

Child care workforce increasingly diverse, as are children served

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EXCERPTS

Oregon's early childhood education and care workforce is increasingly diverse, with the number of workers who are immigrants growing more than four-fold between 1990 and 2011-13, according to a newly released report from the Migration Policy Institute.

The institute, an independent, nonpartisan think tank based in Washington, D.C., on Tuesday released "Immigrant and Refugee Workers in the Early Childhood Field: Taking a Closer Look."

According to the report, less than 5 percent of Oregon's early childhood education and care workers were immigrants. By 2011-13, that percentage had risen to about 17 percent - 4,000 out of a total 23,000 early childhood education and care workers. That percentage is nearly on par with the 18 percent of all early childhood education and care workers nationwide who are immigrants.

During the same time period, the number of children under 6 from immigrant or refugee families also increased nationally, nearly doubling from 14 percent in 1990 to 25 percent in 2011-13. In Oregon, the percentage of so-called immigrant-origin children under 6 went from about 8 percent in 1990 to just under 25 percent in 2011-13. Oregon now ranks 16th among the states for its percentage of children under 6 who come from immigrant or refugee families.

The increased diversity among both workers and children has important policy implications for the early childhood field, according to several panelists who spoke during a webinar on the report on Tuesday: As states including Oregon work to increase the quality of early childhood education and care, they'll need to take into account what the report called "the breadth of ethnic and linguistic diversity" among children and their child care providers or preschool teachers.

For instance, the majority of immigrant child care workers are employed in home- and family-based child care programs. Similarly, immigrant children are more likely to be enrolled in home- and family-based child care programs than in child care centers.

In a field where pay is already low, workers earn the lowest wages in home- and family-based child care programs, the panelists said. And that affects the quality of the care the children in those programs receive, said Maki Park, a policy analyst at the Migration Policy Institute.

"Low wages are so clearly linked to lower program quality," she said. "These are the most influential years in terms of bang for the buck."

Another concern is that about 20 percent of early childhood education and care workers who are immigrants have both limited English proficiency and low education. Without carefully planned strategies for ways that these workers can meet increasingly strict requirements, such as associate and bachelor's degrees, it's likely that they will be left behind, Park said, and so will the children in their care.

The panel also addressed the national shift toward implementing quality ratings systems for child care and preschool providers - systems that often include standards for equity, diversity and inclusion. Oregon, for example, is in the midst of a pilot quality ratings system for licensed child care providers and has a bill before the Legislature, House Bill 2015, with a proposed amendment that would require development and implementation of a similar system for unlicensed providers that receive subsidies. But unless the systems' training and technical assistance make sure to target diverse early childhood education and care workers with multi-lingual trainings and other outreach, Park said, they will be left out.

The report is important, said Marcy Whitebook, director of the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment at the University of California Berkeley, because it pulls together such disparate strands. It's not just a question of wanting to improve the overall quality of early childhood education and care, she said.

"We have to really think about who's in the workforce ... what are their different needs, how do we really think about opportunities for people in the workforce so that we have a workforce that is really responsive to the needs of our children," Whitebook said.

- reprinted from the Oregonian

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