forward. What it needs next is to do it together.

Appendix: Topline Data Summary

A1. Respondent Profile

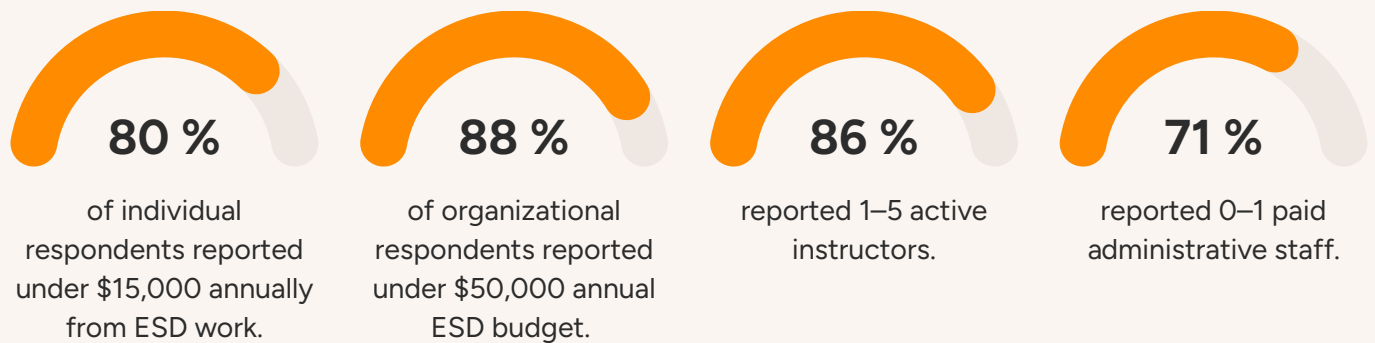
22 total responses — 9 provider organization leaders (41%), 6 independent practitioners (27%), 3 related-field educators (14%), 4 staff or other (18%). 12 U.S.-based (55%), 10 international. 14 respondents (64%) with 6 or more years in the field.

A2. Demand and Service Settings (Past 12 Months)

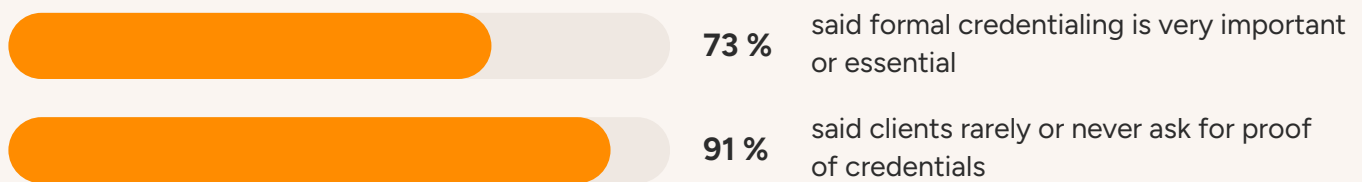


91% reported demand stable or higher; 0% reported lower demand.

A3. Economics

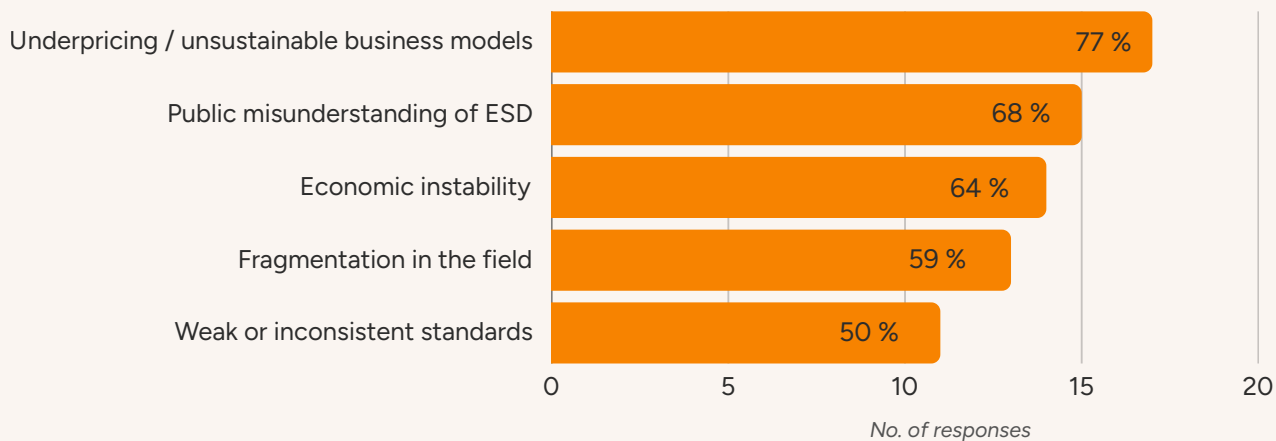


A4. Standards and Credentialing

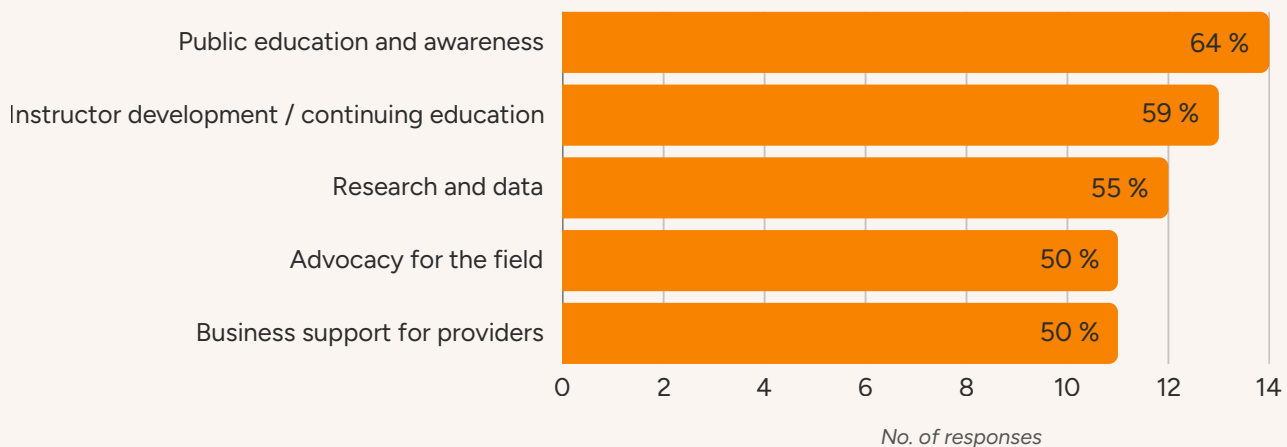


Most common organizational standards in place: written code of ethics (12), trauma-informed training (12), safeguarding policies (11), background checks (11)

A5. Top Threats Named



A6. Top IAESDP Priorities Named



A Letter to the Reader: On Hard Quotes and Harder Conversations

Dear Reader,

I want to talk to you directly for a moment — not as the Association, but as the person who sat with this survey, read every response, and had to make decisions about what to do with all of it.

Here is the honest version of what that was like. When I opened the survey results, I knew there would be things in there that were going to be complicated. That is kind of the point of asking people what they actually think. What I did not fully anticipate was how it would feel to be the one holding it all — deciding what to include, how to frame it, what to say about it. And then realizing that no matter what I do, someone was going to have feelings about it.

That is the tightrope. If I edited the quotes, I'd be accused of bias. If I included everything, I'd be accused of amplifying harm. If I tried to contextualize certain responses, I'd be accused of taking sides. And if I said nothing at all about the harder ones, I'd be accused of cowardice. There is no version of this job that does not involve risk.

So, I went with transparency. Every quote for which we received permission is in this report, unedited, exactly as it was submitted. Not because every statement is one I agree with — IAESDP does not take institutional positions on geopolitical conflicts, and the inclusion of any quote in this report does not represent our endorsement of the views expressed or lack thereof. But because this report was built on the premise that the field deserves to see itself honestly, and I am not willing to be the person who decides which truths are too inconvenient to share.

What I do want to say something about is the dynamic that makes these decisions so hard — because I think it is a dynamic most of us recognize, whether we are compiling a report



or sitting in a community meeting or reading a message that landed wrong.

There is something that happens when we are anonymous. We say things more plainly. We skip the softening, the social negotiation, the careful management of how it might land. Sometimes that directness is a gift; sometimes, it is the only way a real concern gets named instead of buried under politeness. And sometimes it means something sharp arrives on the other end without any of the context that might have made it land differently.

The person on the receiving end of that — whether it's an individual, an organization, or a community — does not get to ask a clarifying question. They just receive it. And then they have to decide, in real time, whether they can hear the concern underneath the directness, or whether the way it was said makes it impossible to stay open to what was actually meant.

I sat with that question myself, reading some of these responses. If I were the person being described, how would I receive this?

Would I be able to separate what I agree with from what I feel accused by? Would I have the bandwidth, on that particular day, to respond from my values rather than my defenses?

I do not always know the answer. I suspect none of us do.

What I do know is that there is a pattern in social justice communities — and ESD is one of them — where difficult speech tends to get handled in one of two ways: either it gets dismissed: labeled as triggering, harmful, or inappropriate, and the language of care gets used to shut down a conversation that actually needed to happen, or it gets lobbed: named bluntly, without much consideration for the whole person on the other end, as though identifying the problem is the same as solving it. Neither of those is Support Culture. Both of them are, in their own way, forms of Predator Culture — one that silences, one that wounds, and both that leave the real work undone.

ESD teaches us something different. It teaches us that our words have impact — and that impact and intent are not always the same thing. It teaches us that the goal is not to never say hard things, but to say them in ways that open doors rather than close them. It teaches us that real safety — the kind that lasts — is built through honest, generous conversation that aims for understanding, not just for the satisfaction of having spoken.

That is what I want for this report. Not agreement. Not comfort. It's understanding. The kind that only comes from staying in the room with something difficult long enough to actually see it.

So, if something in these pages activated something in you — sit with it. Ask what is underneath the reaction. Consider that the person who wrote it is also a whole person, doing this work, trying to speak their truth, and that their perspective is a window into an experience that the field needs to understand, even if it is not the only window.

We are all, in the end, trying to find the balance between truth and tolerance, between speaking plainly and speaking with care, between naming what is real and leaving room for the people we are naming things about. That balance is not a fixed point. It is a practice. It is, honestly, the same practice ESD asks of every participant who walks through our doors.

Stay grounded. Assume good intent. Keep talking. Fight Forward.

Lissette E. Brassac Fitzgerald

CEO, International Association of ESD Professionals
2026



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