

March 2019



# The Views of State Early Childhood Education Agency Staff on Their Work and Their Vision for Young Children:

*Informing a Legacy for Young Children by 2030*

## Executive Summary

**The Views of State Early Childhood Education Agency Staff on Their Work and Their Vision for Young Children: Informing a Legacy for Young Children by 2030**

**Executive Summary**

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March 2019

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<sup>1</sup> The data and analyses quoted in this paper were drawn from the memo produced for CEELo by Kelly Etter, Ph.D., Jeffrey Capizzano, & Soumya Bhat of The Policy Equity Group, *Early Childhood Legacy 2030 Project Summary of Findings from Focus Groups and a National Survey of Early Childhood Specialists* (November 2018)

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The Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcome (CEELO) [Early Childhood Legacy 2030](#) project is a comprehensive, multimedia effort to capture the voices and experiences of those charged with implementing state early education policy, and those who have influenced early education policy– the pioneers of our field. State early childhood education agency staff are responsible for implementing policies and collaborating with other stakeholders to meet the needs of all young children in their states. Yet no one has adequately documented the voice, experience and perspectives of these individuals so that challenges and constraints of implementing state ECE policy can inform a continuous improve process in state agencies.

In order to systematically gather information, CEELO contracted with the Policy Equity Group, a Washington, D.C. consulting firm, to convene a series of focus groups and conduct a national survey of state early childhood education agency staff, in partnership with the [National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education](#).

## Methodology

Data for this report was collected from May through September 2018 in focus groups and a national survey of state early childhood education agency staff.

*Focus Groups*– The goal of conducting the focus groups was to better understand both policy and implementation issues faced by state early childhood education agency staff through an interactive discussion with their peers. Five focus groups were held during May and June 2018. A total of 56 individuals from 29 states and Washington, D.C. participated in the focus groups

*National Survey* – Based on themes that emerged from the focus groups, a survey was developed to gather additional information and examine whether findings from the focus group could be generalized to a broader sample of early childhood state specialists. The survey was sent via email to 558 state early childhood education agency staff in all 50 states; Washington, D.C.; and eight U.S. territories<sup>2</sup> during August and September 2018. A total of 153 respondents participated in the survey from 44 states; Washington, D.C., and Guam.

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<sup>2</sup> The invitee contact list was compiled from multiple sources including the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists (NAECS) member list, the State Education Agency Directory, the NIEER Preschool Yearbook briefing contact list, and various meeting participant lists (e.g., CCSSO Family Engagement Network Meeting, Promoting High-Quality Pre-Kindergarten Meeting, CEELo Roundtable Meeting).

## What We Learned

The full report shares findings from our groundbreaking effort to illuminate who state early childhood education agency staff are, what challenges they face and where they believe early childhood education policy should be headed in the next decade.

## Who Are State Early Childhood Education Agency Staff

- The majority of survey respondents identified as white (82%) women (88.2%) over age 40 (83.5%), with advanced degrees (56% masters; nearly 21% doctorate; 11% professional, e.g. LCSW or JD).
- Most have more than 10 years' experience in the early childhood education (ECE) field—more than half report more than 20 years in the field. However, they averaged just 3.6 years in their current positions.
- Most survey respondents came to their current roles with a background as a state-level administrator (51%) or ECE advocate (43.3%); and many reported experience as an educator in ECE settings (62.7%) and elementary settings (41.8%), as well as ECE administrators (48.4%), and ECE professional development providers (52.9%).
- We had a fairly even split among respondents on positions held in the state agency—24% were the **senior person** in charge of agency's early childhood programs; 36.7% **direct or manage** one or more early childhood programs and report to the senior person; 33.3% identified as a **staff member or consultant** helping administer one or more early childhood programs.
- The majority of survey respondents now work in early education positions serving children birth to age 5, or birth through third grade.
- More than 40% – when asked “where do you see yourself in five years,” shared an expectation to leave state agency work by that time; and about 25% had aspirations for promotion within their agency.

## We looked to see if respondent roles or programs administered impacted their longevity in the agency and their career plans.

- In fact, many state early education staff are relatively new to their positions. About 65% of directors/managers have been in their positions less than one year; and more than 50% of respondents administering PreK programs or other early childhood programs have been in their position for less than one year.
- Almost 30% of those in senior positions plan to retire, and about 20% plan to leave the state agency (or their current organization). More than 30% of PreK Administrators intends to retire in the next five years.

## How Do State Early Childhood Education Agency Staff Work

One goal of Legacy 2030 is to better understand the profession of “state early childhood education agency staff,” along with the challenges they confront, to determine what research is needed and what technical assistance and supports would be most effective. ECE staff in state agencies report a wealth of experience in the field, particularly in direct service settings. The assets they bring to their work include:

- Prior work in the field, classroom experience, and a content knowledge of ECE;
- Current connections and relationships at the community-level (e.g., with districts, practitioners, and other stakeholders); and
- Advocacy and communication skills.

Based on areas of need expressed by focus group participants, a survey question was developed that asked, “*In which areas would you be most interested in receiving professional development or capacity-building support?*” State ECE staff were most interested in professional development in effective program evaluation, working with the federal government, and collaboration and communication strategies. ECE state agency staff also identified types of supports they believed would be helpful in their work including access to leadership cohorts and mentor support programs and training in specific areas (personnel management, leadership, conflict resolution, procurement, contracts).

Focus group participants discussed many contextual factors that influence implementation of ECE policies and initiatives in their state. These contextual

factors include characteristics of those in leadership positions, transitions in leadership and political environment, their degree of access to policy makers, and levels of stakeholder engagement across various groups. We asked state ECE staff to describe their access to the individuals who make policies the specialists administer in their state or territory. Of our sample,

- About 24% had **Full access** to policymakers, “they have developed relationships and they can meet with legislators, testify before committees, and respond to questions from legislative staff, but may need permission to do so”;
- 56% had “**Limited access**” – respondents can communicate with legislators and their staff but only through, or accompanied by, a supervisor or legislative liaison; and
- 17% “**No access**” – respondents are not allowed to talk to legislators or their staff under any circumstances.

To better understand how different stakeholder groups are engaged, we asked state staff to indicate their agency’s level of stakeholder engagement with various groups. We found the *strongest levels of collaboration* were reported with other state agencies, advisory panels (e.g., interagency coordinating councils, early learning councils, special education advisory), state-level associations (e.g., advocacy organizations, state AEYC, Head Start Association, etc.), and local education agencies. *Lower levels of engagement* were reported across stakeholder groups such as the governor’s office, legislators, and the philanthropic community. This is consistent with survey results indicating limited levels of access to policy makers (e.g., legislators, governors).

## What Matters Most to State Early Childhood Education Agency Staff

One of the primary goals of the Legacy 2030 project is to elevate the voice and experience of state early childhood education agency staff as they are charged with the day-to-day job of implementing state policy. We sought to understand, from their perch in a state agency, what they saw as the most pressing policies or issues that need to be addressed to positively enhance child outcomes.

Survey respondents were asked to rank a list of 11 birth-to-third grade policy initiatives from highest to lowest priority for funding. The top three ranked policy priorities focused on direct supports for children and ECE program staff:

1. social-emotional behavioral health supports,
2. teacher compensation and financial relief, and
3. professional development for ECE program staff.

The lowest-ranked funding priorities were supports for dual language learners/English learners and data systems.

## Digging Deeper: Do Priorities Change Based on Role or Program Administered

We also wanted to explore whether a significant relationship existed between the program type respondents administer, their role within their agencies, and ranking they assigned to the 11 policy priorities, along with seven priorities for coordination. We collapsed “program type” into three categories: Preschool (state pre-K), IDEA (any program related to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act), and Other (any early childhood program that wasn’t related to a state pre-K program or IDEA program). For “role” we identified three categories: Senior Person – respondents indicated they were senior persons in charge of the agency’s early childhood programs; Director/Manager – respondents indicated they direct or manage one or more early childhood program and report to a senior person; and Staff Member/Consultant – respondents indicated they are staff members or consultants helping administer one or more early childhood programs. We ran statistical tests (analysis of variance ANOVA) to determine if responses varied significantly by type of program survey respondents administered and their roles within the agencies. Our results indicated that for some issues, responses did vary depending on type of program and role.

- Directors/Managers (M=6.5, SD = 2.4) ranked *family engagement initiatives* significantly lower than Staff Members/Consultants (M=5.1, SD=2.6).
- Directors/Managers (M=5.3, SD=2.6) also ranked *social-emotional behavioral/mental health supports* policy significantly lower than Staff Members/Consultants (M=3.9, SD=2.3).

We found the following policy priorities have significantly different rankings according to the program administered by the respondent.

- *Social-emotional behavioral/mental health supports* and *supports for children with disabilities* are ranked significantly higher by respondents who administer IDEA programs than by respondents who administer Preschool programs.



- *Teacher compensation and financial relief* is ranked significantly higher by respondents who administer Preschool programs than by respondents administering IDEA programs.
- *Family engagement initiatives* is ranked lower by respondents administering Preschool programs than by respondents administering Other early childhood programs.

## Vision for Early Childhood Education By 2030

We asked survey respondents to describe their vision for the field in open-ended responses about *what three statistics they would most like to see change by 2030*. The top four statistics responding state early childhood education agency staff would like to see change by 2030 are:

1. ***Access to high-quality programs***
2. ***Strengthening the ECE workforce***
3. ***Improving Child outcomes***
4. ***Strengthening the Early Childhood System***

## Strategies to Improve Outcomes for Children

In the focus groups, state early childhood education agency staff identified coordination, workforce, and financing as the most pressing issues they face in improving outcomes for young children. We probed deeper on these topics in the national survey. In the focus groups seven coordination strategies emerged and we asked survey respondents to rank order these strategies from most to least important. The top three coordination strategies were:

1. Collaboration, communication, and cross-sector work across agencies/departments
2. Efficient systems for blending/ braiding/layering of program funding
3. Teacher qualification requirements and compensation parity across settings

Respondents were asked to describe an innovative approach to *enhancing the quality of the ECE workforce* that you have seen or would like to see. The top four strategies suggested were:

1. Higher Education Reform
2. On-going Professional Learning
3. Compensation and Financial Relief
4. Qualification Requirements, Career Pathways, and Recruitment

Survey respondents were asked to rank a list of financing strategies from most to least promising based on a set of promising strategies identified in the National Academies of Sciences report, *Transforming the Financing of Early Care and Education*.<sup>3</sup> Blending, braiding, and layering of funding was ranked as the top strategy, followed by ear marks or set asides for targeted populations and local or state tax initiatives.

## DISCUSSION: IMPLICATIONS OF THE FINDINGS

The focus group and national survey findings represent an historic effort to capture the perspectives of state early childhood education agency staff across the country. These are individuals who bear some responsibility for implementing state policy, and wisely stewarding state and local funds to local entities and others, to achieve the goals of the state for young children, in particular early childhood education. But to date we have understood very little about who they are, what capacities they have, and what they think is important to achieve goals for young children. They are essentially an untapped resource in state policy discussions!

Although many were relatively new to their positions, predicted turnover within the next five years is high. This suggests we need to put more emphasis on succession planning and growing the field of future state early childhood policy leaders. As can be noted from the professional development needs, state early childhood education agency staff have a highly complex job that requires skill in multiple areas including child development and pedagogy, financing, collaboration and system change. State early childhood education agency staff identified a number of factors that would enable them to better accomplish their work, including strong leadership, support around political and leadership transitions, and professional development supports to build their own skills and knowledge.

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<sup>3</sup> National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. 2018. *Transforming the Financing of Early Care and Education*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/24984>.

State early childhood education agency staff indicated that social-emotional and mental health supports for young children and a well-qualified, well-compensated workforce were among their top policy priorities. The top four statistics respondents would like to see change by 2030 are – increasing access to quality, strengthening the workforce, improving child outcomes, and strengthening the early childhood system. These four goals could serve to unite the early childhood field in a common vision for legislators, funders and other stakeholders.

## Conclusion

More than 18 new governors outlined policies to improve early learning in their state of the state addresses, and state legislators across the country are debating proposals to increase funding for pre-k and/or full- day kindergarten, reorganizing departments of early learning to be more efficient, and increasing funding for coaching of the workforce.<sup>4</sup> Whether these proposals result in improved opportunities for children, will depend on the skill, capacity and leadership of state agency ECE staff to develop policy and implementation processes to support effective programs.

This rich set of data has enormous potential as CEELO and its partners lift up the voices of state early childhood education agency staff doing crucial work across the country. These findings provide a solid foundation for future research inquiries, important guidance to current and future policymakers and capacity-building supports for those who work on behalf of our youngest children and their families.

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<sup>4</sup> Lowenberg, D. (February 15, 2019). New Governors Support Could Bolster Early Learning in 2019, Five Questions to Ask on Child Care, Prek, and Kindergarten Proposals. <https://www.ewa.org/blog-educated-reporter/new-governors-support-could-bolster-early-learning-2019>

# Acknowledgements

A special thank you to the Alliance for Early Success and the Heising-Simons Foundation for their support of the Legacy Project.



**ABOUT CEELO:** One of 22 Comprehensive Centers funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, the Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes (CEELO) strengthens the capacity of State Education Agencies (SEAs) to lead sustained improvements in early learning opportunities and outcomes. For other *CEELO Policy Reports*, *Policy Briefs*, and *FastFacts*, go to <http://ceelo.org/ceelo-products>.

