



Increasing Qualifications, Centering Equity

Experiences and Advice from
Early Childhood Educators of Color

naeyc[®]

National Association for the
Education of Young Children

In collaboration with
The Education Trust

Introduction

“Our diversity is our strength.” This phrase, oft-repeated among many early childhood education leaders, stems from the field’s roots in developmentally appropriate practice and its embrace of anti-bias principles. It also reflects a demographic reality: in terms of race and ethnicity, educators of children birth through age 5 nearly mirror the children they serve.¹ Research demonstrates that this is a positive aspect of the early childhood education field; numerous studies have shown that having teachers who look like their students of color benefits all students academically, socially, and emotionally.² Yet it is a goal that has been consistently out of reach for the K–12 workforce across the country, making its reality in early childhood education both unique and valuable.

At the same time, what does the reality—and the language celebrating it—mean when the policies and systems that shape the field do not build on this strength of diversity and, indeed, may weaken it? What does it mean in the context of a field that has suffered through decades of underfunding? What does it mean when the field, largely made up of women of color, is undervalued, underpaid, and unsupported? Finally, what does it mean when the early childhood field is grappling with a series of substantive conversations and policy changes designed to “professionalize” the workforce in response to an increasing understanding of early brain development and the importance of early childhood educators having and demonstrating a complex set of skills and competencies?

This process of “professionalizing” includes, among other things, increasing educational requirements. These requirements have the potential to directly impact early childhood educators of color because Black and Latino early childhood educators are less likely to hold a bachelor’s degree and more likely to have high school as their highest level of attainment than White or Asian educators.³ Yet we know that as the floor for qualifications is raised for those who serve as early childhood educators, racial, cultural, and linguistic diversity has to remain a cornerstone in defining what it means to have a high-quality workforce.

In some states, cities, and settings, policy changes increasing educational requirements have been implemented already; in others, the changes are still being debated. As such, the field is at a critical point. The early childhood and higher education



systems supporting those working with children birth through age 5 are not currently structured or adequately funded to support millions of early childhood educators to attain high-quality degrees and then compensate them fairly for their education and expertise. If district, state, and federal policies impose new educational requirements without addressing systemic inequities (including revising current structures and supports, and financing these changes), they will—without question—deepen existing divisions along racial, geographic, socioeconomic, and linguistic lines.

As such, it is a necessity for policymakers and advocates to attend to and mitigate potentially negative outcomes, namely a decrease in the diversity of the early childhood education workforce that could result from increasing educational requirements.

To prepare to translate attention into action on this issue, we looked to center the voices of early childhood educators of color in answering the following questions:

- How do early childhood educators of color perceive policies that raise the educational requirements they have to reach in order to keep their jobs?
- In what ways, if any, has the implementation of these policies impacted the career trajectories of early childhood educators of color?
- What advice do early childhood educators of color who have “lived through” these policy changes have for policymakers and leaders heading toward similar change?

A SNAPSHOT OF EDUCATIONAL REQUIREMENTS FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS

Educational requirements for early childhood educators are all over the map. Of states with public pre-K programs, 23 require a minimum of a bachelor's degree for lead teachers across all pre-K settings and programs, while an additional 14 states require a bachelor's for lead teachers in certain types of pre-K programs or settings, such as public schools.⁴ For Head Start, Congress set a requirement in 2007 that 50% of its workforce of center-based lead teachers had to earn a bachelor's degree or higher in early childhood education or a related field (at that time, 44% met such a requirement; it is now 73%).⁵ Yet states have varied significantly in their success: More than 90% of Head Start teachers in West Virginia and the District of Columbia hold a bachelor's degree or higher, while only 36% of teachers in New Mexico claim the same.⁶ In some states, Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) have incentivized degree attainment by requiring it in

order for programs to achieve the higher levels of the system that then trigger increased payment rates. Notably, however, these increased payment rates are frequently insufficient to ensure increased compensation for educators. At the same time, when it comes to the entirety of the birth-through-five workforce, there are approximately 2 million early childhood educators (serving more than 12 million children), with half working in a paid family-based child care setting.⁷ While early childhood educators in these family-based settings are also responsible for the growth and development of young children, the settings in which they work are often and by requirement subject only to child care licensing, where educational qualifications are generally minimal. Yet even here, change is afoot. The District of Columbia, for example, recently established a requirement that set the floor at an associate's degree for all lead teachers working in licensed child care settings.⁸



The following sections in this paper explore the responses, reactions, and recommendations from 50 early childhood educators of color located in three states: New Jersey, North Carolina, and Wisconsin. We selected these states because they have already made statewide policy changes related to educational qualifications and requirements. While the educators who participated in the focus groups are representative of their states, and their

stories and recommendations are compelling, we note that the sample is limited and can't be used to draw conclusions about early childhood educators of color nationwide. As such, when we reference early childhood educators of color in this document, we are primarily referring only to those who participated in these focus groups, and not early childhood educators of color overall. (See Appendix A for the details and methodology of the project.)

CENTERING AND PRIORITIZING EDUCATORS' VOICES

Over the past few years The Education Trust has been listening to and learning from Black and Latino teachers across the country. In this work, Ed Trust elevated the voices of Black and Latino teachers as they discussed their experiences and the challenges they faced while navigating the workforce. In the same period, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) launched the Power to the Profession initiative with 14 other organizations to put the experiences and voices of early childhood educators front and center in developing a unified framework for the future of

the profession. In the face of policy movement to increase educational requirements in the early childhood workforce, both organizations are invested in maintaining and increasing diversity in the early childhood education field. Given these backgrounds, we were excited to join together, with Ed Trust bringing its research expertise in this field and NAEYC bringing its content expertise. This paper is the result of that partnership, and shares early childhood educators' words and guidance, as well as our learnings and the policy implications that build on their insights.

The Gift and Challenge of Policy Change

While educators eventually acknowledged higher educational degrees provided an immense opportunity for them to hone their skills and improve their practice, this wasn't the initial response to policy changes requiring those degrees.

The policy change was first met with fear, anger, and anxiety as early childhood educators of color were left to figure out how they would meet the new requirements. There was a sense of the "unknown" in that this was uncharted territory for most of them. And they were unsure how they could meet this challenge while continuing to serve their students. They remembered thinking:

“I feel bullied.”

“I feel pressured.”

“I'm supposed to be open from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m., caring for up to eight children, babies. I'm dealing with possibly six, seven different families, parents. I'm dealing with the kids, I'm dealing with my home, and then you're telling me that I need to go back to school ... when?”





Their fear and anxiety weren't the only emotions that rose in response to the policy change. They also felt disrespected. These early childhood educators were proud of their experience in the field and remembered originally scoffing at the thought that—after all of the work they had done—they would need more training to continue their employment. The disrespect they felt was not geared to the higher requirements themselves, but resulted more from a feeling that they weren't receiving the credit they deserved for the work that they did, and that the change was being implemented in ways that disregarded them and the reality of their work.

“So now you're telling me—I've been in the business almost over 20-something years, have got my CDA [Child Development Associate] credential, have just about all the credentials [and] now you're telling me that I have to have an associate degree?”

“I don't want to have to be told that unless I get this [degree], then my career is over after I've done all this, you know?”

After the initial response however, a number of the early childhood educators understood the positive implications of more education and a deeper level of knowledge about children and the early childhood education system. Though they didn't necessarily immediately embrace the policy change, they did recognize that the opportunity to develop professionally was valuable. Participants didn't have a problem with the policy change as much as they had a problem with the process of the change and, in some cases, the lack of supports implemented to help them and others meet the new requirement.

“I don't have a problem going to school. I don't have a problem going to get whatever I need.”

“That's pretty much what pushed me, because I'd never been in a center that had a lot of children with disabilities. I didn't have a lot of education in that, so that's why I needed to go back to school to learn, you know, some strategies ... because I don't have all the answers, you know.”

Book Knowledge + Hands-on Experience

The appreciation for more education was anchored in the fact that the participants agreed that the knowledge found in courses could complement the years of experience they already had. Though the early childhood educators of color initially bristled at the requirement of more education, they came to better understand how society is changing and how they needed to grow and adapt to meet the changing needs of children and their families.

“I need the knowledge because every day things are changing.”

“We have challenges every day and I just needed more strategies to help me be able to meet kids where they were.”

The early childhood educators of color recounted stories of how, as they progressed through their coursework, they were able to take what they learned in class and apply it to their experiences in their classrooms, homes, and centers. Participants frequently reflected on their “later-in-their-career” coursework as something that gave them the theoretical grounding to explain their instinctual

and experiential knowledge. As one early childhood educator noted, “The educational part was just confirmation of what I always thought but didn’t have the book knowledge to back it up.” Others recognized that their coursework deepened and strengthened their practice because it gave them a better understanding of “why [children] do what they do.”

“It made me look at how I was teaching [children], and then when I started changing my language and how I was teaching them I saw the difference.”

“We pretty much just focused on [children’s] development, what they need, how we need to approach them; you know, the care and concern that we have to give to them, the respect that we have to have for all backgrounds in regards to where they come from. It was a very, very great experience.”



The early childhood educators of color also found that more education meant better interactions with parents, especially when they challenged practices or had questions about how their child was progressing. Though family engagement is not often taught in associate and bachelor's degrees to the needed levels, the early childhood educators of color learned how to communicate more effectively and support their practice with evidence from the field.⁹ For example, participants spoke about their students learning through playing. Based on their increased knowledge of the theories, principles, and research of child development, they could talk parents through their children's developmental trajectories and what they were learning as they engaged in play-based activities.

“I definitely see a big difference with teachers that have the education; they are more patient, individualizing, educating the parents, but educating the parents in a way, understanding that the parent is the first teacher, and we're here to help.”

Even with all of the benefits their coursework provided, the early childhood educators of color still wanted us to know that the book knowledge could never replace what they learned from their experiences in the field. Indeed, many of the participants noted their belief that there is no way to be successful in the field without having the hands-on knowledge that only comes from working with children.

“We should have an education, but just like she said, my experience totally outweighs what you can tell me.”

“I can get all the experience and all the college education in the world, but when it comes down to putting a child in my presence, my experience and my knowledge don't have to be based around those credentials.”

“So at the end of the day you still need your seasoned people. Because if it ain't got no salt, it's not going to taste too good.”



Personal and Professional Growth

While our findings show that there was some tension between the weight of educational versus experiential knowledge, there was no debate over the benefits received from meeting the higher educational requirement. The early childhood educators of color universally agreed that this achievement propelled them forward as people and professionals, and that it enhanced the public's perception of their profession. Participants grew in three primary ways: credibility in their field, opportunities for advancement, and the development of their voice as an advocate for themselves and the children.

Credibility in Their Field

To begin with, meeting the higher education requirement conferred status: the early childhood educators of color felt that the achievement itself showed the public that being an early childhood educator means more than just babysitting—it means that early childhood educators are professionals. (To be clear, it's not that participants themselves felt that they were just babysitters before meeting the new requirements, but they knew that the public has a certain perception of their field.) The attainment of a credential or degree translated directly, in their minds, to more respect from the public for the profession and those who are providing services to children and their families. This is critical, because changing the perception of the public could go a long way toward enhancing current and future early childhood educators' experiences in the workforce.

“That [assumption about educators in] early childhood just has to change, and it is changing, because we're not babysitters.”

“People respect people that have an education.”

“It's not respected.... They didn't understand that we're teachers as well.”

Opportunities for Advancement

Earning a credential or degree also opened doors of opportunity for the participants, including laying out pathways to leadership, shattering stereotypes, and building a foundation to build upon if they want to change career direction. Though some of the members of the early childhood field actively choose to go into this line of work, many others fell into the workforce based on life circumstances. Of those we talked to, some began by caring for their own children and realized they could make money as a child care provider for others. Others really loved kids and serving their families. However, meeting the higher educational requirements helped them see just how much they could do within this profession—and opened the door to other fields and professions, as well.

“It just pushed me to just want more, and it just opened a lot of doors for me, because I wasn't that statistic that people thought I was going to be, because of my background, being a teen mom and all of that. It was just like I'm going to break down all these barriers, and that was just a stepping-stone to help catapult me to be in a position to have doors open for me.”

SMALL BUSINESS SUCCESS

For many of the participants who are small-business owners running their own family-based child care, professional development that supported them to successfully build their business was essential. These participants were not looking at their profession solely as being an early childhood educator. They had a completely different set of responsibilities that they had to meet to be successful. And while the increased educational requirements are directly linked to content around early childhood education, the participants also spoke of learning skills that were directly tied to their businesses, such as computer skills, better budgeting practices, and financial goal setting. They would not have received this type of training without attaining higher education requirements. They also spoke about how they met other business owners who, for example, showed them more efficient ways to accept payments and other strategies to streamline their business models. This type of knowledge and networking is critical to the success of a mixed-delivery model in early childhood education. As the Alliance for Early Childhood Finance has noted, “weak business platforms don’t just hurt ECE [early childhood education] businesses, they hurt children and families as well. Without strong fiscal and program management, quality suffers: revenues decline and teachers don’t get the support they need to effectively guide children’s behavior, implement curricula, identify delays or offer additional child and family supports.”¹⁰ Business acumen is not a requirement for the competencies that should be demonstrated by all those in the early childhood education profession, but it is critical for some individuals. Policymakers should ensure that resources and supports are provided to help early childhood businesses become stronger, more financially sound and efficient, and better equipped to offer high-quality early learning opportunities.

Developing Their Advocacy Voice

Lastly, the process that it took to complete their coursework helped the participants develop their voices as advocates. With increased knowledge and a broader perspective of the profession, the participants had a much better understanding of the complexities of the field. These complexities include policies and systems that contribute to educator turnover and push prospective early childhood educators of color away from the field. Early childhood educators of color spoke about how they have turned their knowledge into power and advocated for themselves and their colleagues to have access to more benefits, higher wages, and more financial support for those who want to meet higher education requirements.

- “It’s helped me to realize that I have a voice. I’m a part of many different organizations across the state. I did an NPR interview [on the scholarship and financial support programs].”
- “It empowered me, and I found something in me that I didn’t know I had. I became an advocate for the preschool teachers in my area where I worked, and I formed an organization and collected over 150 signatures for the preschool teachers and worked towards having ... the medical [insurance], and a salary that was similar.”

Both/And: “We’re not saying we don’t want to do it. We’re saying we need support to get it done.”

As full-time workers who are frequently women of color earning poverty-level wages, and who are often parents themselves, early childhood educators confront a number of barriers in accessing and attaining higher education degrees. As such, when policies change so that degrees become requirements, it is our collective obligation to support early childhood educators of color in tangible ways that respond to their expressed needs. As we move forward to ensure that early childhood educators can reap the benefits of higher

education for themselves, their families, and the children in their programs, policymakers can learn from the recommendations of educators who have lived experiences with increased qualifications, and can share what is needed to succeed.

SUPPORTING EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS

Through a range of programs and approaches, many states have committed to supporting early childhood educators to earn credentials and degrees, including the three states in which our focus groups were held. In North Carolina and Wisconsin, as in 20 other states and the District of Columbia, states are providing support to educators through the T.E.A.C.H. (Teacher Education and Compensation Helps) Early Childhood initiative. T.E.A.C.H. provides debt-free college education with comprehensive support for the early education workforce and has helped more than 150,000 early childhood educators around the country, resulting in increased education, retention, and compensation.¹¹ In New Jersey, the same court case (Abbott v. Burke) which helped thousands of children living in 31 of the state’s poorest school districts gain access to high-quality early childhood education also helped thousands of early childhood educators working in preschool classrooms in those same districts gain access to high-quality higher education. The focus on educators in New Jersey resulted from the ruling of the state Supreme Court that “well-educated and certified teachers were a

critical component of high-quality preschool” and, further, that a series of supports were required to help teachers in non-district settings meet the deadline to earn a bachelor’s degree with certification.¹² Those supports included policies, funding, and information that aided teachers, programs, colleges, and others in their attempts to meet the new education requirements. Though they vary in structure and reach, as T.E.A.C.H. includes educators working with children birth through age 5 while Abbott focused on those working with 3- and 4-year-olds, the success of both of these programs rests directly on the responsiveness to and centering of the needs of the early childhood workforce. When, for example, transportation was identified as an obstacle, transportation stipends were provided. When it was clear that educators were unable to purchase books for their coursework, the scholarship structures were adapted to make those expenses both allowable and possible. Higher education classes were brought directly into the communities, and funding was structured so that payments were made upfront, to avoid placing the burden on educators to rely on reimbursements.

Systems of Support

In the focus groups, the early childhood educators of color highlighted four interconnected buckets of support systems—financial, workplace, higher education, and personal—that policymakers should focus on to maintain and eventually increase the workforce’s diversity.

Financial Supports

Participants made it unequivocally clear that providing significant financial support is non-negotiable. Many do not have the means or the willingness to take out loans to reach the higher educational requirements they are being encouraged or required to earn. In many cases, the educators we talked to did have access to these supports, and they believe that there must be a combination of financial incentives and scholarship support for all early childhood educators who are going to have to go (or go back) to school.

“If you want me to go back to school, you want me to go out and do practicums, find money, find a way so it’s not coming out of my pocket.”

“Financially support us so we can continue to get our education. We’re not saying we don’t want to do it. We need support.”

“If we have to go back to school to get [an] associate or bachelor’s degree, give us an incentive to do it. Help us pay for it. A lot of us cannot afford it.”

Workplace Supports

The participants also talked about the need to have flexible and supportive workplaces and supervisors, which means allowing them to leave early to go to class or study in the office. Connected to this flexibility is a requirement for substitutes. This is an enormous and essential need: licensing requirements dictate certain ratios of adults to children, which can’t be broken for an early childhood educator who needs to take classes during her shift at work or to find time to complete assignments.

“Pay for me to have a sub while I have pickup time, so I can go to the back of my house or upstairs to do my homework.”

The requirements can pose a major logistical challenge for directors, who are a critical part of a successful journey, as illuminated repeatedly by the participants. They have the power to set schedules and provide many of the resources early childhood educators need to be successful. Directors also serve as a source of moral support or as a powerful obstacle. When it works, it really works; as one participant noted:

“My director has been very supportive. She’s like, ‘Are you taking classes this semester? How is it going?’ She gives me the time, like if I’m getting stressed out she gives me the time that I need to just start to pull myself back together, because it does get stressful, dealing with kids all day and then going home and classes all night.”

Indeed, many extraordinary directors and managers have taken on Herculean tasks to create systems that ease challenges their early childhood educators face. However, others—for various reasons—have rejected early childhood educators' requests to leave work early to go to class or prohibited them from studying while on the clock. In the participants' telling, many of their managers lack a degree or have not had to meet higher education requirements. Thus, they were not able to help guide participants.

“They couldn't understand, why [do I] need prep time? [They said] ‘You can just do this at home.’ You know, like they couldn't make those connections.”

“So it was very, very difficult for me to do.... I had to go late to [my college] class every day, because I cannot get out of the classroom that early, like I wanted to. And when I started to write my papers or anything, if I said, ‘Can I have a few hours to do something?’ it was like, ‘No. You're in a classroom and you have to be working here. When you get home, you do that.’ And I don't have time to do that at home, because I have little ones I have to take care of.”

“Our director wouldn't sign off for me to participate in the [scholarship program]. So I had a hard time, so I ended up paying out of pocket for a little while.... We ended up switching directors and that director was a big advocate.”

Higher Education Supports

The pursuit of more education for early childhood educators is a process currently defined by a lack of coherence, affordability, flexibility, and transparency. These flaws are readily apparent from the interactions early childhood educators of color had with systems in institutions of higher education. They also reported significant variations in the content and quality of their training as a function of higher education setting. This reality is clear in the participants' stories, such as this one:

“[One college said that] I needed 86 credits to get my degree even though I have an associate degree. They then said that's going to take you about 5 years if you go part-time, and 2.5 years fulltime. I said I don't have time like that. Then I heard from another friend about another school. So I met with an advisor, she told me I needed only 33 credits to graduate, and I was able to graduate within 2 years, part-time, and to receive my bachelor's degree. [Some schools] are going to tell you that you need to take all these extra classes, charge you extra money, and then even though you have the scholarship, you're still going to be in debt.”

Systems of Support

Another concern shared by some participants was that, in some cases, the content of the credential was not specified or, worse, it was immaterial.

- “I have a bachelor’s degree, and I entered with a bachelor’s degree, but it’s not in early education.”
- “What I found was kind of ironic when I got here, that my level was still so high, my registry level in terms of my qualifications was so high because I have a bachelor’s, but I was shocked because ... it’s not a bachelor’s in [early childhood].”

Such confusion and complexity pose significant challenges to the early childhood educators who need a higher education system that is set up to support their success. Early childhood educators who are students need, for example, to be able to take classes that are amenable to their working situations and schedules, including online classes, classes offered at or near the places where they work and/or live, and classes offered in the evenings and on the weekends. Higher education needs to meet people where they are.

- “I had to find a school that was going to be right for me, there weren’t a lot of schools that offered the whole, complete online program in your field, but now they do.”
- “I’m online so I can pretty much do my [course] work whenever, I don’t have the problem of not being able to get off work.”

When higher education is consistent and clear in its expectations, and flexible in helping students meet those expectations, early childhood educators are more likely to succeed.



Personal Supports

Although policymakers are limited in their ability to impact this particular support system, it is clear that peers and family members are critical to individual success. As the participants said:

- “You have to have that support from other family members, number one.”
- “We talked and shared and did things to help out one another.”
- “It was a challenge ... and my husband was very encouraging, because he said ... ‘education you can have and it will never get old, it will never get worn out.’ So I decided to do that.”

Compensation

The Elephant in the Room

Wages should increase as qualifications increase, or as a participant put it, “When you are making these changes, the income needs to go up.” Increased compensation, which must include benefits, is the critical incentive that educators must get when they earn additional credentials and degrees. Early childhood educators should be able to continue using their talents to work directly with children and families over the entire course of their career without requiring significant personal and financial sacrifices. As one early childhood educator of color noted, in a reality reflected by many educators across the country, “I wouldn’t be able to do child care if it wasn’t for my husband, because he’s the one that has the insurance and the benefits.” In fact, a number of our participants spoke about the lack of benefits they receive as early childhood educators.

Yet in the current state of early childhood education, wages don’t increase as qualifications increase, and qualifications don’t offer meaningful career choices.

“The early childhood field has definitely been left out when it’s come to wage increases.”

“Our raises are not even [equal to] the cost of living. It doesn’t even benefit your household.”

In many ways, the promise of increased compensation has been largely unfulfilled. Early childhood educators of color reported either being implicitly or explicitly told they would see a raise when the policy change rolled out, but then saw a very different thing occur after they met the increased education requirements.

“You said, go get your associate degree and this is what we’re going to do for you. Now it’s, go get your bachelor’s degree and this is what we’re going to do for you. And I said after that will it be, go get your master’s degree? You know, those were empty words to me.”

In some instances, participants found that earning a credential or degree financially assisted the centers, but not the individual educator. In one of our focus groups, a number of our participants expressed that in their state, centers are rated more favorably when they have employees with higher credentials, which means increased payment rates. However, though the centers earn additional money by employing staff with higher credentials, the staff members report that they do not earn more in their salaries. As a result, the participants voiced concerns about whether and how to ensure they would receive better compensation as a result of increased qualifications (through, for example, tiered reimbursement rates in a state’s Quality Rating and Improvement Systems).

WAGE DISPARITIES FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS OF COLOR

There is a significant wage disparity for early childhood educators of color, a fact that many participants are likely experiencing, possibly without knowing it. Nationally, on average, African American female early childhood educators working full time in settings that serve children

ages 0–5 make 84 cents for every \$1 earned by their white counterparts. White teachers working full-time with this same age group make an average of \$13.86 per hour. This 16% gap means African American teachers make \$366 less per month and \$4,395 less per year, on average.¹³

Respect the Profession

Understand Our Work, Compensate Us, Hold Us Accountable, and Bring Us to the Table

During the focus groups, we asked what they, as early childhood educators of color, would say to a policymaker who is considering increasing the requirements to be an early childhood educator. The participants' thoughts can be summarized by one phrase: respect the profession. But what does that mean? First, it means acknowledging what it takes to do what they do. The early childhood educators of color felt that those who are making decisions have a very limited understanding of what they do on a daily basis, and as such they have no way to make effective policy change. They felt that policymakers need to come into the field and see what early childhood educators and students need in order for them to make changes that will achieve their goals.

“My thing is all these politicians and people making all these rules, so when have they been to our schools? Are they actually coming to our schools and seeing what we do, talk to us, talk to the parents? I mean, they're making all these rules and regulations, but they really don't even know what we do. They're telling us we can't do this and we should be doing this and we have to follow this, but have you been to my school? Do you know exactly what I'm doing in my classroom? Do you know my children are speaking two and three different languages? Do you know this? They don't.”

Second, respecting the profession means investing in it. No educator should earn a wage insufficient for sustaining a family, yet child care workers make an average of just \$10.72 per hour and preschool teachers earn an average of \$13.94 per hour, with roughly half of these educators living in families accessing public benefits.¹⁴

Early childhood educators should be compensated at a level that is commensurate with their abilities and the complex and demanding work that they do, particularly because it will benefit children. Indeed, research demonstrates that higher-paid teachers provide higher-quality care and that educator shortages are driven by lack of compensation.¹⁵ In addition, part of investing in educators means ensuring sufficient funding for scholarship programs and financial support for educators to earn degrees and credentials.

Third, respect means accountability. Participants in the focus groups noted that, in some places, the policy changes relative to education requirements also coincided with how their settings were evaluated for quality. They felt that the evaluations weren't focused on the right measures—the things that really drive quality. As one early childhood educator noted,

“And see, that's a pet peeve of mine, a barrier, because they don't want to see us interacting with the kids. They want our folders; they want our paperwork, our shot records and whatever else. What about you seeing me interact with these kids?”

When we ask early childhood educators to increase their own knowledge, skills, and capacities, they want to be assessed and evaluated on those skills, those relationships, and their abilities to actually advance children's learning and development.

Finally, respect means inclusion. The participants were clear that they want to be included in conversations around policies in the early childhood education space. They remarked that they have extremely valuable experience that should be accounted for in policy conversations. Also, they know that many of the people who are making these policy decisions have little experience in the field and could not know exactly what is needed in the workforce and in these early education environments.

“Before this policy is put into place, I would like to see it approved by people that have really been in this business.”

“Invite us to the table.”

Policy Implications



Policy decisions will be better informed and more likely to be successfully implemented if early childhood educators are at the table. As such, policymakers should take steps to ensure that early childhood educators' voices are heard in any and all decision-making processes. This can include steps such as: 1) supporting remote and video participation in legislative hearings and briefings; 2) requiring the inclusion of practicing early childhood educators in existing advisory councils; and 3) holding the council meetings at a time and place when and where those early childhood educators can attend. Policymakers should also provide stipends and transportation support so they can do so.

In addition, parents, educators, advocates, and policymakers can continue to learn from early childhood educators and invest in proven strategies. This should be done while also encouraging effective innovations that are designed to reach nontraditional students, eliminate existing barriers to higher education, and maintain a commitment to quality. The following 10 policy implications and recommendations emerged from the ideas and experiences that early childhood educators of color shared during our focus groups.

1. Make It Affordable and Accessible: Combining Debt-Free and Loan-Forgiveness Policies

To help students avoid the crushing burden of debt, early childhood educators, advocates, and allies should seek, when possible, to capitalize on the movement for tuition-free and/or debt-free access to higher education. Community colleges provide a particularly promising option, as they help prepare significant numbers of early childhood educators as part of their career pathway, and they frequently offer a greater degree of affordability and accessibility for working adults. In addition, because added costs (including travel, books, and substitutes) can exceed tuition, funding should be expanded

to include the comprehensive and associated costs of degree attainment and should be adapted for the needs of part-time, working students as well. When tuition-free and/or debt-free college is not an option, state and federal policymakers should invest in programs such as T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood and other comprehensive scholarship models. They support individual students and provide leverage to change policies at the institutional level.

2. Make It Possible:

Reduce and Eliminate Nonfinancial Barriers to Success

Early childhood educators are working all day and frequently caring for their own children at night. They need access to coursework that is high-quality, flexible, accessible, and available to them both online and on-site, with classes held at or near the places where they work. For those who speak a language other than English, coursework should be available in their home languages. For those with children, access to child care is critical. And all early childhood educators—regardless of the settings in which they work—need paid release time and substitute pools to succeed in their courses. In addition, though not raised in these specific focus groups, we have found that many early childhood educators, particularly those returning to school after time away, need specific support to pass the mass assessments required to continue college-level coursework. There are models that improve outcomes, such as embedding early childhood content coursework in remedial math courses, and those should be evaluated and expanded more broadly.

3. Make It Align with Our Realities: Count All Settings

As early childhood educators move between center, home, and school settings, and as families choose the setting that is right for them, all early childhood educators, regardless of the location in which they work, should have equal access to supports such as state and federal scholarships and loan forgiveness. In addition, all licensed early childhood education settings should be considered when students are engaged in their practica and field experiences. In particular, students should be able to complete their field requirements in the context of their current workplace.

4. Make It Meaningful: Establish Comparable Compensation for Comparable Qualifications

Early childhood educators with similar experience levels and qualifications should be comparably compensated regardless of whether they work in a community-based center, elementary school, or family-based child care home. They should not be discriminated against for working outside of public school pre-K settings. In addition, there should be a stable wage growth trajectory that parallels professional advancement; in other words, increased qualifications should equal increased compensation.

5. Make It More Efficient: Create Seamless, Articulated Teacher Preparation Pathways

Early childhood educators shouldn't have to wonder whether their credits will transfer as they move from a Child Development Associate credential (CDA) to an associate degree to a bachelor's degree. States and institutions of higher education can and should work together to make a seamless pathway a reality. This seamless pathway should also include degree programs with advisors and student-teacher supervisors who are culturally and linguistically competent, provide support for navigating the higher education process, and understand the personal and professional demands of their students.

6. Make It Feasible:

Lessen the Time It Takes

Educators to Reach Attainment

It can take an early childhood educator working full time six to eight years to earn an associate degree. Policies that institute educational requirements must account for these types of timelines, not least because placing the burden of faster completion rates on already pressured early childhood educators who are often working full time and doing personal battles with poverty, is likely to do no more than cause these educators to leave the system entirely. At the same time, we must also explore changes to the structure of course offerings and/or program plans to allow educators to navigate the process more efficiently. With additional investments in degree program infrastructure and supports for early childhood educators working to complete their degrees, we can streamline this process and lessen the time early childhood educators take to finish their programs.

7. Make It Real:

Value Experience with College Credit

Often used in the context of veterans and military training, federal and state governments are increasingly exploring the use of credit for prior learning (CPL) and prior learning assessments (PLA) for nonmilitary students. Though higher education institutional and state policies on credit for prior learning vary tremendously, advocates and policymakers can look to best practices when developing or expanding institutional and/or state policies that recognize and award credits for students' previously demonstrated competencies through prior work experience and apprenticeships.

8. Make It Supportive:

Use Cohort Models and Mentors

Cohort models, counselors, and mentors have been shown to make a difference in completion rates for first-generation and nontraditional students. These individuals can help students navigate higher education, handle the challenges of balancing work, family, and college, and support those who are struggling with the challenges of poverty. Degree programs should invest in and advocate for these models, both formal and informal, in order to boost chances of student success. Another key support for students, as we heard in the focus groups, comes from their employers; to the extent that administrators are therefore also required to meet equivalent qualifications as their teachers, it will help to ensure that supervisors can actively provide a supportive environment for the pursuit and attainment of further education.

9. Make It Consistent:

Streamline Accountability Systems

Multiple systems of accountability, including but not limited to QRIS, should be responsive to an agreed-upon set of competencies that are deemed necessary to be an effective, high-quality early childhood educator. This consistency will allow researchers and policymakers to have a shared understanding of which competencies and skills are valued by the profession and can increase pressure for institutions of higher education to adopt and embed those competencies in their courses of study.

10. Make It Bigger:

Think Outside the Classroom

Accessibility can be improved by bringing higher education into various communities. At the same time, early childhood educators need policymakers and institutions of higher education to think broadly about the ways they can put higher education within reach. This should include investments in expanded broadband internet access in rural areas and in extended public transportation infrastructure.

Conclusions: Looking Ahead

Much of the discussion around policy recommendations for early childhood educators is focused on advancing the current workforce. While this is appreciated and needed, the workforce at present also encourages a focus on the workforce of the future. This has implications for our K–12 system, which is graduating too many students, particularly students from communities of color, without the basic math, reading, and writing skills that allow them to perform adequately on assessments done by community colleges upon entry into the college.

It also has implications for the higher education and early childhood education fields; and, indeed, the focus group participants recognized that there needs to be a renewed commitment to recruitment in early childhood education. If the profession gains respect, and attendant compensation, they noted, it will be easier to get more people interested in the field, something which is not happening now.

“Students are not wanting to go to school to be teachers. My family has seen how I struggled, so they said, ‘Oh, I don’t want to teach’, and took a different avenue.... You know, they’re helping, supporting families, but they didn’t want to teach because they felt we didn’t have what we need.”

“I think it would be beneficial to go back to the high schools, go back to the colleges, to educate the kids now.... There is not that push of look, you could be an educator.”



In one memorable line, a focus group participant put it plainly: “We have got to make it sexy.” There’s no question that a better narrative is needed for a better future—one in which the early childhood education profession is well prepared, effective, and compensated, and as strong in its diversity as ever. To get there, though, prospective and current early childhood educators must see a network of supports that will facilitate their success in meeting higher education requirements and will result in more respect, more professional autonomy, and fair compensation for the high-value, complex, and demanding work they do.

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Methodology

To understand the implications of increased educational requirements on the early childhood education workforce, The Education Trust and NAEYC prioritized the voices of early childhood educators of color because their futures are likely to be most affected by the changes. Our specific aim in conducting this study was to explore the perceptions of early childhood educators of color who have experienced policy changes that increased the educational requirements necessary for educators to be employed.

Sample

For this project, The Education Trust enlisted the assistance of NAEYC contacts to build a sample of early childhood educators of color. We recruited 50 educators of color from three states—New Jersey, North Carolina, and Wisconsin—with the support of state organizations including Advocates for Children of New Jersey, T.E.A.CH. Early Childhood North Carolina and the Wisconsin Early Childhood Association. We selected these states because they have already made statewide policy changes related to educational qualifications and requirements. We note that our sample in this study is limited and can't be used to draw conclusions about early childhood educators of color nationwide.

Procedure

In 60–90 minute focus groups, participants discussed questions exploring their perceptions about the journey toward earning a credential or degree, policies that require educators to have a credential or degree, and supports needed to help educators earn a credential or degree. They also provided feedback for policymakers and leaders to help early childhood educators of color remain in the field while earning a credential or degree. A total of 5 focus groups were conducted, resulting in each group having 4 to 16 participants. This allowed sufficient time for each participant to be heard. Each participant received a \$25 Visa gift card.

Data Analysis

Data were coded using a constant comparative analysis. In phase one, we read the interview data to garner familiarity with the text and to analyze the content for themes. In phase two, we created notes in which a list of themes emerged. We then coded appropriate sections of the text with designated themes and from this sorted them according to specific thematic topic areas. We then merged similar themes together into an overarching theme. To establish inter-rater reliability, we randomly selected three transcripts, and each researcher coded each transcript.

Following this, we discussed themes that arose and compared themes coded. We continued discussions until a consensus was reached on all of themes of the coded transcripts. During phase three, we decided on the criteria to use for coding the remaining focus group data. This phase employed the use of qualitative data analysis software. For the purpose of this paper, we highlight several significant themes by weaving a story of participants' initial reactions to the prospect of earning a credential, their reflections on their experiences, and their recommendations to policymakers on how to ease this transition for other early childhood educators of color.

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