

Raising the Standards for Early Childhood Professionals Will Lead to Better Outcomes

Young children deserve high-quality early childhood programs that enrich their social, intellectual and physical development, and build a foundation for school success. Raising the level of education and training for early childhood educators is an important step to ensure that every young child enters school ready and able to learn.

—NEA President Dennis Van Roekel

In the past, kindergarten was considered the beginning of a child’s formal education. But today, many children enter kindergarten having completed several years in child care or preschool programs. Still, many kindergarten teachers express concerns that significant numbers of children enter their classrooms unprepared either because they have had no early childhood education or the programs they attended were of poor quality.

Recent research suggests that children who attend high quality early childhood education programs* are more likely to thrive in kindergarten than those who do not.¹

The benefits of high-quality early education programs extend well beyond kindergarten. Children who attend such programs are less likely to repeat grades, to require special education services, or to drop out of school.² The effects are especially significant for children from low-income families.

The reality is that too many children do not attend high-quality early childhood programs *and* children from low-income families are more likely to attend lower quality programs. The “Cost, Quality, and Outcomes Study,” one of the first large-scale studies of child care quality in the U.S., found that the vast majority of early childhood programs were either poor or mediocre in quality, based on observations of widely accepted indicators of child care quality (developmentally appropriate activities, teacher sensitivity, and the extent to which the teaching style was didactic or child centered).³ A follow-up study,

“The Children of the Cost, Quality, and Outcomes Study Go to School,” followed children through the second grade and found that the quality of child care centers had long-term positive effects on children’s language ability, math skills, thinking, attention, and social skills. In second grade, children who attended high-quality child care programs fared better than those who attended mediocre and poor-quality programs.⁴

What constitutes a high-quality program?

NEA has identified five critical components:⁵

- It provides a well-rounded curriculum that supports all areas of development.
- It appropriately assesses children for the purposes of guiding instruction, enhancing student learning, and identifying concerns.
- It addresses child health, nutrition, and family needs as part of a comprehensive service network.
- It provides small class sizes and low teacher-child ratios.
- It employs well-educated, adequately paid teachers.

The qualifications of the teacher is one of the most critical elements of a quality early childhood program. Yet, fewer than half of all teachers working in early childhood programs hold a four-year degree—and many have no college education. In most states, a high school diploma is all that’s needed to work in a licensed child care center. Kindergarten teachers, by contrast, typically hold at least a bachelor’s degree, but even they may not have the specialized training in early childhood education recommended by various education groups.

* In this brief, early childhood education programs refer to public or private programs that typically serve children from six weeks of age until they enter kindergarten. These programs — which may also be referred to as child care, day care, preschool, nursery school — include Early Head Start, Head Start, and prekindergarten programs.

Are there benefits to specialized training?

The research shows that teachers who have earned a B.A. and who also have received specialized training in early childhood share these characteristics:⁶

- Have classrooms with richer language and literacy environments
- Are more actively engaged, more sensitive, and less punitive
- Give children more feedback and encouragement
- Are more likely to have the skills that promote better outcomes for children

A review of state standards

Standards for early childhood educators vary significantly by state and by workplace setting. There are vast differences in the minimum teacher qualification requirements for center-based child care programs, state funded prekindergarten programs, kindergarten programs, and Head Start programs. In 2000, the National Academy of Sciences’ Committee on Early Childhood Pedagogy called for raising educational standards for early childhood educators in order to improve teacher efficacy and child outcomes.⁷

Private center-based child care programs

Working parents rely heavily on private center-based programs to provide child care during working hours, while parents who do not work outside the home frequently look to child care programs to provide enriching social and educational experiences for their children. In 2005, 57 percent of children ages three to five were enrolled in center-based early childhood programs.⁸ Child care programs play an increasingly important role in preparing children for kindergarten. Unfortunately, state standards for privately run, licensed child care programs are significantly lower than that for school-based prekindergarten and Head Start programs.

Summary: Some 12 states require no pre-service training for teachers working in child care programs, while 38 states and the District of Columbia require some level of pre-service training. (See chart on this page.)

Minimum requirements for teachers in private child care centers	
No requirements	Alaska, Idaho, Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana, Michigan, Missouri, Nevada, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, Wyoming
Prior experience or observation in licensed preschool or child care center by licensing agent	Kansas, Maine, Mississippi, Montana, Nebraska, Oregon, West Virginia
High school diploma or GED	Arkansas, Connecticut, Indiana, South Carolina, Tennessee, Utah
Prior experience with high school diploma/GED	Arizona, Georgia, New York, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Texas, Washington
Clock hours in early childhood education	Alabama, Florida, Maryland, New Mexico, Virginia, Wisconsin and The District of Columbia
Vocational or occupational education program	Colorado, Delaware, Massachusetts, New Hampshire
Child Development Associate (CDA) or Certified Child Care Professional (CCP) credential	Hawaii, Illinois, Minnesota, New Jersey, Vermont
College coursework in early childhood or equivalent	California

Source: National Child Care Information and Technical Assistance Center

Prekindergarten*

The recent research suggesting that pre-K programs contribute to student success⁹ has spurred the expansion of publicly funded prekindergarten programs. Presently, 42 states and the District of Columbia invest in pre-K initiatives, with the majority targeting at-risk and low-income four-year-olds.¹⁰ Only three states (Florida, Georgia, and Oklahoma) offer “universal” prekindergarten programs to nearly all four-year-old children regardless of income or risk factors. Overall, educators working in state-funded prekindergarten programs have higher educational qualifications than their counterparts in privately run licensed child care centers.

Summary: 12 states have no state funded pre-K program; 7 require a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential granted by the Council for Professional Recognition. (CDA is a national credentialing program designed to provide performance-based training, assessment, and credentialing of child care staff, home visitors, and family child care providers. Four states require an Associate of Arts (A.A.) degree, and 27 states and the District of Columbia require a Bachelor of Arts (B.A.). (See chart on page 3.)

* In this brief, prekindergarten refers to programs housed in or funded by the public school system that primarily serve children ages 3 to 4 for the primary purpose of enhancing school readiness.

Minimum education requirements for teachers in state funded pre-Ks	
No Program	Alaska, Hawaii, Idaho, Indiana, Mississippi, Montana, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Utah, and Wyoming
Child Development Associate (CDA)	California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Iowa (in private ECE setting), Oregon.
Associate of Arts degree (AA) in early childhood or equivalent	Georgia, Ohio Washington, Minnesota
Bachelor's degree (B.A.) without specific early childhood endorsement or equivalent	District of Columbia, Louisiana, Maine, Michigan, Missouri, Nebraska, Nevada, New Jersey, West Virginia, Wisconsin
B.A. with specific early childhood endorsement or equivalent	Alabama, Arkansas, Illinois, Iowa (if in public school setting), Kansas, Kentucky, Maryland, Massachusetts (if in public school setting), New Mexico (if in public school setting), New York, North Carolina (only in the "More at Four" setting), Oregon, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Vermont (if in public school setting)

Source: National Institute for Early Education Research

Head Start

Since 1965, the federally funded Head Start program has offered eligible children from low-income families comprehensive early education, health, nutrition, and family services, from birth until they enter school. In the nearly 30 years of serving children, Head Start increasingly has made school readiness a central focus. The Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007 has set deadlines for improving teacher qualifications. Under the law, all Head Start teachers must have an associate's degree by 2011. By 2013, the law requires that 50 percent of Head Start teachers nationally must have either a bachelor's degree in early childhood education or a B.A. with coursework equivalent to a major in early childhood education and experience teaching preschool children. Additionally, the law requires assistant teachers to have at least a CDA credential and to be working toward completing at least an associate's degree within two years.

Kindergarten

According to the Academy of Sciences' Committee on Early Childhood Pedagogy, children between the ages of two and five should be assigned a teacher who has a B.A. plus specialized education related to early childhood. Many early childhood education experts would go a step further and contend that the same specialized training is necessary for children through age eight.¹¹

Education Week's Quality Counts report in 2002 found that while all 50 states require kindergarten teachers to hold a minimum of a bachelor's degree, only 17 states require kindergarten teachers to complete courses or certification in early childhood.¹²

NEA advocates raising standards

The majority of children in early childhood settings do not have access to highly qualified teachers to prepare them to succeed in school. Many children, even when they get to kindergarten, will still not encounter an educator with the specialized training in child development, a factor that is associated with improved student achievement.

If we hope to close the achievement gap between low-income students and their more affluent peers, we need to employ more highly qualified teachers in early childhood programs. If we want children to acquire the necessary skills for future academic success, we need to reach them early with highly qualified teachers.

NEA believes the most effective early childhood educators have at least a four-year college degree plus specialized training in early childhood.

To provide the quality of early education and care necessary to prepare children for success in school, the Association recommends that the federal government offer funding and technical assistance to states to meet these goals:

- All teachers working in publicly funded preschool programs hold a bachelor's degree in child development and/or early childhood education.
- All instructional assistants working in publicly funded preschool programs hold an associate's degree in child development or early childhood education.
- Lead teachers in private child care centers hold a minimum of an associate's degree in child development or early childhood education.
- All teaching assistants in private child care centers hold a minimum of a Child Development Associate (CDA) or a state-issued certificate that meets or exceeds CDA requirements.

States should develop incentives and supports to enable teachers and education support professionals currently working in early childhood programs to obtain the recommended credentials without compromising the quality

of education and care that children receive and without substantially increasing the cost of care to parents.¹³

References

¹ Gormley, W., Phillips, D., and Gayer, T., 2008, "Preschool Programs Can Boost School Readiness," *Science*, 320, 1723.

² Barnett, S., 2008, *Preschool Education and its Lasting Effects: Research and Policy Implications*. Boulder and Tempe: Education and the Public Interest Center & Education Policy Research Unit, <http://epicpolicy.org/publication/preschool-education>

³ Helburn, S., 1995, *Cost, Quality, and Outcomes Study in Child Care Centers*, Technical Report, Denver Department of Economics, Center for Research in Economic and Social Policy, University of Colorado at Denver.

⁴ Peisner-Feinberg et al, 1999, *The Children of the Cost, Quality, and Outcomes Study Go To School*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center, <http://www.fpg.unc.edu/ncedl/PDFs/CQO-es.pdf>

⁵ National Education Association, 2003, Policy Statement on Prekindergarten and Kindergarten.

⁶ Barnett, S., 2003, *Better Teachers, Better Schools: Student Achievement Linked to Teacher Qualifications*. National Institute for Early Education Research.

⁷ National Research Council, 2001, *Eager to Learn: Educating Our Preschoolers*. Committee on Early Childhood Pedagogy. Barbara T. Bowman, M.Suzanne Donovan, and M. Susan Burns, editors. Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

⁸ Early Childhood Program Enrollment, Child Trends Databank, www.childtrends.org

⁹ Gormley, 2008.

¹⁰ Barnett et al, 2008, *The State of Preschool 2008*, The National Institute for Early Education Research. Rutgers Graduate School of Education.

¹¹ National Research Council, 2001, *Eager to Learn: Educating Our Preschoolers*. Committee on Early Childhood Pedagogy. Barbara T. Bowman, M.Suzanne Donovan, and M.Susan Burns, editors. Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

¹² *Education Week*, January 10, 2002, "In Early Childhood Education and Care: Quality Counts," 2002, pp. 64: Bethesda, MD.

¹³ NEA Education Association Handbook, Resolution B-1.

Resources

NEA on Prekindergarten and Kindergarten is NEA's policy roadmap for early childhood education. It was developed by NEA's Special Committee on Early Childhood Education and adopted by the 2004 NEA Representative Assembly. www.nea.org/assets/docs/mf_prekinder.pdf

"Early Childhood Education and School Readiness" is an NEA policy brief that outlines the importance of early childhood education in preparing young children for elementary school. www.nea.org/assets/docs/mf_PB03_EarlyChildhood.pdf

"Full-day Kindergarten Helps Close the Achievement Gaps" is an NEA policy brief that discusses the importance of providing young children with a full day of kindergarten to maintain the progress achieved in early childhood programs. www.nea.org/assets/docs/mf_PB12_FullDayK.pdf

"Workforce Designs: A Policy Blueprint for State Early Childhood Professional Development Systems," published by the National Association for the Education of Young Children, focuses on state policies to improve professional development systems for early childhood educators. www.naeyc.org/files/naeyc/files/policy/ecwsi/Workforce_Designs.pdf

National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) State Preschool Yearbook is an annual survey of state-funded preschool programs. <http://nieer.org>