Developing and Supporting Highly-Qualified Preschool Teachers

Why teacher qualifications matter

Teacher knowledge and skills are one of the keys to success in providing high quality early learning, and strong pre-service teacher education builds the foundation for those. Yet, only about half of state-funded Pre-K programs require lead teachers to have a Bachelor of Arts (BA) degree and specialized training. Head Start raised teacher qualifications requirements in recent years, and 73 percent now have a BA. By contrast, all the well-known examples of preschool programs demonstrating strong long-term outcomes for children (e.g., Perry Preschool and Chicago Child Parent Centers) had teachers with BA degrees. More recent examples of large scale public programs with evidence of strong persistent impacts have all had licensed early childhood teachers with BA degrees (New Jersey, North Carolina, Alabama, Tulsa, and Boston). The entire field needs to catch up, but to do so in a way that retains the diversity of the early childhood workforce and supports it with adequate compensation.

The Institute of Medicine and National Research Council (National Academy of Sciences) have recommended that states “develop and implement comprehensive pathways and multiyear timelines [...] for transitioning to a minimum bachelor’s degree qualification requirement [...] for all lead educators working with children from birth through age 8”. They made this recommendation because research has found that BA-level teachers support higher quality generally, and, more specifically, provide richer language and literacy experiences and more sensitive, less punitive interactions with young children. Of course, this is much easier to recommend than to do. However, for the preschool workforce, at least, there are many examples from which states can learn, including some that offer highly successful paths for others to follow.

How to improve preschool teacher qualifications

**Develop a qualification requirement that is specifically designed to provide preschool teachers with the knowledge and skills needed.** Ideally, this requirement sets uniform standards statewide that ensure that all teachers are well-prepared in alignment with the state standards for early learning and teaching. These set out paths for new teachers and the existing workforce regardless of whether they start with no higher education, a two-year degree, a four-year degree, and a pre-existing qualification (that may be accepted with some kind of supplementary in-service coursework aligned with the new requirements).

**Work with higher education to develop a coherent system that is well-articulated and meets the needs of the students** (e.g., bringing evening courses to locations near them and including on-line options).

**Provide the supports needed for the existing workforce to move quickly through the new preparation systems** including guidance on navigating the system, assistance with federal student aid, additional
financial assistance for tuition and other costs (e.g., books), and pay for substitutes to facilitate attending classes.

*Create a timeline that is feasible*, phases in the requirement with a date certain for when it applies to teachers and allows for teachers to demonstrate adequate progress toward the qualifications as a condition for continued employment.

*Provide adequate compensation for teachers in all settings who meet the qualifications.* This requires pay and benefits parity with public school teachers having the same qualifications regardless of whether teachers are in public schools or private provider organizations. Otherwise, a two tiered system will be created that will continually drain the private sector of strong teachers. Given the developing shortage of K-12 teachers, we can only expect this situation to worsen in the future. This can be part of a more comprehensive policy addressing teacher compensation P-12. NIEER’s Cost of Quality Preschool and Revenue (CPQ&R) planning tool can be used to help cost out this policy.

*Scholarships for teacher preparation, bonuses, and other marginal increases in pay to recognize higher qualifications are not a substitute for adequate teacher compensation.* In North Carolina, where such programs like WAGES that have now spread across the country originated, the gap between preschool teachers in public schools and private providers (all with BA degrees and an early childhood certification) is now $18,000.

State pre-K programs that serve children through private providers may find it more difficult to support pay parity unless pre-K is universal or funds providers by the classroom rather than by the individual child. When some children in a classroom are funded by state pre-K but others receive no state funding or are funded at lower rates, it can be difficult or impossible to support teacher compensation parity with K-12 in the public schools. Only by ensuring that all children in a classroom are adequately funded, can a state ensure that funding is sufficient to support stronger qualifications.

**An example: NJ’s workforce development**

The following are the steps taken to produce a highly qualified workforce in NJ’s 31 low income districts in which over 50,000 3 and 4 year-olds live - almost 25% of the population of children in NJ. In 6 years, the percentage of licensed pre-k teachers with BA degrees in early childhood education in these districts went from 35 percent to 97 percent.

1. Calculate the number of teachers that would need to become certified. Determine how much college they already have. Assess the percentage of teachers with BAs currently teaching in private provider classrooms.
2. Grandfather all existing N-8 and N-K licenses and endorsements. (N stands for nursery so technically these teachers were already “qualified”.
3. Develop a rigorous P-3 license and a post-bachelors alternate route.
4. Provide scholarships and support for teachers in private provider classrooms with one external entity administering the scholarships. These went directly to the IHEs to avoid teachers having to pay out-of-pocket. Include tuition, fees, books and funding for substitutes for release time for teachers to attend classes.
5. All current teachers and assistant teachers eligible
6. Allow 4 years to BA with certification. Track progress and provide advisement for teachers who are not making adequate progress. At the 4 year mark any teacher within 30 credits of completion is given a two-year extension.
7. Provide incremental pay increases at targeted milestones in progress toward completion.
8. Develop acceptable strategies for student teaching while teaching full time.
9. Develop strategies for meeting teachers where they are for courses especially those not in education. Look into on-line offerings.
10. Provide special counseling and advisement. Develop cohort models so students can support each other.

The slide below provides a summary of the challenge or conditions New Jersey had to address in order to establish this requirement and what strategies the state used for each.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conditions</th>
<th>Strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Limited qualified teacher pool</td>
<td>Scholarships/Signing bonus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Alternate Route credential</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Comparable salary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No state P-3 cert.</td>
<td>Add P-3 cert &amp; ECE alternate route</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scarcity of ECE faculty</td>
<td>Grants to colleges for ECE faculty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Early Learning Improvement Consortium MOUs w/ IHEs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Center directors w/out ECE or admin</td>
<td>Directors Academies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>expertise</td>
<td>Center director salary scale:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All other positions needed PD</td>
<td>Size of center + ECE degree + admin credits = &gt; $$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State agency capacity</td>
<td>DOE ECE administrator in senior staff role</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ECE specialists as district partners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Budget set aside for state-level administration, oversight and program improvement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
References


Institute of Medicine and National Research Council of the National Academies (2015). Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation. [https://www.nap.edu/read/19401/chapter/1], p. 513. 5 Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes (2016).

