

Child-care workers in D.C. would get more time for degree requirements ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The District of Columbia plans to extend the deadline for day-care providers to meet new education requirements, amid concerns that they are unrealistic and overly burdensome.

New proposed timelines announced Friday give child-care workers an extra one to four years to complete certification or degree requirements that are some of the most stringent in the nation. City officials also announced new supports for workers, including a partnership with Trinity University to begin offering classes in local child-care centers starting in January, so providers do not have to travel to a university campus to complete a degree.

"We are committed to supporting our child-care providers through this transition," said State Superintendent of Education Hanseul Kang.

She said the city also remains committed to improving the qualifications of the child-care workforce, which she said is a critical step toward improving the quality of care for children throughout the District.

"We know the achievement gap begins early, and staff qualifications can help address those gaps," she said.

Updated regulations that went into effect last December made an associate degree the minimum credential for a lead teacher in a child-care center. The original deadline to comply was December 2020, but new regulations, if approved by the D.C. Council, would push that back to December 2023.

The requirements have been met with anxiety and frustration by many child-care providers. Critics say many people will be unable to meet the new standards and will have to leave the profession.

And many say there is little incentive for child-care workers to get higher degrees when they are still in minimum-wage jobs. Without adequate funding for higher salaries, critics say the higher requirements will also drive up the cost of care for parents who are already paying some of the highest rates in the country. The D.C. Council is considering a plan to study the issue of compensation for child-care workers.

Education requirements also increased for many home-care providers and assistant teachers in child-care centers, who now need a Child Development Associate (CDA) certificate, considered an entry-level credential in the field. That deadline is expected to be pushed back by a year to December 2019. Home-care providers serving a larger number of children will also need to get an associate degree, but the deadline is expected to move from 2019 to 2023.

The District estimates that about 1,000 people working as lead teachers do not have an associate degree and another 1,000 working as assistant teachers and home caregivers do not have a CDA.

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 December, all lead teachers in classrooms that participate in the District's universal preschool program will be required to have bachelor's degrees - a deadline that also was extended.

The CDA typically takes between six and nine months to complete and is offered free or through scholarships. Funding is also available for child-care workers wishing to earn an associate degree, but the path is more challenging, particularly for those who need to take remedial courses or learn English before they are eligible to do college-level work.

Kang said these concerns and others are what prompted the revised time frame, and also what inspired officials to bolster supports for workers, including the partnership with Trinity University.

The Office of the State Superintendent of Education set up an "early-childhood education help desk," staffed by a longtime day-care provider, who answers questions about the new requirements and counsels workers - at their workplace or over the phone - about how to

meet those requirements.

A city-run fair on Saturday will show caregivers in wards 7 and 8 how they can earn their CDA or associate degree and how they can finance it.

Elizabeth Groginsky, assistant superintendent of early learning in the District, said the city is looking at further changes to help workers go back to school, including potentially offering a degree program in Spanish.

Kevin Hart, director of the Christian Tabernacle Child Development Center in Shaw, said moving the deadline back would be a big help.

"This will give us an opportunity to really come up with a realistic plan of how to get this done. Right now, everyone is in scramble mode," he said.

-reprinted from The Washington Post

Region: United States [3]

Tags: workforce [4]

qualifications [5]

professionalization [6]

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<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/workforce> [5] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/qualifications> [6]

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