

In the rush to improve early education, don't forget about teachers ^[1]

Quality early-childhood education demands a well-trained workforce

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EXCERPTS

Parents know that a child's early experiences greatly influence their success later in school and in life. While parents are young children's first and best teachers, they rely on early educators as partners in preparing their children for success. And when that partnership is strong, we have the building blocks for prosperous communities, states, and nations. As a result, states and communities across our country have started to raise the qualifications and credentials for early educators. That is a great thing—as long as the resources are in place to assist early educators with the real costs of preparation and professional development while the bar is being raised.

It takes more than love of teaching for a person to be an effective early educator. I started my career in child care after entering a secretarial-degree program and landing a summer internship at a nonprofit that supported early-childhood and Head Start programs. I became interested in going into early education but I didn't know the extent of knowledge, skills, and expertise it took to be a top-notch teacher until I accepted a job at one of the highest-quality child-care facilities in North Carolina. There, teachers were expected to maintain high levels of skills and continuous professional development.

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Working at such a high-quality facility required that I spend evenings and weekends attending trainings and sometimes taking college courses necessary to complete my company's required 66 in-service training hours per year. It wasn't easy. However, it became very rewarding when I became more intentional in the teaching strategies I used and saw the difference it made in the development of my pupils. Those experiences also made me realize that I needed to learn more, and that meant going back to school to earn degrees.

Developing foundational skills in young children is a complex job that requires competency and skill. That's why it is critically important to have standards for the lead early educators who are primarily responsible for fostering children's social-emotional and academic growth while overseeing the work of assistant teachers and paraprofessionals. Those who work with the youngest children must know how to build trust with children and families.

Teachers—whether they run a family-child-care home or work in a child-care center—need to understand and abide by local rules and state regulations, be able to develop and implement lesson plans, have the skills to assess children's development, design curricula that's appropriate, and have a true understanding of the National Association for the Education of Young Children's Code of Ethical Conduct, which provides a common basis for resolving the primary ethical dilemmas that early educators face. These skills and knowledge are not innate, any more than the skills and knowledge to design and build buildings are innate. Strong instructional programs must exist to help student-teachers develop the knowledge, skills, and expertise to become effective.

Many fear that raising qualifications for early educators will make the profession less diverse and no longer reflective of the children it serves. That is simply not true. In North Carolina, 44 percent of center directors and 47 percent of center early educators are people of color, according to a 2015 survey from the Child Care Services Association. Nationally, a significant percentage of our profession consists of low-income women of color who are hungry for professional advancement and will seek out opportunities if we provide the pipeline and assistance to make higher education possible. If the resources are there, we can then have diversity, a well-qualified workforce, and better outcomes for children and communities.

My experience running a child-care business in North Carolina shows that this is not impossible, as some suggest. I worked 12 hours a day and went to school at night. My family sacrificed, and my advancement was made possible by a system that made higher education possible. For example, the Child Care Services Association's T.E.A.C.H. early-childhood scholarship program—which offers a three-way partnership between the nonprofit, the scholarship recipient, and a sponsoring child-care center—paid for 80 percent of what it cost to earn my associate and bachelor's degrees while still running my business. It also reimbursed me for books, provided a travel stipend, supported release time for me to study and go to class, and provided a counselor to support my journey.

I also received support from a statewide initiative (WAGE\$), which provides education-based salary supplements to low-paid teachers,

directors, and family-child-care educators working with children from birth to age 5. The program is designed to increase retention, education, and compensation.

We need to expand these kinds of supports to provide the same resources and opportunities to all early-childhood professionals.

But it is not just funding support that early-childhood educators need to complete their education. Many also need people who can help them navigate the path to obtaining higher education, especially those for whom college and technology can be intimidating. Early educators will meet the call as long as there's a path and a system in place that helps them achieve their aspirations to be the best possible teacher for the children placed in their trust.

By raising the qualifications and increasing professional development and compensation opportunities for early educators, our communities, states, and nation have much to gain. Children who come to school with foundational skills that foster reading at grade level are on the pathway to be high school and college graduates and productive citizens.

Investing in early educators has a real return. And parents need early educators who know their children, see their potential, and know how to employ all the ways to bring it out. Children and families deserve nothing less—and we need to work together to make that happen.

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