# Teaching the Teachers of Our Youngest Children

The State of Early Childhood Higher Education in Mississippi

## Highlights

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CSCCE

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## The State of Early Childhood Higher Education in Mississippi, Highlights

The Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (CSCCE) was founded in 1999 to focus on achieving comprehensive public investments that enable and reward the early childhood workforce to deliver high-quality care and education for all children. To achieve this goal, CSCCE conducts cutting-edge research and proposes policy solutions aimed at improving how our nation prepares, supports, and rewards the early care and education workforce to ensure young children's optimal development.
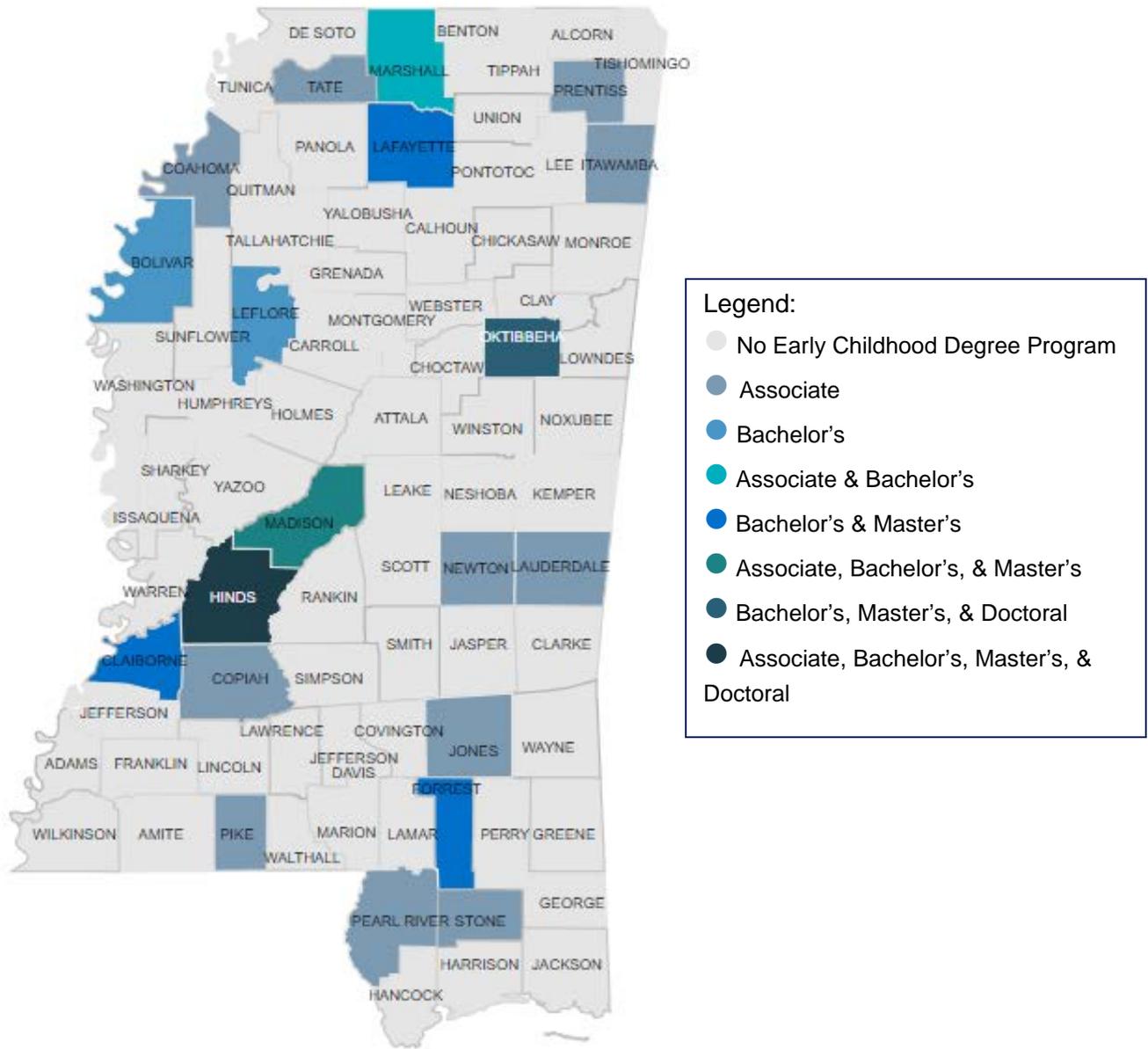
# Introduction

The importance of early care and education (ECE) to children's lifelong learning and to our nation's economic well-being is recognized up to the highest levels of government and in businesses, schools, and living rooms across the country. This understanding represents a dramatic shift from earlier decades and carries with it heightened expectations for what teachers of young children should know and be able to do,[1] especially in light of mounting evidence about inadequate and unequal educational quality for many children, particularly those of color and those living in low-income families.[2]

The state of Mississippi is home to more than 235,000 children under the age of six.[3] More than 154,000 of these children have all available parents in the workforce and, thus, potentially need child care.[4] Like many states in recent years, Mississippi has committed public and private resources toward multiple efforts to improve ECE services, including early education degree and certification programs, in order to improve the preparation of their graduates to meet the complex needs of young children.[5] Critical to these efforts is the establishment of a well-coordinated, comprehensive professional preparation and development system that can prepare and support an incoming generation of educators, while also strengthening the skills of the existing early education workforce. Institutions of higher education are crucial to meeting the evolving and increasing demands identified as improving developmental and learning outcomes for the state's young child population.

The following pages highlight findings from the *Mississippi Early Childhood Higher Education Inventory* and the extent to which early childhood degree programs offer course content and learning experiences that are associated with effective teacher preparation. The full narrative report, *Teaching the Teachers of Our Youngest Children: The State of Early Childhood Higher Education in Mississippi*, presents the full findings.

# Distribution of Mississippi Early Childhood Degree Programs



Legend:

○ No Early Childhood Degree Program

● Associate

● Bachelor's

● Associate & Bachelor's

● Bachelor's & Master's

● Associate, Bachelor's, & Master's

● Bachelor's, Master's, & Doctoral

● Associate, Bachelor's, Master's, & Doctoral

# Part 1: Early Childhood Higher Education, Mapping the Scene

*This section of the report examines program offerings, faculty characteristics, student supports, and institutional challenges.*

## FINDING ONE: PROGRAM OFFERINGS
Goals, Course Content, and Age-Group Focus

Nearly one-half of Mississippi early childhood degree programs identify their primary goal as teacher preparation, while most remaining programs aim to prepare students for multiple roles in many types of settings. While programs offer a range of topics related to child development and teaching approaches, they tend to require more content focused on preschool-age children than infants and toddlers or school-age children. In general, associate degree programs are more likely than upper-level programs to offer content related to administration and leadership. More than one-half of programs incorporate state or national standards related to early math and/or family engagement into their curricula.

## FINDING TWO: FIELD-BASED LEARNING EXPERIENCES
Requirements and Age-Group Focus

Most associate and upper-level degree programs in early childhood require students to complete one or more practicum experiences. In addition, most associate degree programs require a student teaching experience. There is little consistency as to the duration and frequency of either type of field-based learning experience. Programs are more likely to require field experiences to have an age-group focus on preschool-age children than infants and toddlers or school-age children, especially at the associate degree level. While programs typically require field experiences to involve supporting children's math, literacy, and socioemotional development, programs are less likely to require field experiences to involve developing partnerships with families and collaborating with community organizations.

## FINDING THREE: PORTRAIT OF FACULTY
Employment Status, Demographics, and Professional Background

Mississippi early childhood degree programs are staffed with a mix of part-time and full-time faculty. Faculty members primarily identified as white/Caucasian, although one-third of faculty members identified as black/African American. Nearly all faculty members identified as female, and all faculty members reported that they were monolingual, speaking only English. Most faculty members have had graduate education specific to early childhood, and they report having worked in an array of ECE professional roles in the past decade.

## FINDING FOUR: FACULTY PERSPECTIVES AND EXPERTISE
Faculty Perspectives on Course Content, Teaching Experience and Capacity, Professional Development Background, and Professional Development Interests

Mississippi early childhood higher education faculty were more likely to consider content related to preparing teachers to work with families of various ethnic, racial, and cultural backgrounds important relative to other course content. In general, faculty members reported feeling most capable of preparing teachers to work with preschool-age children. Mississippi early childhood higher education faculty are particularly interested in professional development related to helping practitioners who struggle with mathematics, teaching practitioners to use assessment to inform instruction, and teaching practitioners to work with children with special needs.

## FINDING FIVE: SUPPORTING STUDENTS
Services Offered and Program Articulation

Mississippi early childhood degree programs offer multiple support services to help students access resources and strengthen their academic skills. More than one-half of all programs offer the following services specifically for early childhood education students: academic counseling, financial aid counseling, academic tutoring in math, or academic tutoring in reading/writing. These services are more common among associate degree programs than upper-level programs. While most programs across degree levels reported that they had articulation agreements for early childhood education students, associate degree programs were far more likely than upper-level degree programs to report challenges with articulation.

## FINDING SIX: PROGRAM CHALLENGES
Faculty and Program Needs

Mississippi early childhood degree programs experience challenges related to faculty resources. More than one-half of upper-level program leads reported a need for additional faculty expertise teaching young children who are dual language learners and working with college students who are English-language learners. Almost one-half of all program leads, including most program leads at the associate degree level, indicated that the low pay of the ECE field has led to challenges recruiting and retaining students. In addition, most faculty reported a need for additional financial resources for students.

# Part 2: Early Childhood Higher Education, An Evolving Landscape

*This section of the report examines how institutions of higher education are adapting to emerging research in three key domains: family engagement, early mathematics, and dual language learners.*

**FINDING SEVEN: FAMILY ENGAGEMENT**
Required Offerings, Faculty Attitudes, Teaching Experience, and Professional Development Interests

Faculty members generally consider the inclusion of family engagement to be very important in the preparation of early childhood teachers. Multiple topics related to family engagement are embedded in degree programs, and programs were most likely to require an age-group focus on preschool-age children for these topics. Nearly all faculty members reported feeling capable of teaching family engagement content and having recent experience teaching this topic. Faculty members expressed high interest in professional development topics related to working with families exposed to trauma and working with families of children with special needs.

**FINDING EIGHT: EARLY MATHEMATICS**
Required Offerings, Faculty Attitudes, Teaching Experience, and Professional Development Interests

Faculty were more likely to rate the inclusion of early mathematics as very important relative to other content areas for practitioners working with school-age children, and they also tended to rate it very important for practitioners working with preschoolers. However, they were far less likely to consider early mathematics as very important for infants and toddlers. Most faculty members considered themselves prepared to teach early math content to practitioners working with preschool-age children, but somewhat less likely to be confident in their ability to teach early math to practitioners working with infants, toddlers, and school-age children. Most faculty reported high interest in professional development on strategies to help practitioners who struggle with mathematics build confidence in their ability to facilitate children's mathematical understanding and skill.

**FINDING NINE: DUAL LANGUAGE LEARNERS**
Required Offerings, Faculty Attitudes, Teaching Experience, and Professional Development Interests

Most degree program curricula require various dual language learner (DLL) topics, and most faculty members consider the inclusion of teaching young DLLs to be important in the preparation of teachers. However, faculty reported feeling less prepared to teach this content area than the other content areas included in the *Inventory*. In addition, fewer than one-half of faculty members have participated in professional development related to DLLs recently, though they reported some interest in future professional development opportunities.

# Recommendations

Here, we outline an approach toward strengthening early childhood workforce development in Mississippi, with an emphasis on higher education. The efforts should be coordinated among key stakeholders in the state, including the Mississippi Office of Early Childhood Education, and representatives from the higher education community, including the Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning and the Mississippi Community College Board. These recommendations are predicated on identifying new resources from state, federal, and philanthropic sources.

## 1. Unify expectations for early childhood workforce preparation

- Expand the pre-K endorsement to begin at birth and go through preschool, with the potential option to overlap with the early elementary grades;
- Establish a more uniform system for certifying teachers and administrators throughout the state that reflects foundational knowledge for early educators across age groups and auspices aligned with the Mississippi Early Learning Guidelines and Standards and that articulates a streamlined pathway for lead and advanced teacher, administrator, and professional support roles; and
- Align early education degree program course requirements with state standards and competencies, such as the Mississippi Early Learning Standards for Three-Year-Olds and Four-Year-Olds.

## 2. Strengthen program content and equity across the age span

Provide resources to develop and support participation in faculty professional development to enable faculty members across degree programs and institutions to collaborate with other experts to develop and enhance program content standards related to:

- **Child Development and Pedagogy,** preparing teachers to work with children of different ages, including:
    - Infant development and learning across multiple domains; and
    - Methods of teaching and pedagogy for children of different ages;
- **Early Mathematics,** addressing:
    - Children's mathematical understanding from infancy through early elementary grades; and
    - Developmentally appropriate pedagogy for early mathematics instruction across the birth-to-age-eight age span;

- **Dual Language Learners,** emphasizing:
    - Recognition of the value and importance of supporting children's home-language development as they also learn English, with an emphasis on very young children;
    - Strategies for using observation and assessment in teaching young dual language learners and strategies to support the mathematical, literacy, language, cognitive, and socioemotional development of young dual language learners; and
    - An understanding of the strengths and needs of adults from diverse linguistic, racial/ethnic, and cultural backgrounds to support their entry and retention in the ECE field; and
- **Trauma**, preparing practitioners to work with children and families who have experienced trauma.

## 3. Strengthen the application of field-based learning experiences

- Provide resources and support to faculty members across degree programs and institutions to develop degree program standards for the timing, frequency, and duration of field-based experiences, with opportunities focused on children from infancy through preschool;
- Develop differentiated field experiences for pre- and in-service students. For pre-service students, extend more opportunities for in-depth student teaching experiences, and for in-service students, explore and implement models that accommodate those already working in classrooms, while also providing quality experiences (e.g., the California Early Childhood Mentor Program);
- Implement additional opportunities for student teaching experiences, in which students are engaged in classrooms for a longer period of time and are given increasing responsibility related to curriculum development, instruction, and assessment; and
- Provide field-based learning opportunities for students to engage with:
    - Infants and toddlers;
    - Children with special needs;
    - Children who are dual language learners;
    - Families; and
    - Community organizations that support children and families.

## 4. Provide increased access and supports for students

Implement or expand the following supports for early childhood education students across the state to ensure that a diverse current and incoming workforce can successfully meet standards and attain competency:

- Blended and non-traditional formats for degree programs, including increased online options for students residing in communities without access to a campus;
- Alternative class schedules and locations;
- Academic counseling;
- Additional support for students who struggle to pass standardized tests necessary for licensure (e.g., contextualized math course options, ACT and/or Praxis preparation courses);
- Cohort models; and
- Financial resources for students.

## 5. Establish partnerships among and improve articulation agreements between two- and four-year institutions

- Ensure that all community colleges have a comprehensive articulation agreement with a four-year college or university that is geographically accessible to students; and
- Offer dedicated advising staff who can provide students with the necessary guidance to take full advantage of articulation agreements, including information on the transfer process, required courses, and accepted credits.

## 6. Build a leadership pipeline reflective of the diversity of the state's ECE practitioner and child populations

- Identify the appropriate course of study and degree level (associate, bachelor's, graduate) for each leadership role based on specific skills and knowledge;
- Ensure training and ongoing professional opportunities for faculty teaching coursework on supervision, administration, and leadership development in undergraduate and graduate degree programs;
- Identify options to create leadership pathways and/or programs;
- Ensure an adequate number of degree programs at both the undergraduate and graduate level that offer the appropriate course content;
- Investigate and develop strategies used in other professions (e.g., health, education, social welfare) to create faculty development programs — such as a fellowship or grant — intended to increase ethnic and linguistic diversity among faculty, particularly in key leadership positions;
- Identify options to increase faculty expertise in working with college students, young children, and families of diverse racial, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds; and
- Provide opportunities for faculty to pursue professional development related to teaching dual language learners, including strategies to develop the language, literacy, mathematical, and cognitive development of this population.

## 7. Increase faculty supports

- Develop strategies to support an increase in the number of full-time faculty members, with sufficient release time, who can share in administrative responsibilities;
- Establish an ongoing fund with well-articulated expectations for faculty members' professional development honoraria and program improvement grants;
- Develop additional opportunities for faculty professional development in the areas of helping practitioners who struggle with mathematics, teaching practitioners how to effectively use assessment to inform and individualize their instruction, and teaching practitioners to work with children with special needs; and
- Ensure adequate resources, including funding, staffing, and dedicated time for program planning and improvement.

# Endnotes

A complete list of references can be found in the full report.

[1] Whitebook, M., Phillips, D., & Howes, C. (2014). *Worthy Work, STILL Unlivable Wages: The Early Childhood Workforce 25 Years after the National Child Care Staffing Study.* Berkeley, CA: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley. Retrieved from http://cscce.berkeley.edu/files/2014/ReportFINAL.pdf.

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[5] Hyson, M., Horm, D.M., & Winton, P.J. (2012). Higher education for early childhood educators and outcomes for young children: Pathways toward greater effectiveness. In Pianta, R. (Ed.), *Handbook of Early Childhood Education* (pp. 553-583). New York, NY: The Guilford Press; Ray, A., Bowman, B., & Robbins, J. (2006). *Preparing Early Childhood Teachers to Successfully Educate All Children: The Contribution of Four-Year Undergraduate Teacher Preparation Programs.* New York, NY: Foundation for Child Development & Chicago, IL: Erikson Institute.

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