

Issue Brief

Strengthening the Knowledge and Competencies of Early Care and Education Professionals

Early childhood is a time when developmental changes are happening that can have profound and lasting consequences for a child's future. Studies have shown that much more is going on cognitively, socially, and emotionally in young children than previously known. Even in their earliest years, children are starting to learn about their world in sophisticated ways. Development proceeds in ways that are both rapid and cumulative, with early progress laying the foundation for future learning.

This emerging science makes clear the importance and complexity of working with young children from infancy through the early elementary years. Young children thrive when they have secure, positive relationships with adults who are knowledgeable about how to support their development and learning. As such, early care and education (ECE) professionals must be well-qualified for their positions.

Two reports from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine—*Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation* (2015) and *Transforming the Financing of Early Care and Education* (2018)—offer recommendations for how to ensure that ECE professionals have the knowledge they need to help children thrive, and that children have access to affordable, high-quality early care and education. The reports identify the knowledge and competencies that these professionals need to provide high-quality care and education, along with the financial supports that will be needed to help ECE professionals develop these competencies.

SHARED KNOWLEDGE AND COMPETENCIES ARE NEEDED ACROSS THE WORKFORCE

As children progress from infancy to preschool and through their early elementary years, it is important for them to have continuous high-quality support for their development and learning. Ensuring this continuity and quality means that all professionals who work with children need a shared base of knowledge and skills.



Across age ranges and settings, care and education professionals need:

- core knowledge of developmental science and content knowledge;
- mastery of practices that help children learn and develop on individual pathways;
- knowledge of how to work with diverse populations of children;
- the capability to partner with children’s families and with professional colleagues; and
- the ability to access and engage in ongoing professional learning to keep current in their knowledge and continuously improve their professional practice.

KNOWLEDGE AND COMPETENCIES SHOULD BE STRENGTHENED

The system for educating children from birth through age 8 can be improved to better support care and education professionals in acquiring the competencies and knowledge they need. Currently, most lead educators (those who bear primary responsibility for children, for planning and implementing activities and instruction, and for overseeing the work of assistant teachers) in care and education settings prior to elementary school are not expected to have the same level of education—a bachelor’s degree—as those leading elementary school classrooms. This difference in education requirements lags behind the science of child development and early learning, which clearly indicates that the work of lead educators for young children of all ages is based on the same high level of sophisticated knowledge and competencies.

State leadership and licensure and accreditation agencies, state and local stakeholders in care and education, and institutions of higher education should collaborate to develop and implement comprehensive pathways and multiyear timelines at the individual, institutional, and policy levels for transitioning to a minimum bachelor’s degree qualification requirement, with specialized knowledge and competencies, for all lead educators working with children from birth through age 8.

For this approach to be fully realized and effective, it must be implemented carefully with a phased approach, with supportive local, state, and federal policies, and with informed, supportive leadership.

As this recommendation is phased in, leaders of schools, centers, and care and education programs should consider strategies for improving the feasibility of accessing higher-education programs, such as providing adequate paid time away from work and other supports to assist professionals in maintaining full-time income opportunities while completing degree programs. They should also consider pathways and timelines to improve the availability, accessibility, and quality of professional learning during ongoing practice.

CURRENT SYSTEM FOR FINANCING PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION FACES PROBLEMS

The current financing structure and available financing mechanisms for professional education and ongoing professional learning are not designed to ensure a highly qualified ECE workforce. Despite increased awareness of the need to improve the foundational knowledge and competencies of the workforce, financial supports for ongoing professional learning and higher education are generally provided only on a limited basis. Existing resources and financing mechanisms are insufficient to overcome the barriers that educators face when pursuing professional education and training, which include affordability, access, and availability. Moreover, there are few mechanisms available to help ameliorate the racial and ethnic stratification across job roles that persists throughout the ECE workforce.

An additional problem is that no financing mechanisms address the quality of higher-education programs for early care and education. Financing is largely absent for system-level improvements to ensure that higher-education programs prepare students with the knowledge and competencies necessary to work with young children. Without proper investment to ensure quality in higher-education programs, financing to support pursuit of higher education for the future and incum-

bent workforce may do little to improve the quality of professional practice.

NEW FINANCING MECHANISMS NEEDED TO STRENGTHEN KNOWLEDGE AND COMPETENCIES

Because compensation for the ECE workforce is not commensurate with desired qualifications, these practitioners should be provided with financial assistance to increase their knowledge and competencies and to achieve required qualifications through higher-education programs, credentialing programs, and other forms of professional learning. The incumbent early childhood care and education workforce should bear no cost for increasing practitioners' knowledge base, competencies, and qualifications. Also, those entering this workforce should have financial assistance to limit their education costs to a reasonable proportion of postgraduate earnings, with a goal of maintaining and further promoting diversity in the pipeline of professionals.

The following are essential aspects of fulfilling this general recommendation:

- Existing grant-based resources should be leveraged, and states and localities, along with colleges and universities, should work together to provide additional resources and supports to the incumbent workforce, as practitioners further their qualifications as professionals.
- States and the federal government should provide financial and other appropriate supports to limit to a reasonable proportion of expected postgraduate earnings any tuition and fee expenses that are incurred by prospective early childhood care and education professionals and are not covered by existing financial aid programs.

Resources for system-level improvements will also be needed to transition the current workforce to a highly qualified workforce. States and the federal government

should provide grants to institutions and systems of postsecondary education to develop faculty and ECE programs and to align ECE curricula with the science of child development and early learning and with principles of high-quality professional practice. Federal funding should be leveraged through grants that provide incentives to states, colleges, and universities to ensure higher-education programs are of high quality and aligned with workforce needs, including evaluating and monitoring student outcomes, curricula, and processes.

Due to the workforce's current low levels of compensation, asking individuals to contribute out of pocket to their educational expenses or to cover them using loans that must be repaid with future wages is not feasible. Similarly, asking ECE providers to cover educational costs in the current system could pose significant difficulties for many employers, especially for small-business providers that operate with relatively limited budgetary discretion. For these reasons, additional federal and state funding will be necessary to avoid disrupting service provision.

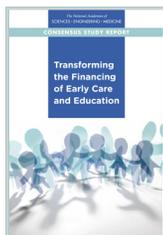
A number of grant-based resources for higher education are currently available from the federal government, states, private entities, and individual colleges and universities. These resources should be leveraged to offset the costs of tuition and fees for ECE professionals.

Additional funding may also be necessary to ensure that these professionals are able to pursue higher education and other forms of credentialing at an affordable rate. States and localities, along with colleges and universities, should work together to provide these additional resources to the incumbent workforce as practitioners further their qualifications. They should have the flexibility to determine certain requirements for supports, such as number of years in service required to qualify for assistance and length of commitment required after completing training.

COMMITTEE ON FINANCING EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION WITH A HIGHLY QUALIFIED WORKFORCE

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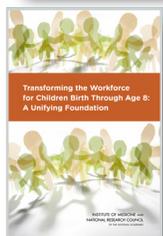
For More Information . . . This Issue Brief was prepared by the Board on Children, Youth, and Families based on two Consensus Study Reports *Transforming the Financing of Early Care and Education* (2018), sponsored by the Administration for Children and Families of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Alliance for Early Success, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Buffett Early Childhood Fund, Caplan Foundation for Early Childhood, Foundation for Child Development, Heising-Simons Foundation, Kresge Foundation, U.S. Department of Education, W.K. Kellogg Foundation, and *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation* (2015) sponsored by Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, David and Lucile Packard Foundation, Robert R. McCormick Foundation, U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (Administration for Children and Families and Health Resources and Services Administration), and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of any organization or agency that provided support for the project. Copies of the Consensus Study Reports are available from the National Academies Press, <https://nap.edu>.



Transforming the Financing of Early Care and Education (2018)

Available:

http://www.nas.edu/Finance_ECE



Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation (2015)

Available:

<http://www.nas.edu/birthtoeight>

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