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Advancing the Early Learning Workforce through State Policies

By Winona Hao

Between what children ought to gain from early learning and what the current workforce can provide, there is a huge gap.[1] The low skills bar, combined with low wages, poses risks to young children.[2] State boards of education (SBEs) can strengthen requirements, professional development, and credentialing and preparation in cooperation with higher education systems to advance this workforce.

The science about how critical the earliest years are for a child's achievement in school and in life has not translated into policies and systems that properly value the knowledge and competencies required of the workforce that cares for children from birth to age 8.[3] This workforce is widely dispersed across diverse settings, most of the time due to different funding streams: Head Start, childcare centers, family day care, state preK programs, other educational programs, and elementary schools. The complex structure has spawned multiple sets of standards and requirements, which has made it hard to achieve coherence and failed to advance the workforce as a whole.

State boards can shape early learning workforce policies significantly. Yet without a clear understanding of core competencies this workforce ought to have, policies fall behind. Typically, families do not know what credentials to expect in an early educator. Only one-third of preschool teachers in centers or public schools hold bachelor's degrees, so a young child is most likely to end up with a teacher who is not trained in early learning and has no degree.[4]

POLICY GAPS

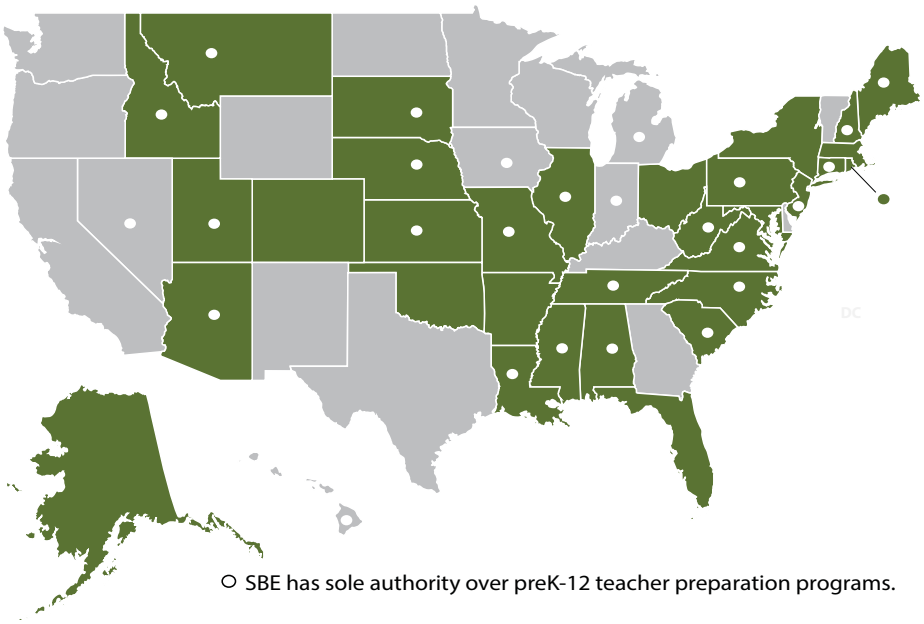
To eliminate barriers for advancing the workforce, state policymakers should streamline and align standards, requirements, and preparation programs and support educators' professional development and economic well-being. The 2015 report *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation* listed knowledge and competencies that teachers and leaders who care for and educate young children need,[5] and this list can guide policymaking in qualifications and licensure, preparation programs, professional development, and compensation.

Qualifications and Licensure. Establishing core knowledge and competencies for early educators is a prerequisite for states that want to reexamine teacher licensure and certificates. There are 43 states and the District of Columbia with state-funded preK programs; 23 require bachelor's degrees for lead teachers in all their state programs.[6] Outside state preK systems, however, no state requires bachelor's degrees in early education settings, and only 11 require a child development associate credential or vocational training. Most states require only a high school diploma, some training, or nothing at all.[7] This low bar jeopardizes the development of a quality workforce, codifies old norms for what children should gain in early education, and deprives teachers of opportunities for professional development and compensation.

The multiplicity of qualifications and certificates confuses administrators and teachers alike. It is critical to establish universal common language requirements for these certificates and to limit the number of certificates used in states. States also need to reconsider the stratification of licensure, as teaching young children requires a skill set different from that for teaching older children. Broad licenses, such as K-5 or K-6, may offer more flexibility for teacher placement but hinder the development of teacher preparation programs that train graduates for early learning grades.

Preparation Programs. Researchers have calculated that children from the poorest American families have heard an

32 SBEs Have Authority over PreK-12 Teacher Licensure



○ SBE has sole authority over preK-12 teacher preparation programs.

average of 30 million fewer words by age 3 than children from the wealthiest families.[8] While early learning could address this gap for low-income kids, most teacher preparation programs do not require students to study early language and literacy.[9] Other foundational areas, such as math and science, are also lacking in these programs. Few courses focus on diversity either, including working with dual language learners and understanding the race and culture of young learners.[10]

Institutions of higher education usually take their cue from state licensure stratifications to design their programs. Too often, the wider the grade span a teacher license covers, the less training is provided for teaching lower grades. Preparation programs tend to focus on topics more appropriate for teaching older children, with the result that many educators have poor training and coursework in early learning pedagogy and practices. States should consider narrowing the grade span or create a more focused licensure to allow higher education to develop programs designated for teaching young grades, such as preK-3 or birth to 5. Allowing higher education to provide early childhood education as an "add-on" endorsement is also an option, but such endorsements should consist of more than just a test.

Professional Development. Although professional development is crucial for teacher growth, hardly any paid professional development is available for this workforce, especially for teachers in center and family care settings. States can examine the needs for professional development in different settings and allocate funding to provide job-embedded trainings. By providing such incentives, the early learning system could progress toward higher qualifications for teachers.

Compensation. Early education is more than wiping noses and giving hugs, and it is also more than learning ABCs and numbers. The low wages for this workforce reflect the perceptions of policymakers and the general public. While the field is busy adding new competencies required to build an effective workforce, efforts should also be made to address teachers' well-being. When 46 percent of the workforce is enrolled in public support programs and relies on an average $9 per hour paycheck, stakeholders should reflect on the economic security of this important workforce.[11]

BOARD ROLES AND EFFORTS

SBEs play a distinct role in developing a well-qualified early learning workforce. According to NASBE's policy database, 32 SBEs have authority over preK-12 teacher licensure, and 28 SBEs have sole authority over preparation programs (map). SBEs might want to consider examining their state competencies to see if they align with the skills needed to work with young learners. SBEs can then strengthen requirements based on the core competencies, improve professional development, and advance workforce credentialing and preparation in cooperation with institutions of higher education. SBEs may also want to consider working with other state stakeholders on how to support the workforce financially, remove obstacles to their career development, and decrease high turnover rates.

NASBE has gleaned best practices from previous work with states. The **Nebraska state board** worked with a team of 24 early learning professionals to review state core competencies. They formed a task force, which conducted focus groups to gather broader input. The board then adopted revised competencies as working guidance. Moreover, Nebraska developed training modules and implemented a dissemination plan in collaboration with state early learning training entities.[12]

The **Virginia state board** collaborated with key agencies to address the need for a high-quality early education workforce. The board convened a working committee to outline strategies. They added core competencies that reflected the research on quality adult/child interactions and proposed an "add on" endorsement to an elementary teacher's license. The committee proposed including requirements for teachers to acquire skills to enable them to meet the social and educational needs of young children, as well as to gain knowledge of the development and learning of children in the early grades. The proposed changes were reviewed and approved by the Advisory Board on Teacher Education and Licensure and adopted by the Virginia State Board of Education.[13]

The early learning workforce deserves no less attention and pay than do K-12 teachers. Early learning teachers need strong commitment from state policymakers to raise the bar on requirements, align system policies, set new norms, and elevate the profession. States should plan a long-term strategy to advance and support this critical and underserved workforce.

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NOTES

1. Institute of Medicine and National Research Council, *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation* (Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 2015).

2. M. Whitebook et al., *Early Childhood Workforce Index: 2016* (Berkeley, CA: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment University of California, Berkeley, 2016).

3. National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development* (Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 2000).

4. Whitebook et al., *Early Childhood Workforce Index.*

5. IOM and NRC, *Transforming the Workforce.*

6. The National Institute for Early Education Research, "The State of Preschool 2015" (New Brunswick, NJ: NIEER, 2015).

7. Office of Child Care, "Data Explorer and State Profiles," https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/data.

8. Betty Hart and Todd R. Risley, "The Early Catastrophe: The 30 Million Word Gap by Age 3," *American Educator* (Spring 2003).

9. Hannah Putman et al., *Some Assembly Required: Piecing Together the Preparation Preschool Teachers Need* (Washington, DC: The National Council on Teacher Quality, 2016).

10. IOM and NRC, *Transforming the Workforce.*

11. Whitebook et al., *Early Childhood Workforce Index.*

12. Mariana Haynes, "Promoting Quality in PreK-Grade 3 Classrooms: Findings and Results from NASBE's Early Childhood Education Network," Issues in Brief (Alexandria, VA: NASBE, 2009).

13. Ibid.

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