



*Four practices to increase the pool of skilled early educators stand out as promising.*

**Amaya Garcia with Cara Sklar**

## **Preparing Pre-K Teachers: Policy Considerations and Strategies**

Children across the nation lack access to high-quality pre-K programs that can support their development and build foundational skills for elementary

school. The pandemic set pre-K enrollment and funding back further, with an enrollment decline of nearly 300,000 children and state spending remaining

relatively flat.<sup>1</sup> As children and families return to public pre-K, state policymakers must focus on investing in program expansion and strengthening quality. Those efforts should start with a pre-K teacher workforce that is well prepared and fairly compensated.

In recent years, early childhood education (ECE) advocates have pushed for credential requirements to enhance the skills and competencies of early educators. A seminal 2015 National Academies report, which recommended requiring bachelor degrees, has faced pushback, given the barriers that many early educators face in earning a degree.<sup>2</sup> These barriers include low wages that put the cost of paying tuition out of reach, the need to work full-time, familial obligations, a lack of familiarity and knowledge of available programs, and navigating admissions requirements.<sup>3</sup>

Further complicating efforts to support pre-K teachers' degree attainment is the fact that credential and training requirements vary tremendously.<sup>4</sup> Of the states that offer a publicly funded pre-K program, 18 do not require a bachelor's degree and certification for all lead teachers. There are also within-state differences, with 11 states setting higher expectations for teachers working in pre-K programs in public schools than for those who work in community-based programs. Every state pre-K program uses a mixed-delivery model in which programs are offered across schools, child care centers, and family child care homes. This adds an element of complexity to teacher preparation and credentialing that is uncommon in the K-12 system.

At the same time, early educator compensation is low and not necessarily tied to credentials and attainment. In many states, pre-K teachers are paid differently depending on the setting in which they work.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, too few educators are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and credentials required to teach pre-K, and enrollment in teacher preparation programs has declined overall, with some universities choosing to eliminate programs in ECE entirely.<sup>6</sup>

Teacher preparation is quickly changing, with new models emerging to develop more accessible, affordable, flexible pathways. While programs are often labeled as traditional (e.g., four-year undergraduate programs) or alternative (e.g., fast-track programs for career

changers), these classifications do not reflect the diversity of these new models.

We will describe four of these approaches: allowing community colleges to confer bachelor's degrees, supporting paid work-based training through registered apprenticeships, funding grow-your-own programs that remove barriers for teachers within communities, and encouraging institutions of higher education (IHEs) to collaborate on developing aligned, articulated pathways.

## Community College Baccalaureates

In 25 states, community college baccalaureate (CCB) programs allow community colleges to offer four-year bachelor's degree programs. Ten states currently offer programs in teacher education, with Florida offering the most, at 47 programs that span early education, elementary education, secondary education, and special education.<sup>7</sup> These state-level policies arose out of a need to increase access to four-year degree programs for students that higher education institutions have historically underserved.<sup>8</sup>

Because they eliminate transfer gaps between two- and four-year institutions, CCB programs can make earning a bachelor's degree more straightforward. In addition, the programs are much more affordable, which helps expand access, particularly for nontraditional students. In California, for example, a survey conducted by the state's Legislative Analyst's Office found that students perceived the low cost to be the biggest benefit of CCB and that 51 percent of students reported that they would not have gone on to get a bachelor's degree if it had not been offered at their community college.<sup>9</sup> A study examining CCB programs in Florida and Washington suggested that the programs are an entry point for promoting greater access to bachelor degrees for students of color.<sup>10</sup>

Washington adopted its CCB policy to help grow their teacher workforce and address pressing shortages. For example, Highline College, close to Seattle, offers a bachelor of applied science in ECE, which includes an option to earn a P-3 endorsement and licensure but also has a pathway for individuals who want to earn a bachelor's but do not need licensure. And in Arizona, which just approved CCB programs,

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Mesa Community College will launch a bachelor of arts program in ECE with a focus on dual language instruction.

Many policymakers have embraced CCB as a strategy to meet employer needs and local workforce demands, including in education. As states seek strategies to attract more individuals to teach, particularly early childhood educators who need a low-cost option, CCB should be examined.

## Registered Apprenticeship

Registered apprenticeship is a highly effective “earn-while-you-learn” workforce development strategy. ECE apprenticeships are a particularly attractive model for the incumbent workforce since they build on prior experience, offer support for nontraditional adult learners, and treat employment as a central asset to degree attainment rather than a barrier.<sup>11</sup> Typically lasting two to three years, registered apprenticeships have several core components: employer involvement; paid, on-the-job learning under the supervision of skilled mentors; related, classroom-based instruction often delivered in partnership with a community college; rewards for skill gains assessed against established competency standards; and, upon completion, a portable, industry-recognized credential, post-secondary credit, or degree.<sup>12</sup>

To benefit the early childhood workforce most, an apprenticeship program of study should be aligned with state ECE competencies. Quality apprenticeships either include credit-bearing, transferable coursework that positions learners to earn further postsecondary credentials (college-connected apprenticeship) or are designed to seamlessly lead to an associate or bachelor’s degree (degree apprenticeship).

Both college-connected and degree apprenticeship models must involve higher education partners in articulation agreements that ensure that coursework, credits, and degrees transfer between institutions. And the culminating degree, license, or credential should be recognized at the state or national level, be portable between jurisdictions, and qualify the recipient for employment across early learning settings. One of the nation’s most well-regarded programs, the Pennsylvania Early Childhood

Education Apprenticeship Program, lets educators transition from a child development associate credential to an associate degree to a bachelor’s degree.<sup>13</sup>

## Grow Your Own

Grow-your-own programs are an increasingly popular strategy for recruiting and preparing racially and linguistically diverse teachers already living in the communities they would serve. States and localities have implemented these programs to expand the pool of well-prepared educators who understand the needs of their students and families. Many of these future educators are already working in local schools or child care programs but have not been able to earn a teaching credential due to structural barriers and inequities. To address these barriers, grow-your-own programs may provide financial assistance, paid job-embedded learning, academic advising, flexible scheduling for courses, mentorship, tutoring, test preparation, and a cohort model. In addition, many programs employ navigators that can tailor support for individual candidates.

Partners often cocreate grow-your-own programs to address specific workforce needs in the community, such as bilingual teachers, special education teachers, and pre-K teachers, and can use a variety of preparation approaches. Chicago Public Schools launched a bilingual teacher residency program in summer 2018 in partnership with the National Center for Teacher Residencies and National Louis University.<sup>14</sup> Born out of Chicago’s need to expand public pre-K and identify culturally competent, bilingual teachers to serve young English learners, the program recruits local paraeducators to spend a year working with a mentor teacher while taking classes that will lead to a master’s degree and educator license. They are provided a modest salary to help cover living expenses and discounted tuition. The program’s design puts paraeducators on a faster track to earning a teaching license and boosting pay, which serves as an incentive to participate.

Over 30 states plus the District of Columbia fund grow-your-own program development and expansion or provide direct scholarship support to teacher candidates.<sup>15</sup> However, these

programs heavily focus on preparing educators who will work in public schools—a potential limitation for preparing pre-K teachers who work in other settings. Similarly, many teacher residency programs are designed as graduate-level programs, which restricts participation to those with bachelor’s degrees. Policymakers should consider how to expand existing grant and scholarship programs to include teachers working in different settings.

## Higher Education Consortia and Collaboratives

A handful of states are strengthening alignment and fostering collaboration among IHEs. The lack of alignment has produced a mixed landscape of degree programs, with uneven quality in curriculum and clinical experiences. IHE consortia help foster alignment and address key barriers to earning credentials: lack of articulation between community colleges and four-year institutions, a lack of guidance and academic support, rigid course schedules that do not serve working adults well, and unpaid student teaching requirements.<sup>16</sup>

In 2021, the Illinois General Assembly passed the Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity Act, which codified a partnership between public universities, community colleges, and any private university that wants to opt in to meet the needs of the early childhood workforce by “streamlining, coordinating, and improving the accessibility of degree completion pathways” among IHEs in the state.<sup>17</sup> Regional hubs will be developed to allow students to take courses at any institution in the hub and make it easier for students to access a class when they need it and in the format (in-person, hybrid, online) that works for them. In addition, universities in the consortium will be expected to accept the full transfer of associate of applied science degrees and parallel credentials obtained through the state’s Gateways to Opportunity program. Students will also receive direct support from navigators, who will assist with the application and financial aid process, and program coaches/mentors, who will help students stay on track and graduate. In addition, an existing Illinois policy allows student teachers to be paid during their clinical training, which consortium members can leverage.

Similarly, the University of Colorado–Denver is leading an effort to remove systemic barriers within higher education and state policy to attaining degrees in Colorado. In partnership with four other Colorado IHEs, it launched a consortium to develop and implement curriculum enhancements and alignment, expand access to bachelor’s degrees, and identify and address barriers to degree persistence. Through online bachelor’s degrees and teacher residencies, each educator preparation program is piloting distinct approaches to offer in-depth clinical training and mentoring, facilitate greater access in rural communities, use grow-your-own strategies, and provide credit for prior learning. The goal is to scale these practices in the state and to make credit transfers between IHEs more seamless. While these efforts are still under way, they do offer models for how to foster stronger alignment within higher education and ultimately strengthen pre-K teacher pathways.

## Opportunities for State Leaders

Thus state education leaders have a role in strengthening pre-K teacher recruitment, preparation, and retention. They can do the following:

- convene stakeholders—including teachers—in public meetings, special sessions, or working groups to highlight successful recruitment and preparation efforts and identify continuing needs, including funding for programs that prepare pre-K teachers;
- advocate for expansion of lower cost pathways for earning a teaching degree;
- create teacher certification and licensure systems that offer multiple approaches to measuring educator skills and competencies;
- make information on available educator preparation pathways, financial assistance, and requirements easily accessible and available in multiple languages (as needed);
- work with relevant agencies to produce an annual teacher workforce supply/demand report that is inclusive of ECE programs within and outside public schools;
- engage in efforts to boost teacher compensation and create salary parity for pre-K teachers working in different settings and with similar qualifications;

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- align early educator preparation coursework with state-developed ECE competencies;
- examine pre-K teacher credential and licensure requirements across settings to identify potential gaps and opportunities for alignment;
- promote the development of consortia or collaboratives among IHEs and related educator preparation providers to create stronger alignment between programs;
- identify resources to support apprenticeship start-up costs and fund intermediary organizations to lead the partnerships;
- consider including apprenticeships in federal system-building grants such as the Preschool Development Grant Birth to Five, Child Care Development Block Grant, and Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act; and
- convene IHEs, workforce investment boards, and early childhood task forces to consider adding registered apprenticeships as part of the ECE career pathway.

As the country emerges from the pandemic, developing high-quality ECE preparation pathways takes on added urgency. Children are entering pre-K with a wider range of behaviors and abilities than ever, and they need teachers who understand early development and have the skills to support children’s learning and growth. While states have largely led on funding and expansion of universal pre-K, a large federal investment in child care and pre-K could create even more pressure to grow the workforce and strengthen degree programs.

But these efforts must be paired with reform of compensation systems so that pre-K teachers are paid the same across settings and at a level equal to K-12 teachers. Members of state boards of education should use their authority to identify resources and pursue practices that give young children the chance to have a nurturing relationship with a teacher who helps them thrive. ■

<sup>1</sup>Allison H. Friedman-Krauss et al., “The State of Preschool 2021: State Preschool Yearbook” (New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research, 2022).

<sup>2</sup>National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine, *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation* (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2015); National Association for the Education of Young Children and Education Trust, *Increasing Qualifications, Centering Equity Experiences*

and *Advice from Early Childhood Educators of Color* (Washington, DC: NAEYC, 2019).

<sup>3</sup>Kaylan Connally et al., “Teacher Talent Untapped: Multilingual Paraprofessionals Speak about the Barriers to Entering the Profession” (Washington, DC: New America, January 2017).

<sup>4</sup>Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, Bellwether Education Partners, and National Institute for Early Education Research, “Early Educator Preparation Landscape” (Early Educator Investment Collaborative, 2020), 6, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED614020.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup>Suzann Morris and Linda Smith, “Examples of Mixed-Delivery Early Care and Education Systems,” blog post (Washington, DC: Bipartisan Policy Center, June 17, 2021).

<sup>6</sup>Colleen Flaherty, “When Education Programs Bite the Dust,” *Inside Higher Ed*, January 28, 2022.

<sup>7</sup>Ivy Love, Debra Bragg, and Tim Harmon, “Mapping the Community College Baccalaureate: An Inventory of the Institutions and Programs Comprising the Current Landscape” (Washington, DC: New America, November 2021).

<sup>8</sup>Ivy Love and Iris Palmer, “Community College Baccalaureate Programs: A State Policy Framework” (Washington, DC: New America, June 2020).

<sup>9</sup>Gabriel Petek, “Final Evaluation of Community College Bachelor’s Degree Pilot” (Sacramento, CA: Legislative Analyst’s Office, January 2020), <https://lao.ca.gov/reports/2020/4140/final-eval-cc-bachelors-degree-012320.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup>Elizabeth Meza and Ivy Love, “Community College Baccalaureate Programs as an Equity Strategy: Student Access and Outcomes Data” (Washington, DC: New America, March 2022).

<sup>11</sup>Mary Alice McCarthy, “Rethinking Credential Requirements in Early Childhood Education: Equity-Based Strategies for Professionalizing a Vulnerable Workforce” (Washington, DC: New America, June 2017).

<sup>12</sup>Emily Workman, “Earning While Learning with Early Educator Apprenticeship Programs” (Washington, DC: New America, February 2019).

<sup>13</sup>Allison Lutton, “Apprenticeship as a Degree Attainment Strategy for the Early Childhood Workforce” (Philadelphia, PA: District 1199C Training & Upgrading Fund, September 2018).

<sup>14</sup>Amaya Garcia and Roxanne Garza, “Chicago’s Bilingual Teacher Residency: A Partnership to Strengthen the Teacher Pipeline” (Washington, DC: New America, October 2019).

<sup>15</sup>Amaya Garcia, “A 50-State Scan of Grow Your Own Teacher Policies and Programs” (Washington, DC: New America, May 2022).

<sup>16</sup>Illinois Board of Higher Education, “Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity Overview,” webinar, September 13, 2021, [https://www.ibhe.org/assets/files/early-childhood/Consortium\\_Overview\\_for\\_Webinar\\_091221.pdf](https://www.ibhe.org/assets/files/early-childhood/Consortium_Overview_for_Webinar_091221.pdf).

<sup>17</sup>Illinois General Assembly, Public Act 102-0174, Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity Act.

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