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Advancing Quality Pre-Kindergarten for All

Better Teachers, Better Preschools: Student Achievement Linked to Teacher Qualifications by W. Steven Barnett

Once they begin kindergarten, America's children are taught by professionals with at least a four-year college degree. Prior to kindergarten their teachers are far less prepared. Fewer than half of preschool teachers hold a bachelor's degree, and many never even attended college.

New research finds that young children's learning and development clearly depends on the educational qualifications of their teachers. The most effective preschool teachers have at least a four-year college degree and specialized training in early childhood. Despite overwhelming evidence in its favor, Americans have yet to fully recognize the value of well-educated, professional, early education teachers.

What We Know

- Better-educated preschool teachers with specialized training are more effective.
- Preschool programs employing teachers with four-year college degrees have been shown to be highly effective and good economic investments for the taxpayer.
- Low educational qualifications and a lack of specific preparation in preschool limit the educational effectiveness of many preschool teachers.
- In 19 out of 38 states that finance pre-k, educational requirements for prekindergarten teachers are lower than for kindergarten teachers.
- Head Start has lower educational requirements for teachers than most state prekindergarten programs.
- Leading educators and researchers have called for improved educational standards for preschool teachers.
- Better compensation is required to hire and retain more effective teachers.

Policy Recommendations

- Require preschool teachers to have a four-year college degree and specialized training in order to increase the educational effectiveness of publicly-funded programs.
- Design professional development programs enabling current early education teachers to get a four-year degree.
- Pay preschool teachers salaries and benefits comparable to those of similarly qualified teachers in K-12 education.
- Encourage higher education institutions to develop the faculty and programs required for the professional development of early childhood teachers.
- Support the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)/National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) standards for new programs to prepare preschool teachers.

Minimum Post-Secondary Degree Requirements For Preschool Teachers, By State⁵

State	State Financed Pre-K	Child Care ²
ALABAMA	BA	None
ALASKA	N/A	None
ARIZONA	CDA	None
ARKANSAS	BA ¹	None
CALIFORNIA	CDA	6 credits ³
COLORADO	CDA	None
CONNECTICUT	CDA	None
DELAWARE	CDA	None
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA	BA ¹	CDA
FLORIDA	N/A	None
GEORGIA	AA ¹	None
HAWAII	CDA	CDA
IDAHO	N/A	None
ILLINOIS	BA ¹	CDA or CCP
INDIANA	N/A	None
IOWA	None	None
KANSAS	BA	CDA
KENTUCKY	BA ¹	None
LOUISIANA	BA	None
MAINE	BA	None
MARYLAND	BA ¹	None
MASSACHUSETTS	3 credits ³	None
MICHIGAN	AA	None
MINNESOTA	CDA	CDA
MISSISSIPPI	N/A	None
MISSOURI	CDA	None
MONTANA	N/A	None
NEBRASKA	BA ¹	None
NEVADA	BA ¹	None
NEW HAMPSHIRE	N/A	12 credits ⁴
NEW JERSEY	BA	CDA or CCP
NEW MEXICO	None	None
NEW YORK	None	None
NORTH CAROLINA	BA ¹	None
NORTH DAKOTA	N/A	None
OHIO	CDA	None
OKLAHOMA	BA ¹	None
OREGON	CDA	None
PENNSYLVANIA	BA	None
RHODE ISLAND	N/A	None
SOUTH CAROLINA	BA ¹	None
SOUTH DAKOTA	N/A	None
TENNESSEE	BA ¹	None
TEXAS	BA	None
UTAH	N/A	None
VERMONT	BA ¹	CDA
VIRGINIA	None	None
WASHINGTON	AA ¹	None
WEST VIRGINIA	BA	None
WISCONSIN	CDA	None
WYOMING	N/A	None

AA – Associates Degree; BA – Bachelor’s Degree; CDA – Child Development Associates Credential; Pre-K – Prekindergarten; CCP - Certified Childcare Professional.
 N/A – state does not provide finances for pre-k; None – no post-secondary degree requirements.
 1 - with courses or certification in early childhood.
 2 - many states require professional training or ongoing development.
 3 - in topics related to early childhood education or child development.
 4 - in early childhood education, 6 of which may be non-credit courses.
 5 - update December, 2004.

Student Achievement Linked to Teacher Qualifications

Research proves that the long-term educational, social and economic benefits of a high-quality preschool education occur only when teachers are professionally qualified and adequately compensated. Yet, most preschools are not required to hire teachers who meet even the most basic professional requirements -- nor could they afford to without increased funding.

The education levels of preschool teachers predict teaching quality and children’s learning and development. However, fewer than half of all early education teachers hold a four-year degree and many have no college education. In most states, a high school diploma is all a person needs to teach in a licensed child care center. As a result, many preschool programs are educationally ineffective.

Analyses of what we expect of preschool teachers show that the minimum qualifications for a preschool teacher should be a four-year degree with specialized training teaching young children.

Better-educated teachers have more positive, sensitive and responsive interactions with children, provide richer language and cognitive experiences and are less authoritarian, punitive and detached.

The logic is simple. Better-educated teachers expose children to larger vocabularies and construct better, individualized lesson plans. Teachers with higher education levels can better solve problems in the classroom such as a child with a learning difficulty or a child upset by a death in the family.

Teachers who have been taught what young children need to learn and how to teach them will conduct richer learning activities that address each child’s needs. They demonstrate greater warmth for the children, more enthusiasm for activities and encouragement for children to share and cooperate with their peers.

Research also confirms that preschool teacher quality is strongly linked to compensation. Poor pay and benefits make it difficult to recruit and hire professionally qualified early education teachers. It contributes to high turnover, which harms educational quality and wastes the resources spent on teacher preparation and continuing education.

America stands to lose far more in educational benefits for our children than we save by limiting the requirements for and underpaying preschool teachers.