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Advancing the Early Care and Education Workforce: A State-Based Cross-Sector Approach

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Introduction

An estimated 2.5 million professionals are responsible for the care and education of more than 50 percent of children 0–5 years of age (Brandon & Scarpa, 2006; Zaslow & Martinez-Beck, 2006). The quality of that care and education greatly influences the potential growth and development of each child; therefore, early care and education professionals need to have the skills and knowledge to ensure children’s optimal growth and development. However, training and support systems available to early care and education professionals are not consistent across programs, nor do they provide the depth and scope needed to build a quality early care and education workforce (Karp, 2006).

The early care and education workforce is highly diverse in numbers, types of programs where they work, and the skills and knowledge they possess. Early childhood programs can be located in public and private preschools or community-based organizations, and may be funded by Federal, State, or local entities. Requirements for education, training, and years of experience also vary depending on whether early childhood professionals are considered caregivers, providers, or teachers. Investments made through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 are expected to increase this diversity further (American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, 2009). Such greater diversity will have a significant influence on the quality of care and learning opportunities available to the nation’s children during the most critical stage of their lives (AACTE, 2004; Tout, Zaslow, & Berry, 2006).

The Federal government plays an important role in expanding access to quality early childhood programs and improving the quality of workforce development for early care and education practitioners. However, State and local buy-in and support are critical to ensuring that limited resources are used optimally, local characteristics are recognized and specific needs are met, and quality and accountability are monitored efficiently. This white paper summarizes the complex challenges associated with expanding and enhancing the skills of this workforce to attract and retain qualified early childhood professionals. Strategies are presented for establishing an effective and efficient cross-sector system that is federally driven but state and locally owned. The strategies are based on several key research-based assumptions:

- The early care and education workforce needs access to and participation in a quality comprehensive professional development system to increase knowledge and skills to better care for and educate children 0–5 years of age (Washington, 2008).
- Federal, State, and local resources and programs designed for professional development of the early care and education workforce need to be coordinated and managed effectively and efficiently to achieve sustainable impact (Barnett & Frede, 2009).
- Training and educational opportunities available to early care and education professionals, no matter what program they work in, need to be articulated to ensure a continuum of professional development and address the diverse needs of the current and future workforce.

Challenges and Recommendations

Research and documented Federal, State, and local experience provide informative lessons and promising innovations that cut across various sectors working with children 0–5 years of age. Research suggests that collaboration and coordination should be modeled and promoted at a national level, and planning, implementation, and evaluation should be conducted at State and local levels to build a sustainable community-based foundation for more effective professional development. Three recommendations are discussed below.



1. Increase access to and efficiently utilize a comprehensive system of training and onsite technical assistance (TA) that supports high-quality services for children and families, regardless of the program that serves them.

In the early care and education field, standards and qualification requirements have been minimal in light of entry-level requirements that promote hiring family and community members. Similarly, programs have their own knowledge, skills, and education requirements and policies affecting the early care and education workforce. Programs and States differ in their requirements and processes for providing ongoing professional development opportunities that address the unique needs of their early care and education professionals. For example, Head Start requires that by 2013, 50% of teachers must have bachelors degrees, while 27 of the 38 states that serve preschool children require the same for their teachers (NIEER, 2008). Without an agreement about the standards of learning, educational background, and effective support, the early care and education workforce will be unprepared to achieve positive outcomes.

Federal leaders and agencies can take several key actions to address these challenges:

- Identify, analyze, and integrate State and local research and best practices related to quality and comprehensive professional development systems that meet the individual needs of States and communities. Apply the strength and creativity of the field to formulate innovative approaches that build a quality workforce. Support evaluation and research to test and advance what works rather than accept the approach of any single sector. For example, Kansas, Missouri, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia have established comprehensive professional development competencies that apply to the workforce in a variety of settings.
- Establish minimum standards to guide States in developing training program content. Select core content and competencies that ensure knowledge- and skill-building is sequenced, conducted over time, organized meaningfully, and builds a continuum of levels.
- Establish mandated and targeted funding to develop comprehensive training systems that are dynamic and responsive to local characteristics.
- Establish consistent workplace standards for curriculum planning and professional development activities during paid work hours. Reward excellence and enable career advancement comparable to other professions with equivalent knowledge and skill requirements.
- Provide incentives for early care and education professionals to receive training from different sectors to enhance communication, recognize the value of each other's skills and knowledge, and build relationships.
- Fund a scholarship program targeting early care and education professionals who aspire to be and meet the qualifications for being mentors or master teachers. Offer training and onsite follow-up by mentors to support classroom teachers across all settings.
- Fund training for administrators to align program policies with the knowledge and skills teachers receive through their own training. Provide alternative approaches, such as distance learning and on-the-job training and mentoring to increase knowledge and skills.
- Expand scholarship, loan forgiveness, and wage incentive programs to a broader audience, including rural populations and English language learners. Provide financial assistance for child care, Head Start, and pre-kindergarten professionals who obtain degrees or credentials and complete training.



2. Promote, fund, and support State-administered professional development systems for early care and education that are integrated across all relevant sectors, including U.S. Department of Education, Department of Education special education, Head Start and Early Head Start, higher education institutions, Child Care Bureau, and Maternal Child Health.

Compensation, benefits, and working conditions vary widely among settings, which increases migration across settings and adds to an already high turnover rate in positions where stability is a critical element of quality programming for children.

Federal leaders and agencies can take several key actions to address these challenges:

- Examine Federal government (Department of Education and Administration for Children and Families) regulatory and funding criteria for early care and education professional development grants to States, localities, and programs. Based on this analysis, work to eliminate barriers to interagency coordination and create incentives to implement coordination at the State level.
- Mandate interagency coordination to address professional development for early care and education professionals at the Federal level. A federally directed systems approach that respects the diversity and autonomy of States will advance coordination through modeling cross-sector relationships, coordinated TA, and targeted funding and oversight.
- Establish common goals and eliminate barriers to interagency coordination in States. Create incentives for systemic coordination and collaboration at every level of planning and implementation, such as creating shared definitions and language regarding professional development qualifications and experience for early care and education (Zaslow, Dent, & Halle, 2006).
- Create an inclusive interagency work group to examine Federal regulations and funding criteria for early care and education professional development funds for States, localities, and community-based programs, similar to those established through Early Learning Opportunity grants (Department of Education) and Child Care and Development Fund Quality targeted funds (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services),
- Target Federal funds to those State efforts that contribute to a coordinated professional development system that is cross-sector in structure, approach, and implementation and ensures that appropriate entities in State agencies and local communities are engaged, system building goals are met, and all intended participants are served. The coordinated systems need to be in place to be effective on a larger scale.
- Provide funding to develop and expand technology applications and data management systems in States to support early care and education professional development that:
 - Increases access to information related to professional development opportunities and career advancement for early care and education professionals.
 - Reduces the burden of documenting education, experience, and other professional credentials.
 - Promotes the collection and maintenance of common data on professional qualifications and professional development activities and outcomes across sectors, while maintaining appropriate confidentiality.
 - Coordinates workforce and professional development data among States to track progress on State and Federal goals and inform current and future investments.



3. Provide Federal leadership and guidance to articulate separate but overlapping community-based and higher education offerings and certifications of various early care and education sectors.

Early care and education practitioners pursue professional development opportunities within an environment of unconnected offerings with workshops and conferences, sequenced training series, on-the-job mentoring or coaching, and certificate programs that are developed, sponsored, and recognized primarily by one sector. If affordable and accessible, practitioners might take college courses, but these might not lead to a degree, and programs seldom acknowledge previous non-credit-bearing experience. This lack of coordination can frustrate practitioners, limit knowledge- and skill-building, and waste resources in every sector.

Federal leaders and agencies can take several key actions to address these challenges:

- Facilitate coordination between the Department of Education and the Administration for Children and Families, including the Child Care Bureau, Head Start, and Early Head Start, to expand outreach and increase access to higher education programs, as well as articulation from one level to the next. Add resources to implement alternative training options, such as distance learning and on-the-job training.
- Provide TA and resources to States to create a seamless training and education system for professionals who work across sectors while remaining in the field. Articulate training from community-based education to higher education accredited course work.
- Establish professional development opportunities that are open, accessible, and affordable to practitioners in all sectors, even if they are sponsored by an individual sector.
- Create a cross-sector model to link training to State knowledge and competency guidelines, similar to models established in Connecticut and Missouri.

Conclusion

Professional development is critical for increasing the knowledge and skills of the early care and education workforce to ensure the quality of programs for children 0–5 years of age. Institutionalizing statewide professional development systems can be achieved through Federal mandates and resources combined with standards and assessment procedures set by the States. Such systems will increase the scope of offerings and have an important influence on training organizations and higher education institutions. Increasing access to and support for integrated cross-sector professional development experiences and ensuring that they are equivalent across sectors will help achieve a sustainable, positive impact on the early care and education workforce. Coordinated cross-sector initiatives that include publicly financed compensation and benefits will attract and retain qualified members of the workforce throughout their careers and increase opportunities for advancement and specialization through a career ladder or lattice.

In addition, establishing core knowledge and competencies that are aligned between sectors and encompass the knowledge and skills required to work with young children will lead to statewide credentialing systems that are well resourced and responsive to diverse State and local characteristics and common credential requirements and processes that are seamless to practitioners. Including career counseling and mentoring to assist practitioners in career planning also will improve knowledge and skills within the early care and education workforce.

Federal decision-makers have an opportunity to invest in the quality of early care and education for the nation's children by taking timely action to advance the skills and knowledge of the early care education workforce.



About the Authors

This paper was written by Jill Aviles and Reeva Murphy, who conduct research, provide training and technical assistance, and implement programs in the areas of professional development and early care and education for local, State, Federal, and international organizations. The authors are members of the Early Education Services group at ICF International, which advances learning, competence, accountability, and leadership in the early education field through delivery of customized tools, training, and services in local, State, Federal, and international settings to ensure high-quality care and education for young children. The views expressed in this paper and any errors are those of the authors and not necessarily those of ICF International.

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Additional Resources

- A Review of the Research Literature, Effective Investments in the Child Care and Early Education Profession* (2008), by Roberta M. Weber and Molly Trauten. www.hhs.oregonstate.edu/hdfs/sites/default/files/Lit_Review.pdf.
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- Formal Education, Credential, or Both: Early Childhood Program Classroom Practices* (2008), in *Early Education and Development*, Vol. 19, No. 3, pp. 479–504, by Jennifer A. Vu, Hyun-Joo Jeon, and Carolee Howes. www.informaworld.com/smpp/content~db=all?content=10.1080/10409280802065379.
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- Professional Development Findings (April 2008), compiled by the National Professional Development Center on Inclusion. <http://community.fpg.unc.edu/resources/articles/NDPCI-PD-Findings-4-2008.pdf/view>.