

YES WE CAN!

With the recent release of the Unifying Framework for the Early Childhood Education Profession by the Power to the Profession Task Force, it is time to move forward and get the hard work done. At the T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood® (T.E.A.C.H.) National Center we have been about providing opportunities for our diverse early childhood workforce to advance their education, compensation and careers. Naysayers have tried to contest the need, the willingness of the workforce to engage in higher education, the ability of the workforce to succeed, the commitment of the workforce to our profession and the availability of pathways to better compensation and better jobs. From our annual data and the stories of our workforce about their journeys and the impact education has had on their lives, we believe our early childhood workforce is nothing but amazing in their commitment, willingness to learn and grow and their desire to be a part of a real profession.

The National Center decided to test our hypotheses. About 18 months ago, we began a study of T.E.A.C.H. associate and bachelor's degree graduates. We reached out to T.E.A.C.H. programs across the country to identify a cohort of graduates that earned their degrees over the preceding three semesters. From this group we reached out to see who would be willing to participate in a three-year longitudinal study to follow these graduates, surveying them every six months. Very simply, the goals of the study are to better understand career and wage progress that follows degree completion for T.E.A.C.H. associate and bachelor's degree graduates. Data from year one is ready to share and it is amazing.

During the first year of the study, with two possible survey rounds, we had an 80% response rate. There were no major demographic differences between survey respondents and non-respondents. Respondents included 137 associate degree and 81 bachelor's degree graduates. To be clear, the demographics of T.E.A.C.H. scholarship participants often mirror the demographics of college non-completers. All participants work in early childhood settings and are part-time students. Many (67%) have children. A significant number of participants (37.2%) are women of color and/or of Hispanic origin. For many (42%), a T.E.A.C.H. scholarship allowed them to have their first college experience. First generation graduates make up one-half of our sample.

T.E.A.C.H. graduates across both degrees showed a \$1.50/hr. to a \$3.89/hr. real wage gain (10-27% increase), adjusted for inflation. They reported increased confidence in their knowledge and skills (72%). One-half reported receiving a raise and more than one in five reported getting a promotion. After one year, 96.8% of respondents were still in the field.

We wanted to know if graduates continued their professional development activities. Approximately 26% continued their education, working on either a bachelor's or master's degree. Nearly half of all respondents had attended a local, state or national ECE meeting or conference in the previous year, while approximately one-third had joined or renewed their membership in an ECE professional association. About one in every six T.E.A.C.H. alumni had attended a local or state advocacy event, and nearly the same percentage had presented at a

local, state or national conference in the last year. These data indicate a real and ongoing commitment to the profession.

Upward mobility is also present. Most assistant teachers (80%) became teachers after earning their degrees. About 7% are engaged part time in other paid ECE-related work. Such part-time work includes serving as adjunct faculty at community colleges and various kinds of technical assistance and consulting work.

Earning degrees while working full-time in early childhood settings is really difficult. With the right kinds of financial and personal support, early childhood educators are willing to take the challenge, and they are succeeding. They are accruing tangible benefits from their degrees, but, most importantly, they see themselves as early childhood professionals committed to making a difference in the lives of young children and engaging in the field. Can our field meet the Power to the Profession challenge? Yes, we can. Do we need significant investments to support their journey in higher education? Yes, we do. Do our systems of higher education need to be ready to meet our workforce/their students where they are? Yes, they must. And must we advocate at all levels for strategies and investments in creating the compensation our early childhood educators need? Absolutely! There is still much work to be done, but these data tell us that our early childhood educators are up to and benefit from the challenge.

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