

# Requiring Early Childhood Degrees Is the Right Strategy!

As the importance and use of formal early childhood education programs has grown, pundits have raised questions about the worth of such programs. In particular, with increasing use of public funding for early care and education, observers have asked how much they cost in relation to their benefit and whether teachers of young children are really teachers. To address some of these questions, the National Academy of Medicine (NAM), a part of our nation's most esteemed scientific body, the National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine convened a panel to study the science of early childhood development and to examine what educators working with children from birth to eight need to know and be able to do. I had hoped that their examination of the issue as presented in "[Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation](#)", and their recommendation that we as a nation move to requiring all teachers of young children have a bachelor's degree, would significantly advance our policies and thinking about teachers of young children.

Sadly, this has not proven to be the case, and a recent spate of ill-informed commentaries require some correction. The recent news that a single jurisdiction, the District of Columbia, has mandated that all ECE teachers have at least an associate degree in early childhood education or its equivalent in the next few years has resulted in a number of responses in which various commentators have claimed: that (1) requiring a college education for an early childhood teacher is either unnecessary or impossible or both; (2) a minimum education requirement will threaten the employment of the current ECE workforce because they are incapable of completing a college education; and (3) employing teachers with college degrees will make needed child care unaffordable for working parents and low-income families who need it most. There is considerable evidence that each of these assertions is untrue, and that the failure to appreciate this fact may lead to public policies that will turn the clock backward for families and teachers, and could adversely affect the future of this nation by failing to optimize the future potential of its youngest citizens.

The NAM report summarizes the science of what young children need in their early childhood

teachers and makes the case for a minimum of a bachelor's degree. In this respect, the US situation can be clarified by international comparisons. A number of years ago on an early childhood study visit to France, I learned a little about the requirements for early childhood teachers in their system. The first step in their education is earning what is the equivalent to a bachelor's of arts degree in any number of disciplines, from history to French, to mathematics to sociology. Basically the French expect their teachers to have a well-rounded education on which to build their specialized learning in early childhood education, which involves an additional two years of study.

In our work with over 135,000 T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood® scholarship recipients across the country, we have found that so many must take remedial English and math coursework to bring them up to the college level. They gain a level of proficiency in communication and math that they may never have had when they graduated high school. This has only strengthened them as teachers, who are better able to work with young children and to communicate more effectively with families. And the general studies coursework provides them with greater skills in critical thinking, information gathering, writing and understanding of the human condition. We also know that children with parents who have college degrees have significantly more vocabulary by the time they are three, which sets them on the path for reading and school success. Yet many children in early childhood settings often spend most of their waking hours 5 days a week for their first 5 years with someone other than their parents. Shouldn't we want that person in loco parentis to have a college degree, if the evidence is so strong that it matters for parents?

[The National Survey of Early Childhood Care and Education](#) found, using survey data from 2012, that 53% of teachers working in center-based settings already have two-year, four-year or advanced degrees. The federal government already requires degrees for teachers working in Head Start, with all teachers having at least an Associate Degree in Early Childhood Education and at least 50% of all teachers working in Head Start programs nationally having a bachelor's degree. And many state and federally funded Pre-K

teachers are required to have at least a bachelor's degree, with many states also requiring a teaching license. In addition, many states, as part of their Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) have also required teachers to have at least two-year degrees at the highest levels. And to their credit, the District of Columbia has recently set a new requirement for all teachers working in child care centers to have least an associate degree in early childhood education or its equivalent. But the debate continues, as evidenced by the negative responses by many to this new standard. And recent articles from [New America](#) and [The Atlantic](#) have also questioned the need for and affordability of teachers with bachelor's degrees.

I want to make the case for degreed teachers in all early care and education programs, recognizing that this will be a long journey. Requiring an Associate Degree in Early Childhood Education, like DC did, may be a good start along this path, and there is evidence that it can and should be done. In both the [Washington Post](#) article on the DC decision and in the New America article, the T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood® initiative was mentioned as a mechanism that could help teachers get their degrees.

About 27 years ago in North Carolina we had to take a hard look at our child care system and the people who were teaching and caring for our young children. It was not a pretty picture. Less than 10% of our teaching workforce had a two or four year degree in anything, the turnover rate was over 40%, salaries were abysmal and most child care centers did not require or support any professional development of their teachers. We wanted to create a strategy that would help change this. We began with some assumptions. We assumed that if we provided our workforce with the opportunity to go to college to earn credentials and degrees, AND we really supported their journey into higher education, that they would and could be successful. But our assumptions were informed (and transformed) by data. Our research said that teachers wanted a degree, but that barriers in their personal lives, in their centers and in higher education made it very hard.

So using these data we crafted the T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood® scholarship model that was based on addressing some of those barriers, both economic (cost of tuition, books, travel, paid release time) and social (lack of personal and employer support) barriers,

and on the belief that we could leverage higher education to better meet the needs of working, diverse early childhood students. We tested the model with

- Teachers, family child care educators and program directors,
- Credentials and two- and four-year degrees ...and now with master's degrees,
- First generation students, teachers who had never taken a college course and teachers who had started and stopped,
- Racially and ethnically diverse populations,
- Diverse ages of the women and some men,
- Those working in both rural and urban communities and in child care, Head Start and Pre-K settings, and
- Multiple states.

The results have been amazing!

First, because the scholarships really provide the amount and types of financial support to ensure a debt-free college education and the social support provided by a personal coach and an engaged employer, T.E.A.C.H. recipients have been incredibly successful. In FY16, almost 16,000 T.E.A.C.H. scholarship recipients in 23 states and the District of Columbia were on a pathway to earn credentials and degrees. Those working on degrees completed 14-17 credit hours a year while working full time, with average GPAs that exceeded 3.2. Their compensation increased about 8% annually while on the scholarship and they now have greater job and career mobility in the short term and for a lifetime. And turnover rates for those on scholarships to earn associate and bachelor's degrees last year were 4-6% - something that provides continuity for children and stability for the programs in which they work. And year after year, the fact that half of our T.E.A.C.H. population nationally are first generation college students, makes these accomplishments even more notable.

The multigenerational impact of this education and these degrees is an important outcome of the program as well. First, the children in their classrooms are immediately benefiting from a more knowledgeable and more engaged teacher. A recent meta-analysis done from the [Campbell Collaboration](#) found a consistent positive relationship between teacher qualifications and the quality of the early childhood classrooms when examining the results in 48 studies worldwide. Second, because it may take a number of years for teachers to complete their degrees and

because T.E.A.C.H. scholarship recipient turnover is so low, multiple cohorts of children are benefiting from better performing teachers. Third, most T.E.A.C.H. recipients are themselves parents, with children and perhaps grandchildren of their own. Since half of T.E.A.C.H. recipients are the first in their families to go to college, the educational trajectory of their own children is likely changed, creating the potential for a future lifetime of better career and earnings potential. Finally, the compensation for T.E.A.C.H. recipients improves each year they are on the scholarship and then after they earn their degrees. The recent [T.E.A.C.H. national report](#) profiles three individuals with significant wage gains over time, and these are pretty typical. While T.E.A.C.H. doesn't solve the compensation problem for the field, for those who have earned their degrees, there is a real economic pay off.

A recent [study](#) found that children perform better in school where they have had teachers of their same race. Unlike in public schools, teachers working in child care, Head Start and Pre-K settings have historically been more likely to look like the children they are serving. Almost one-half of the T.E.A.C.H. scholarship population are women of color or of Hispanic origin. We have more evidence when we look at NC's early childhood workforce, where T.E.A.C.H. scholarships have been universally available for over 25 years. Forty-seven percent of NC's ECE workforce are people of color...growing more diverse in the last 5 years. The latest NC workforce [study](#) found that race was not a factor in which teachers had degrees. When looking at those with degrees specifically in early childhood education, there is virtually no difference between white teachers (39%) and teachers of color (38%) suggesting that NC is achieving equity of access to education for its diverse early childhood workforce. Overall, education levels of the NC workforce continue to increase, with 74% of teachers of 3-5 year olds and 52% of teachers of infants and toddlers having earned degrees. And there has been a 16% increase in program directors of color over the last 12 years, because teachers have degrees and become directors, and in some cases directors who never had degrees have gone back to school and earned one.

We should not and cannot sell the early childhood workforce short; they can meet the challenge of degree requirements. People said Head Start teachers couldn't meet the degree requirements. They

have exceeded them. The same thing has been said about higher education requirements in states' Quality Rating and Improvement Systems and in Pre-K programs. Yet teachers are meeting those standards as well. The NC case study of the dramatic shift in the education of the workforce is an example, both of the power of increasing standards, but more importantly what supports are needed to help the workforce achieve their dream. We started the work in NC by asking the workforce if they wanted to earn a degree. Their messages were clear. For most in our field it has been a lifelong and unrealized dream. But with the right economic and social supports, they can and will do it.

Finally, to those who say we cannot afford what it will cost to support teachers in their pursuit of degrees or in the additional funding that will be needed to fairly compensate this professionalized workforce, I say we really have no choice. Many years ago we figured out that our society needed its citizens educated and we created public schools and set professional standards for teachers. We have used federal, state and local dollars to do this, because we believed that our society would be better served if all of its citizens had a sound basic education. But now science is telling us that kindergarten is too late for many of our children to catch up, to be able to succeed in school and eventually in life. We cannot continue to ask parents to bear the full cost of this, nor can we continue to ask the ECE workforce to continue to subsidize early childhood education in their forgone wages. Investing in highly qualified teachers and great early childhood programs may be the best educational investment we can make. We owe it to our children and to our early childhood teachers to find the money.

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