D.C. among first in nation to require child-care workers to get college degrees [1]

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EXCERPTS

Debbie James-Dean graduated from high school in 1979 and has spent much of her career working in child care. She was anxious when her director at Kids Are Us Learning Center in Southeast Washington told her she needed to go back to school.

“I was afraid I couldn’t do it,” she said. And earning $12.75 an hour, she couldn’t afford textbooks, let alone college tuition.

But she got a scholarship, and last summer she enrolled in her first college course: “Educating the Young Child.” She’s one of hundreds of child-care teachers in the District who must return to school under new licensing regulations that went into effect in December for child-care centers.

More than a decade after Washington, D.C., set out to create the most comprehensive public preschool system in the country, the city is directing its attention to overhauling the patchwork of programs that serve infants and toddlers.

The new regulations put the District at the forefront of a national effort to improve the quality of care and education for the youngest learners. City officials want to address an academic achievement gap between children from poor and middle-class families that research shows is already evident by the age of 18 months.

A central part of that mission is educating a workforce that historically has been paid and treated like babysitters. What the job demands is closer to the work of elementary school teachers, scientists say. “This is a real opportunity to build the profession and set our young children on a positive trajectory for learning and development,” said Elizabeth Groginsky, assistant superintendent of early learning in the District.

But for many child-care workers, often hired with little more than a high school diploma, returning to school is a difficult, expensive proposition with questionable reward.

Many already have more training than people in comparably paid jobs such as parking-lot attendants, hotel clerks and fast-food workers. And unlike in most professional fields, prospects are slim that a degree will bring a significantly higher income — a bachelor's degree in early-childhood education yields the lowest lifetime earnings of any major.

Center directors have few resources to tap if they want to reward their better-educated employees. Many parents in the District are maxed out, paying among the highest annual tuitions nationally, at $1,800 a month. And government subsidies that help fund care for children from lower-income families fall well below the market rate.

In the end, early-child-care teachers that go on to earn diplomas often leave their jobs to work in public schools, where they can earn substantially more.

Despite the challenges, early-education advocates across the country are hopeful that the District can set an example of how a workforce can be transformed. With the city’s relatively small labor pool and a history of advocacy and generous funding for preschool, educators say, there may be enough political will and support to make it happen.

Valora Washington, chief executive at the Council for Professional Recognition, which oversees the Child Development Associate (CDA) program, an entry-level credential for child-care providers, said a similar education requirement would “shut down” the child-care system in many states.

“D.C. is different. D.C. is ahead of the curve,” she said. “It’s more possible here than it would be anywhere else.”

Failing to keep pace

The new credential requirements in the District follow a 2015 report by the National Academies that says the child-care workforce has not kept pace with the science of child development and early learning.

From the first days of life, learning is complex and cumulative, the report says. Infants are capable of abstract thought, forming theories about what is happening in the physical world and whom to trust.

Scientists concluded that teachers need the skills and insight to offer the kinds of learning experiences that challenge them and make them feel safe. They need tools to diagnose and intervene when they see learning or emotional problems. And they need literacy skills to introduce young learners to an expansive vocabulary, exposure many children do not have at home and are not getting in day care.

In sum, the report says, teachers of infants and toddlers require the same level of sophisticated knowledge and skills expected of elementary educators and they should likewise be expected to have bachelor's degrees.

At the same time, the report urges policymakers to use caution when increasing minimum credentials, to avoid unintended consequences, including workforce shortages, reduced diversity in the profession and pressure on out-of-pocket costs for families.

The District set the minimum credential for lead teachers as an associate degree, rather than a bachelor's, because of such challenges, Groginsky said. The deadline to earn the degree is December 2020. New regulations also call for child-care center directors to earn a bachelor's degree and for home care providers and assistant teachers to earn a CDA.

Early-childhood advocates in the District are working with counterparts in Maryland and Virginia to research compensation trends and career pathways and develop policy recommendations that can boost the earning potential of child-care providers, Groginsky said. There is precedent for increasing teacher qualifications. Nearly three-quarters of lead teachers in federally funded Head Start preschool programs have bachelor's degrees, up from 44 percent in 2007. And by this December, all lead teachers in classrooms that participate in the District's universal preschool program are required to have bachelor's degrees. The requirement, set a decade ago, has been much easier to meet for charter or traditional public schools that pay competitive salaries. Independent centers have struggled to comply.

To help, the District funds scholarships for those pursuing CDAs or higher education.

The Teacher Education and Compensation Helps, or T.E.A.C.H., scholarship is funded mainly through local and federal funds but also requires the employee and child-care center to pay a small share.

It was started in North Carolina in 1990 after a workforce survey showed that less than 10 percent of child-care workers had any kind of college degree. Since then, the portion with degrees has increased to nearly 65 percent, thanks to the scholarships, and also because the state instituted a quality rating system that rewards centers based on the education levels of its staff members.

Nationally, the program has expanded to about two dozen states and the District and has awarded scholarships to 136,000 people.

The T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood National Center estimates that participants earn on average 8 percent more each year they participate, as they receive bonuses or are promoted at work. And the scholarship reduces turnover, a serious challenge for the field. For every year that an employer supports an employee's education, the employee must commit to another year of work.

In the long term, some go on to teach college courses, direct their own centers or work as consultants who provide technical assistance, said Sue Russell, executive director of the national center.

"These are the same women who did not think they would ever go to college," she said.

'It's like a battery charge'

When James-Dean earned the scholarship, she enrolled at Central Texas College, which has a satellite campus in the District.

On school days, she wakes up at 4:15 a.m. to take the Metro from Rockville to her work, on the edge of the District's Washington Highlands neighborhood, so she can use the computer to do homework before the children arrive.

She spends the next eight hours reading stories, changing diapers and playing chase and "ring around the table we go" with toddlers.

By 4 p.m., she's headed for the Metro again to a child-care center on the other side of the city, where classes go to 9:15 p.m.

She said at first she was "dreading" the long days. "But now it's just adrenaline, it's like a battery charge," she said.

She is inspired by the other women she meets at school. Some of her classmates do not speak English or still have young children at home. "They are getting through it," she said.

Her boss, Lynita Law-Reid, the director at Kids Are Us, said she knew the credential requirements were coming, so last year she created employee agreements and asked each employee to commit to progressing through a higher-education program. So far, just two of her 16 teachers have associate degrees.

Many of her employees are mothers, or single mothers, with little personal time and flexibility. One employee left her job because she could not commit to going back to school, Law-Reid said.

Most college campuses or classes are across town, and so many have chosen to pursue online programs and pay for them out of pocket, a route that makes Law-Reid nervous. One employee said she already owes back tuition and could not log on to her courses until she finished paying down her bill.

James-Dean said counseling and tutoring helped her get through two tough English classes, and she is bracing herself for the math classes she needs to take. This spring, she is taking another education course and a philosophy of religion class that "sounds interesting."

She expects higher education will help her get a raise, but for her, going back to school is mostly about “self-improvement,” she said. “It’s like an appetite, like a hunger that’s being fed,” she said.

For most of her working life, she was raising children, helping to raise grandchildren and caring for older relatives. “I’ve been taking care of everybody but myself at work and at home,” she said. “Now I am doing this for me, and it feels really good.”

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