

# 'It's my job to continue to push' for more diverse early childhood leadership<sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

California's early childhood workforce is mostly women of color — and research shows they are often concentrated in the lowest paying jobs in the field.

"A predominantly white leadership is making decisions about a field that is incredibly diverse," said Lea Austin, director of the UC Berkeley's Center for the Study of Child Care Employment.

Comprehensive data about the early childhood workforce hasn't been collected in California in more than a decade, but here's what we do know:

Los Angeles County early educators earn an average of \$14.65 an hour, according to a 2017 report from the County's Child Care Planning Committee. Home child care providers reportedly make even less — \$11.73 an hour.

In California, 52% of center-based early educators and 67% of home-based providers are African American, Latino or Asian, according to the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment.

Nationwide, the Center found African American and Latino early educators are most likely to be in the lowest-paying jobs, like assistant teachers.

The center is currently conducting a new workforce study, so for now we don't have a firm handle on the demographics of leadership in the field. But in half a dozen interviews for this story, LAist heard anecdotes from women of color in leadership roles that support Austin's statement.

Tashon McKeithan, the first new leader of the nonprofit Child Educational Center in La Cañada Flintridge since its founding in 1979, is an African American woman

"There's not many African American women who are here," McKeithan said. "But I own it and I let people know I'm speaking from this kind of perspective and I want to hear everyone's voice."

As decisions are made about how to rebuild the early childhood system, some in the field worry about who will have a seat at the table.

"There is a great risk, I think, of just perpetuating the inequities that we already have in place with new policies, new investments, new reforms, if it's the same people just talking to each other," Austin said.

## 'It's my job to continue to push'

In 1991 Tashon McKeithan was studying economics and sociology at Williams College in Massachusetts. It was a high school business law teacher that first encouraged her to consider college.

McKeithan said the microaggressions and outward racism she sometimes experienced in college became fuel for her fire.

"I feel like for me, if I give up, I'm failing a whole generation behind me," McKeithan said. "So it's my job to continue to push."

The New York City native thought she'd be "the Wall Street type." Then a college internship landed her in a Brooklyn elementary school classroom teaching third graders to read.

"I thought to myself, very selfishly, like I want to feel this way on a regular basis," McKeithan said. "I want to have this joy in my life and also just be able to give part of myself to someone."

McKeithan finished her bachelor's and went on to get her master's and a doctorate — the latter two degrees in education. She taught in New York City public schools, led numerous early childhood programs and is vice president of the Culver City Unified School District Board.

In August, she started as executive director at the Child Educational Center, a nonprofit known for its focus on play and exploration.

"My favorite thing is when I see children ... just so happy, just playing in the mud and just allowed to be children," McKeithan said. "It's grand."

McKeithan's experience creating an anti-bias curriculum was one aspect of her career that stood out to the board, who all have or had kids attending the center.

"She had talked about initiatives she'd done and other places to really start reflecting on an organization's diversity, equity, inclusion, and that's something we, we really want to embrace," said Board President Katie Fallin Kenyon.

McKeithan said the new role is an opportunity to become more of an advocate for access to the type of education offered at the center, which uses outdoor classrooms as part of its play-based approach to education.

"I think when people think of outdoor classrooms, it's all the stereotypes kind of come in, it's [for] people with means," McKeithan said.

She said one way to spread their methods is through professional development programs for other early childhood educators.

At the same time, McKeithan must also guide the center through a pandemic that has totally upended the child care industry. Child care centers often rely on student tuition and as a safety precaution during the coronavirus pandemic, class sizes are limited and some families have yet to return.

"There's moments where I'm human and there's moments of sort of, you know, weakness that I say, 'Oh, my gosh, I just can't move forward.' And then I say, 'Well, why am I here? Why am I doing this?'"

The answer is for the children she serves and her middle school-aged daughter.

"I do this because it's important for her to see how to create change, and that she is powerful, and that it can take one person," McKeithan said.

### **'What we have to gain is everything'**

In the 2017-18 school year, 76% of California kindergarteners were African American, Native American, Asian, Filipino, Pacific Islander, Latino or multi-racial.

"The people that look most like the kids are usually the assistants," said Mary Anne Doan, director of the California Early Childhood Mentor Program. There's research that shows students can benefit from teachers that look like them and Doan believes this is true of leadership as well.

"I think what we have to gain is everything. I think what we have to gain is healthy children, not just physically, but ... mentally, emotionally, spiritually, healthy children who have a great image of themselves, who understand that they have unlimited potential, and that they can do anything."

The Center for the Study of Child Care Employment's Lea Austin said one of the barriers that prevents child care workers who are making poverty-level wages from rising in the ranks is access to higher education.

The job of leading an early childhood program comes with new challenges teachers might not have experienced before, like managing staff, balancing a budget, planning for emergencies and communicating with state licensing agencies. Doan, an educator with 40 years experience, said there are also more unique problems to solve including broken toilets, leaking roofs and the occasional escaped pet snake.

And there are fewer professional development programs that can help early educators navigate these trials compared to the K-12 field.

Here are some of the opportunities in Southern California:

The California Early Childhood Mentor Program is based out of 104 community colleges across the state, including those in Southern California. There's a program that connects early childhood education students with mentor teachers and one that pairs directors to mentors in the field.

The UCLA Head Start Management Fellows Program recruits leaders nationwide from the federally funded early education program for an annual 12-day training in topics including finance, project management, strategy, marketing, human resources and data analysis.

Cal State Northridge's Early Childhood Education Partnerships for Excellence program, is part of the university's master's program. It pairs mentors working in the field with graduate students who collaborate to provide free consultation to child care programs in the community.

Delia Vicente, the executive director of UCLA's Early Head Start programs, is one of the 1,600 people who've gone through the university's Head Start Management Fellows Program. She said she benefited from supervisors who supported her ideas and now she's trying to pass that on.

"I'm constantly asking my team 'What do you want to do when you grow up some more?'" Vicente said.

It's a question she borrowed from her young son. When he asked it five years ago, it challenged her to start teaching and create more programs.

"When somebody asks you that, then you go get it," Vicente said. "Then you're like, 'OK I'm motivated now. Now I know where I'm going.'"

(If you want more leadership tips from Vicente and the other people we interviewed for this story, check this out.)

Austin said as she interviewed early childhood leaders for her doctoral dissertation, they often pointed to the importance of mentorship and sharing knowledge with the younger generation, but that it was only the leaders of color who specifically talked about the need to diversify leadership.

"Everybody has to be thinking about this issue," Austin said.

"To ask people to assume more debt as they're teaching and working in classrooms without the guarantee of this better job or access to another job, that's a really difficult and challenging thing to ask people to do and a risk that many may not be willing to take," Austin said.

**Region:** United States <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** diversity <sup>[4]</sup>

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