Rethinking credential requirements in early education [1]

Equity-based strategies for professionalizing a vulnerable workforce
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Introduction
Sen. Ben Sasse (R-Neb.) tweeted a blunt response to the District of Columbia's recent announcement that, by 2020, it would require lead teachers in licensed early childhood centers to hold associate degrees. Sasse was not alone in his scorn. The announcement generated a wave of skepticism across media outlets. News stories questioned the District's decision and voiced concern about the impact on early childhood educators and families. Newspaper comment fields were alive with bitter complaints about "oppressive" licensing practices and an encroaching nanny state determined to take over the rightful role of parents. Some worried how the new requirements would affect the cost of early education, already out of reach for many families. Others asked how workers in DC, who average about $23,000 a year in earnings, could afford college.

Most of all, the commenters doubted why an early education worker would need a college education in the first place. People without college degrees have been taking care of young children for millennia. What had changed to warrant such a drastic measure?

Quite a lot, it turns out. Children are the same as ever, but our understanding of their cognitive development has changed dramatically over the last decade. Advances in neuroscience have confirmed that children begin learning in their earliest days, and their capacity for learning can be significantly enhanced with the right mix of supports and activities. Studies show that the benefits of early learning—from higher test scores in middle and upper grades to better social and communication skills—are broad and long lasting.

As our understanding of early learning has deepened, so too have our expectations about what should transpire in early education settings. The field of early education expanded behind the discovery that the stretch from birth to age five is rife with opportunities to give children an educational leg up. Indeed, over the last few decades, early education has exploded. The percentage of young children of working mothers enrolled in formal early education and care programs outside the home doubled between 1977 and 2012 while the percentage receiving care at home from a non-relative dropped in half.

Despite its grounding in cognitive science, the field of early education has struggled with perceptions that it is babysitting by another name, something that requires little or no training. Early education advocates know otherwise. They point to solid evidence that professionally trained educators are far more effective at helping young children learn than their untrained counterparts. Without rules requiring early education centers to hire trained educators, however, the quality of the education children receive varies widely.

Few people question degree requirements for teachers in elementary schools, including in kindergarten and first grade. Advocates for degree requirements for early educators ask why we would expect anything less for the teachers of our youngest children. If a bachelor's degree is required to teach a five-year-old, why not a four-year-old? Or a three-year-old? Teachers are teachers, according to this view, and all of them need professional training before they are ready for the classroom.

Is DC's new requirement "insanely stupid," as Sasse put it, or is it long overdue recognition that teachers of our youngest learners require as much skill and training as teachers of our older children? Neither position quite captures the challenge of professionalizing the field of early education. Charges of government overreach are overblown, particularly in light of the strong evidence that early education has positive and long-term benefits. If the government is going to fund early education—and it should—it must set criteria for ensuring that those dollars go to quality providers. However, the argument that teachers in early childhood centers are the same as teachers in elementary schools and should be held to similar qualification requirements is deeply problematic. Both might be groups of teachers, but they do not represent a single workforce. Just as high school teachers and college faculty both educate, they do so in such different settings and under such distinct expectations that we do not generally think of them as a single workforce.

Teachers in early childhood centers operate in a vastly different segment of the labor market than their elementary school peers. The majority work in private settings marked by rules, funding sources, and employer relationships distinct from those of public school teachers. Most importantly, they generally earn significantly lower wages and enjoy far fewer benefits than their counterparts in elementary schools. These two groups of workers are not even represented by the same unions. In fact, only 10 percent of center-based early childhood educators are represented by a union at all, compared with half of all early and middle grade teachers.

Degree requirements might change who qualifies for a job as a lead teacher for young children, but they can't change the underlying realities of the labor market—and that is the real problem with degree requirements in early childhood education and other low-wage occupations. The way the early education market is structured, the costs of any degree requirement will be borne almost entirely by workers who will see little, if any, increase in wages. And college isn't getting any cheaper. An average associate degree at a two-year public college costs around $9,500 a year. A bachelor's degree from a four-year public institution costs about $18,600 a year. That is a steep entry price for a profession where hourly wages average less than $10 an hour.

What if there was an educational strategy that could increase early childhood educators' skills and knowledge and improve the quality of their jobs without requiring them to pay for a college degree? The city of Philadelphia is one of several governments that have embarked on a bold experiment to do exactly that. The ECE Career Pathways Partnership is led by the District 1199C Training and Upgrading Fund, a labor-management partnership serving employers and workers in the healthcare and human services sector.

The program launched in May 2017 by enrolling 30 current early childhood educators in a two-year registered apprenticeship program. Participation results in a certificate of completion from the U.S. Department of Labor, an associate degree, and lead teacher certification for Philadelphiaarea early childhood education centers. The apprentices learn on the job with the help of a worksite mentor and receive college credits as well as their regular wages. They face limited out-ofpocket costs, but they earn progressively higher wages as they advance through the program.

Apprenticeships could be game changers in early education, frontline healthcare, and other fields where a skilled workforce is essential for reaping the rewards of public investment but where wages remain low and working conditions poor. Awareness of how apprenticeship programs are designed and delivered—and how they differ in key respects from traditional higher education programs—can help policymakers identify opportunities for strategically leveraging them to professionalize workers in critical industry sectors. The aim of this paper is to expand understanding of how apprenticeships could benefit the early education sector.

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