Running a pre-k program is hard. So why do some states require almost no qualifications? [1]

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EXCERPTS

Every weekday morning, Leilani Au, a child care center director in Honolulu, wakes up early to figure out staff schedules for the day. With 18 teachers and more than 25 teachers' aides, scheduling changes are inevitable. Once that's under control, she says, "I spend the beginning part of my day connecting with staff and checking email. I try to visit the classrooms and have brief conversations with the children and teachers, and then I greet as many parents and children when they arrive as I can."

About 130 children between the ages of 2 and 5 attend Au's child care center and its two satellite locations. Au works with the center's education coordinator to direct the curriculum, assessments, and staff professional development. She reports on enrollment, budgets, and personnel issues to the University of Hawaii, with which the center is associated. She also spends time ensuring the center keeps its National Association for the Education of Young Children accreditation—the industry gold standard. In many respects, her role and responsibilities are similar to those of an elementary school principal.

Au has a master's degree in education and many years of experience in the classroom; this is the third child care center she's directed. But as a study we recently conducted revealed, the educational and experience requirements for people directing early child care vary wildly by state—and many lack Au's qualifications. Notably, while nearly every state requires elementary school principals to have a master's degree and pays them a salary to match, 41 states allow center directors to have less than an associate's degree—and their low salaries often reflect it.

That matters, because about 60 percent of 3- and 4-year-olds spend the day in a pre-K classroom, whether it's publicly funded pre-K at an elementary school, Head Start, or a private or nonprofit center. And after teachers, research on elementary and high school education has shown, school leaders are the greatest factor within a school that affects student achievement. "Program leadership is the combination of administrative, pedagogical, and leadership essentials," says Teri Talan, director of policy initiatives at the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership and a former child care center director. "In small programs, chances are the center director wears all hats."

The new report by New America's Early & Elementary Education Policy program, "A Tale of Two Pre-K Leaders: How State Policies for Center Directors and Principals Leading Pre-K Programs Differ, and Why They Shouldn't," compares expectations for principals and center directors in all 50 states and Washington, D.C. The stark differences in state policies that we found particularly affect disadvantaged children, whose families can't afford to be as selective about where they send their young kids. In the report, we made a series of recommendations to improve the preparation, development, and working conditions of child care directors and in the process to improve children's experience as well.

While there are differences between leading an elementary school and directing a child care center, these leaders share many of the same day-to-day responsibilities. Center directors essentially need to run a business, but they also need a strong understanding of how to support children's learning and development. Perhaps most important, they must be able to hire, train, and retain skilled and caring teachers. According to Talan, both principals and child care directors have "ultimate responsibility to make sure that children are developing and families are receiving the support they need. They are responsible for creating a culture of learning, where families, children, teachers and other staff are learning too."

A 2015 report from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine recommended that all early childhood leaders, center directors included, earn at least a bachelor's degree, with specialized knowledge and competencies. The federal Head Start program also recently started requiring that new directors have at least a bachelor's degree (not necessarily in early childhood education or leadership), with experience in administration and management. Unfortunately, most state requirements have not caught up with the latest research.

New America's policy scan found that seven states do not require center directors to have any formal higher education or training, as depicted in the map below. Twenty-two states require a Child Development Associate credential or less. Twelve states require at least some college coursework, and seven states require an associate's degree. Currently only New Jersey and Vermont require a bachelor's degree, and then only for large centers, with at least 30 children and at least 60 children, respectively. In Washington, D.C., a newly passed

policy requires center directors to have a B.A. with at least some coursework in early childhood by 2022, though directors who have been in their position for at least 10 years may apply for a waiver.

To be sure, a bachelor's degree is no guarantee that center directors will have gained the specialized knowledge and skills needed to lead a pre-K program. But we believe it is a step in the right direction. In a strong higher education program, future leaders should have ample opportunities to master the skills to be a strong instructional and administrative director.

At the same time, a college degree by itself is not enough. Twenty-seven states currently allow people to become center directors without any work experience in child care, as long as they have enough formal education. To be fully qualified to run such a program, directors should be required to have both education and firsthand experience. Many states do already require some time in the field; Hawaii, where Au works, for example, requires that directors have at least a CDA credential and four years of experience working with children.

Beside improving the experience of children and staff, there's a secondary reason why better preparation for child care directors is important: Center director compensation in most states is low, a reflection of these minimal education and training requirements. In Hawaii, the median salary for child care center directors is $51,000, compared to $89,000 for a school principal—a disparity that's typical of other states. Low salaries can lead to high turnover, disrupting staff and diminishing the quality of care and education. According to the 2015 National Academies report, turnover in child care settings is four times higher than in elementary school settings.

To help ensure that all children have strong early learning experiences and opportunities, state policies must catch up with the research on the importance of child care center directors' role, and the importance of their having adequate qualifications, preparation, compensation, and support. That transformation, hand in hand with increasing financing for early childhood education so that all children can attend high-quality programs, would go far in improving the experience for our youngest learners, their families, and the adults who oversee their care.

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