



NC Early Childhood Foundation

Perspective

Addressing the early learning conundrum: High expectations with low requirements and compensation

by [Tracy Zimmerman](#) | October 26, 2016

The expectations on the early learning workforce are high. By the time children transition to kindergarten, they ideally will – according to North Carolina’s definition of school readiness—have skills that range from being able to resolve conflict positively and problem-solve, to recognizing the relationship between letters and sounds and identifying basic shapes.^{[1][2]}

Early learning educators, in partnership with parents, play a decisive role in preparing children to succeed in school. The stakes are high – approximately 75 percent of children who begin kindergarten behind will never catch up to their classmates.^[3]

At the same time, North Carolina has low minimal requirements to become an early learning educator – a high school diploma and one basic course in early childhood education. At a median wage of approximately \$10.50 per hour, the pay is low enough that 42 percent of North Carolina child care worker families must participate in one or more public support programs like Medicaid and SNAP (Food Stamps) to make ends meet – at a cost of millions of dollars.^[4]

This juxtaposition of high expectations and low requirements and pay is not limited to North Carolina. In 2016, recognizing that the early childhood workforce system needed to advance to reflect the latest scientific knowledge of how children develop, the Institute of Medicine (IOM) and the National Research Council released *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation*.^[5]

The report reflects on how much we have learned about children’s development in recent years. Brain scientists have discovered that during children’s earliest years, their experiences are built into their bodies – shaping the brain’s architecture and impacting how biological systems develop. Positive early experiences build a strong foundation for learning and future health. The interactions between parents and caregivers and children shape

the developing brain. As pediatrician Jack Shonkoff says, “Brains are built, not born.”

While much is known about how children learn and develop, what professionals need to know and be able to do, and what professional learning supports they need, this knowledge is not reflected in “the current capacities and practices of the workforce, the settings in which they work, the policies and infrastructure that set qualifications and provide professional learning, and the government and other funders who support and oversee these systems.”^[6]

The report outlines 13 recommendations to ensure that all children’s development and early learning is supported by high-quality teachers and settings. Included among the recommendations is that states transition to a minimum bachelor’s degree qualification requirement, with specialized knowledge and competencies, for all lead educators working with children from birth through age eight.

In North Carolina, despite our low requirement, the state has made progress on increasing education levels. North Carolina’s star-rated license includes incentives to increase teachers’ education. The T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood® scholarship program supports early educators in the costs of obtaining higher education. And early education degree programs are available in every North Carolina Community College and in the majority of four-year higher education institutions. As a result, by 2015, 63 percent of all early childhood teachers had already obtained an Associate’s degree or higher, and 37 percent of those teachers had obtained a Bachelor’s degree.

The issue of increased education requirements for early childhood teachers is gaining additional attention from stakeholders across North Carolina. [BEST NC](#), a business-led advocacy group focused on North Carolina education from preschool through post-graduate, convened education leaders from across sectors this fall to focus on elevating the early childhood workforce.

In addition, the [NC Child Care Coalition](#), a coalition of more than 100 state, local and regional organizations across the state, is recommending increasing the requirements for lead teachers. They are proposing that the General Assembly require that by 2020:

All lead teachers in 3-, 4- and 5-star child care centers complete the Infant/Toddler, the Preschool Certificate, or equivalent.

75 percent of lead teachers in 3-, 4- and 5-star child care centers have at least an Associate's Degree in Early Childhood Education or its college equivalent.

All directors in 3-star child care centers have an Associate's Degree and administration courses.

All directors in 4- and 5- star child care centers have a Bachelor's degree and administration courses.

Increasing compensation for early educators goes hand-in-hand with increasing education requirements. The IOM report points out that transforming the early learning workforce to achieve the outcomes demanded from it also means “making substantial improvements in working conditions, well-being, compensation, and perceived status or prestige.” In North Carolina, more than half of early learning teachers have family incomes below \$30,000 per year.^[7] As a result, our teachers often face the same daily stresses around paying for food, transportation, and doctor visits as the families of the children in their care, which can impact their ability to support children's optimal development.

WAGE\$® is a tool that has been used effectively in North Carolina and other states. The program provides education-based salary supplements to early learning teachers, directors and family child care providers. It has successfully supported increased education levels, reduced turnover and increased teacher retention.^[8] In fiscal year 2016-17, WAGE\$® is only available in 53 counties in North Carolina through support from local Smart Start Partnerships for Children at their discretion. In fiscal year 2015, 3,800 early childhood teachers—only 14 percent of the total early education teaching workforce—received WAGE\$® salary supplements.^[9]

The members of BEST NC's Working Group on Early Childhood Educators explored the issue of early childhood compensation, as well. To begin to address compensation, the NC Child Care Coalition recommends that the General Assembly develop a state-level salary supplement program based on the current Child Care

WAGE\$® Program.

To support children’s optimal development, early learning professionals need a core set of skills and competencies. As the IOM report concludes, “Persisting with the status quo for the professionals who do this important, complex work . . . will result in inadequate learning and development, especially among America’s most vulnerable families and communities.”

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About the author



Tracy Zimmerman is the executive director of the [NC Early Childhood Foundation](#).

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