

Staffing a universal preschool program will be no small task ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

President Obama's rhetorical plea for universal preschool has yet to be translated into an actionable policy proposal, but we can reasonably assume that any expansion of early learning services for young children will create a demand for more preschool teachers. And not just more teachers but trained ones: Twenty-nine state-funded preschool programs currently require educators with a bachelor's degree, and many of them demand additional teacher certification. Two days after the State of the Union, the president called for programs staffed by "highly qualified, educated" teachers, saying, "This is not babysitting. This is teaching."

Prospective teachers may find their way to the preschool classroom via multiple pathways, depending on their educational and work experience. Each pathway, however, will require specific professional development opportunities and attendant resources to ensure that teachers, regardless of their route to preschool, can effectively promote children's learning. For instance, some teachers currently working in kindergarten and the early elementary grades might choose, or find themselves assigned to, a classroom of 4-year-olds. Because these teachers would likely only have student teaching experience in the elementary (K-3) grades, additional practice and coursework on early childhood education and development combined with classroom mentoring will likely be in order.

Late elementary and secondary school teachers could also find themselves at the preschool door, depending on state certification policies and union and district practices, which might include moving less effective teachers of older children to "non-testing" age groups. California, for example, recently raised the age of kindergarten entry to 5 and launched transitional kindergarten to meet its obligation to 4-year-olds born in the fall who no longer qualified for kindergarten entry. There is no specific preschool training or certification required for transitional kindergarten teachers; however, many districts are initiating professional development projects to ensure that teachers experienced working with 10-year-olds, for example, can learn how to implement more appropriate instructional strategies for younger children than the more formal and didactic approaches common in the older grades. Such efforts, and possibly some additional coursework or certification, will be necessary for this population of teachers.

As noted in a recently released study about Boston Public Schools' prekindergarten program, preschool works to narrow the achievement gap when teachers are highly qualified and well-paid. However, salaries for teachers of young children are more often deplorably low, even for those who have made a considerable investment in their education and training. And with poor compensation comes high teacher turnover and low instructional quality, both of which impede children's development and learning. If comparable pay with K-12 teachers, as proposed by the White House, survives the policy process, many current teachers who hold bachelor's degrees and are working in Head Start and private preschool programs (about one-quarter of the current early care and education workforce) are likely to stampede toward their new local public preschool and the better pay and benefits it will provide.

These teachers, who currently are not required to complete state teacher certification requirements, may be expected to do so. They are also likely to need classroom mentoring and other professional development opportunities depending on how recently they earned their degrees, and whether or not their degrees included a pedagogical focus on young children. Many former early childhood teachers pushed from the classroom for financial reasons could also decide to return to preschool teaching if it offers more than a poverty-level wage. They, of course, will need to update their training and skills depending on how long it has been since they taught.

Another important pathway to preschool teaching will be taken by current child care and preschool teachers and teaching assistants without four-year degrees who are eager to advance their education. In my experience as a researcher, these teachers are most often women of color, many of whom are bilingual, reflecting the languages and cultures of the increasingly diverse population of young children in the U.S.; if adequately supported to achieve degrees, they will help to diversify the predominately white, non-Hispanic teacher workforce. New Jersey, for example, offered supports such as financial assistance, academic counseling and tutoring to child care providers and Head Start teachers who wished to teach preschool in the state's public schools. The success of the program demonstrated that low-paid, working adults could achieve their educational goals.

Last, but not least, today's younger college students could follow a path to preschool education, if jobs awaiting graduates pay salaries commensurate to teachers of older children. If not, college students interested in teaching young children, like countless others before them, will veer toward older grades because they offer higher compensation and status.

While the focus has been on the president's call for universal preschool, his proposal also includes expanding and improving early learning programs for younger children attending child care and Early Head Start and through home visiting. Along with everything that must be done to expand public preschool offerings, we need to ensure that process doesn't drain well-trained early educators away from the

vulnerable population of babies, toddlers and 3-year-olds whose brains are developing at a dazzling pace. This will be the most devilish detail to get right.

Planning and investment in the teacher preparation infrastructure must be a feature of new preschool policy. This should involve both expanding and revamping courses of study to include a focus on younger children, and establishing better programs to ensure the competence of those professionals who will be needed to train and mentor prospective preschool teachers.

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