

National Association of State Boards of Education

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## ➔ Supporting a Diverse Early Childhood Workforce for Dual Language Learners

By Winona Hao and Nadia Syed

**By 2020, half of U.S. children age 0 to 5 are expected to be part of a minority race or ethnicity.<sup>1</sup> This represents an increase in ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity in preschool and child care settings. Of all American children age 8 and under, one in three lives in a non-English language household, which qualifies them as dual language learners (DLLs).<sup>2</sup> Yet 81 percent of public school teachers are white, which poses potential challenges in cultural understanding for students who are learning in a new language.<sup>3</sup>**

More than 11 million children are DLLs. While these children have a natural advantage in becoming bilingual early, some risk factors impede their full development: 58 percent live in low-income families, and 26 percent of their parents have less than a high school education.<sup>4</sup> High-quality early childhood education (ECE) programs can greatly benefit DLLs and enhance their readiness for kindergarten, but their pre-K enrollment lags behind their non-DLL peers by 6.4 percent.

States need to adopt a vision for support of DLLs and take actionable steps toward that vision. Such steps might include developing data systems to better screen and assess students needing added support, family engagement strategies, or early learning standards that integrate dual language learning. But of all the policies state boards of education should consider, supporting and developing a workforce that is culturally and linguistically competent is the most critical.

### **WORKFORCE DISCONTINUITY**

The term ECE workforce encompasses all educators who work with children from birth to age 8, regardless of settings and

systems. This fragmented workforce creates analytical challenges. However, one thing is clear. Important differences between the workforce for children birth to age 5 and that for K-12 signal problems that need policymakers' attention.

**Birth to Age 5.** The birth–age 5 workforce comprises educators in child care centers, Head Start programs, state- and locally funded pre-K programs, private preschools, and family child care programs. Forty percent of the teachers are women of color, which closely mirrors the demographics of their students, about 44 percent of whom are children of color. Additionally, 23 percent of the workforce speaks a language other than English, compared with 21 percent of the U.S. population age 5 and under.<sup>5</sup>

On the one hand, this diversity and bilingualism is a significant strength for young learners. It can help them develop a positive sense of their own racial and cultural identities to have effective interactions with teachers who look like them, understand their culture, and harbor no racial biases toward them. It can help them more quickly develop social and emotional skills and gives them an opportunity to learn in a rich language and literacy environment.

On the other hand, the workforce is poorly paid—an average of \$9 per hour. With 46 percent enrolled in public support programs, the teachers lack economic security.<sup>6</sup> And as credential requirements increase for ECE teachers, many face the loss of these jobs. Only 28 percent of the people of color in the ECE workforce have a bachelor's degree. Simply requiring a bachelor's degree without providing support is thus likely to reduce the diversity of the workforce and exacerbate inequality in it.<sup>7</sup>

**Early Elementary.** In the 2017–18 school year, 31 states reported teacher shortages in the areas of bilingual, dual language immersion, or English as a second language (ESOL).<sup>8</sup> The preponderance of white women in elementary schools suggests that many teachers may not understand or be prepared to help DLLs navigate the challenges of learning in a new language and experiencing a new culture.<sup>9</sup> When poorly supported and lacking in resources that promote cultural competence, staff may rely on instructional programs that discourage use of home languages, and students risk falling behind. The lack of a diverse workforce may increase the risk of teacher bias, which also has adverse effects on children.<sup>10</sup>

### **FIVE RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STATE BOARDS**

State boards of education face a challenge in coming to grips with this tale of two workforces. On the one hand, they must help set the conditions for retaining the existing diversity of the workforce serving children from birth to age 5 while simultaneously setting higher requirements for the profession so that these children can be well served. On the other hand, they need to grow more bilingual teachers and consider whether teacher preparation and professional development are effectively cultivating a generation of K-12 teachers who are culturally and linguistically competent.

**Find ways to help the ECE workforce obtain higher credentials.** This would include identifying educational, financial, and social resources such as accessible, flexible credit-bearing programs, tuition assistance, or other financial incentives, as well as advising services to help retain the workforce.

**Promote stackable credentials and articulation agreements.** The ECE workforce includes many nontraditional teachers who might need alternative pathways to degree attainment. Stackable credentials and state-wide articulation agreements at institutes of higher education can open a door and motivate the existing workforce to increase

their skills. State policymakers may consider joining higher education representatives and early childhood experts and advocates to develop a statewide, competency-based articulation agreement for early childhood education degree programs.

**Grow a diverse workforce.** Many states have long struggled to hire teachers with the requisite pedagogical knowledge and skills to support the DLL population. States should intentionally create pathways and remove barriers for potential bilingual educators.

**Tailor professional development to support DLLs.** Hardly any paid professional development is offered for the ECE workforce.<sup>11</sup> State policymakers should consider guidance with integrated DLL strategies for local education agencies. Effective DLL teachers require unique skillsets: knowledge of first and second language development, instructional practices to engage DLLs, appropriate assessment skills, cultural awareness, family engagement, and positive attitudes toward DLLs.<sup>12</sup>

**Strengthen teacher preparation programs.** Twenty-eight state boards approve teacher preparation programs.<sup>13</sup> Yet many of these programs reportedly lack a focus on diversity, dual language learners, race, and culture.<sup>14</sup> Coursework in bilingual education and pedagogy and equity and social justice in education plus innovative field experiences such as apprenticeships and teacher residencies could help address these gaps.<sup>15</sup> Some states add endorsement requirements for teachers who work with DLLs.

## STATE EXAMPLES

The **Illinois State Board of Education** adopted a rule on transitional bilingual education to enhance the skills of teachers working with DLLs. The rule declares that districts must have bilingual programs for schools with 20 or more children who speak the same language and that preschool teachers who work with DLLs must have an endorsement in bilingual education or ESOL.<sup>16</sup> Illinois's Heartland Equity and Inclusion Project gave a grant for the design of seven core ECE courses to support culturally, linguistically, and ability-diverse learners.<sup>17</sup>

By approving changes to the state's administrative English language learner policies in 2014, the **New York Board of Regents** sought to advance biliteracy. Policy changes touched professional development, data collection, and family engagement. The board approved new requirements for teachers' professional development to address home-language and new-language development. It called for time to be set aside for teachers to collaborate on rigorous lesson plans that are culturally and linguistically appropriate for diverse learners. The board updated policies to increase the collection of surveys and forms pertaining to students' family histories to inform instructional practices, and it also adopted policies seeking increased family involvement in schooling, such as parent-teacher conferences pertaining to linguistic development.<sup>18</sup>

DLLs face unique challenges that require state policymakers to be visionary, strategic, and innovative. The development of the ECE workforce is a key variable in improving support for DLLs. Yet it is complicated work. Recognizing the bifurcated workforce, state boards can work to diminish the achievement gap between DLLs and their non-DLL counterparts while supporting the existing workforce and increasing the quality and diversity of the teacher workforce.

*Winona Hao is NASBE's project director for early learning, and George Washington University student Nadia Syed was an intern at NASBE.*

## NOTES

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