

Towards a North Star for the early care and education workforce: A 15-year vision

We offer our comments as a point of departure to ignite robust conversation, NOT as a unilateral solution to one of the most complex and intractable issues in early childhood education. Below, we propose a North Star for the early care and education workforce with a set of goals, ground rules, and system changes that we believe are essential to transform the profession within the next 15 years. This vision, we believe, is consistent with developmental science, high-quality practices, and the dire need to build an equitable system for all children and educators. This can be achieved through our community's collective will and perseverance.

THE END GOALS WE ALL WANT:

- All young children reach their full potential, with educators and families working as partners; the opportunity/achievement gap has been closed.
- All early childhood educators—at every level and in every role—are effective, well-prepared, appropriately compensated, and supported in their professional growth, regardless of settings in which they work across the birth-third grade continuum.
- An equitable system of professional development and compensation that removes systemic racism and promotes diversity by providing equal opportunity for all educators across the workforce, including a clear path for upward mobility across early childhood professional roles and across all settings.
- Economically, ethnically, racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse candidates have access to higher education enabling them to become effective early childhood educators.

GROUND RULES TO SHAPE OUR VISION:

1. Diversity

- Across the spectrum of professional roles (such as early educator aide, early educator assistant, lead early educator, master early educator, early educator supervisor, principals, or directors), early childhood professionals reflect the diversity of the populations of children and families served across all birth-third grade settings. Diversity should not come at the expense of educators of color, too many of whom earn less than their peers and live in poverty despite the significant skills they bring to children and communities.

2. Competencies and settings

- A degree, credential, or certification, completed within a preparation system, signals demonstration and mastery of a set of unique competencies for a specific role or professional designation.
- Competencies, compensation, and professional roles remain constant across early childhood program settings or auspice. For example, lead teachers in Head Start programs, private provider settings, and school-based settings have the same competencies, compensation, and professional roles.

3. Preparation and professional learning

- There are mechanisms for full funding of the costs related to completion of competency-based, high-quality teacher preparation programs, so that economically, ethnically, racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse candidates have access to higher education enabling them to become effective early childhood educators.
- The appropriate well-funded support systems are in place to provide preparation and ongoing professional learning across professional roles that is accessible to all who need it—in all geographical settings or already working during the day.

4. Full-day and full-year programs

- Programs meet the needs of children and families in communities; early childhood services are offered 10 hours a day, 12 months a year.
- Full-time work hours for early educators are based on an 8-hour workday, which includes paid time for planning, professional learning, child contact/instruction, breaks, etc.

5. Compensation and financing

- The early childhood education system is financed at a level sufficient to fund the true cost of high-quality early learning experiences in all settings for all children across the birth-third grade continuum, including the cost of attracting, retaining and compensating the professional workforce.
- Financing early childhood programs no longer relies upon inadequate compensation for competent early childhood professionals, and payment by families in poverty and a struggling middle class. Early childhood programs are no longer subsidized on the backs of low-income women of every race and ethnicity who work long hours, receive low wages and limited benefits, and often find themselves on public assistance while working full time.

TOWARDS A NORTH STAR VISION FOR THE EARLY CHILDHOOD PROFESSION: A 15 YEAR VISION

Every young child in an early childhood program has diverse early educators across professional roles who are well prepared, possess competencies needed to promote children's healthy learning and development, are supported in their professional growth and development and are compensated appropriately. There is a professional structure that is easily understandable to parents and incentivizes and rewards experience and expertise among early care and education professionals. Early educators must be supported by an equitable system of professional development and compensation that removes systemic racism and promotes diversity by providing equal opportunity for all educators.

THE URGENT NEED TO ACHIEVE THIS GOAL

While the North Star was researched and developed prior to COVID-19 and the growing demand to eliminate racism and bring social justice to people of color, the pandemic has made clear the essential role early educators play in the American economy, the deeply entrenched social and economic injustice perpetuated by our nation's patchwork early childhood system—and how ill-equipped that system is to ensure that early educators can survive social and economic upheavals to remain in service for children and families.

According to research by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), America is likely to lose 50% or more of its quality early childhood providers as a consequence of the pandemic. Revenue for providers and wages for educators were too low to survive extended shutdowns due to shelter in place orders. Nearly half of the ECE workforce consisted of women of color who live in poverty, conditions that increased their vulnerability to COVID-19 and their mortality rates and made them



unavailable to families who desperately needed their services. Low wages among even the most educated early childhood providers are not enough to withstand continued economic upheavals for families amid this pandemic.

The American economy will be slow to recover without a stronger commitment to the professional development and compensation of the early childhood workforce. It is an essential component of rebuilding a resilient economy. The status quo is simply and completely unacceptable: Early educators cannot sacrifice any more than they have for a country and economic system that undervalues their worth as professionals. Clearly, the early childhood workforce must be rebuilt without jettisoning the essential elements of equity and quality that are at the heart of building an effective system.

Without a North Star, this moment for change will be lost if we allow ourselves and others to walk away from what is required to have high-quality early learning in this country. All of us know why “just anything” is not good enough. The North Star is here to guide us from the something we have today to the everything necessary for young children and their early educators.

America can achieve better outcomes for all its children, create upward mobility and build a stronger economy by making sure each child has access to quality early educators who are well-trained and professionally compensated. We can achieve this goal by adhering to the following touchstones:

- Demand an equitable system of professional development and compensation that removes systemic racism and promotes diversity by providing equal opportunity for all educators across the workforce, including a clear path for upward mobility across early childhood professional roles across all settings.
- Define the highest national standards for the professional competencies and qualifications from ECE aide to Master Early Educators and Systems Level Administrators across all settings, so the profession has clearly defined roles and responsibilities, standards by which formal training and professional development can be aligned, and incentives for providers to seek more education and expertise in service of better child outcomes.
- Believe that all early educators want to improve their skills and will seek out more education and professional development when it is made readily available and affordable and incentivized through higher compensation for greater skills and abilities.
- There should be clearly delineated professional roles, competencies and qualifications for aides and assistants, lead educators, master educators, and those who work at the systems-level to shape and facilitate professional development and best practices.

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- Pay particular attention to lead educators in the workforce ecosystem, with other professional roles and competencies serving in support of this pivotal role and position. The lead teacher competencies needed to support children’s learning are aligned with a 4-year bachelor’s degree, regardless of the ages of children and the early childhood setting.
 - Aligning all professional credentials—certificates, Associates, Bachelors and Masters—with evidence-based practices and include work-based experience a focus on developing the interpersonal skills and dispositions necessary to be an effective educator at any professional level and in every setting.
 - These higher standards will require systems change that aligns higher education with on-the-ground practice, provides equal access to additional training and education, and rewards early educators for seeking more education, professional development, and work experience.