



New York
Early Childhood
Professional
Development
Institute

Building the Pipeline for a Successful Early Childhood Workforce in New York

A NEW POLICY AGENDA: TEACHER PREPARATION

Teachers are not born; they are made. Families, community members, and policymakers rely on early childhood teacher preparation programs to equip educators with the knowledge and skills to successfully engage children. Many early childhood educators, however, feel unprepared to fully meet their responsibilities. A 2007 study of New York City's workforce indicates that three quarters of directors, 70% of community-based teachers, and almost half of school-based teachers reported the need for additional professional development. Critically, those who felt well prepared also felt that they were more likely to stay in the field.¹

New York is a national leader in assuring that early educators have bachelor's degrees. In New York City, all early educators working in center based child care and prekindergarten programs are required to have a bachelor's degree and teacher certification. QUALITYstarsNY, the state's quality rating and improvement system, also sets standards and offers supports to help early educators throughout the state to attain a bachelor's degree. Despite our tremendous progress, we know that more must be done to improve the quality of these teacher preparation programs so that educators who get their degrees are well equipped to excel in their careers.

New York is home to a rich and diverse set of institutions of higher education (IHEs)—community colleges, colleges, and universities—that prepare early childhood educators. It is time to turn a spotlight on these programs to identify their strengths and foster new opportunities to provide educators with robust knowledge of early childhood development, practical skills, and the ability to integrate theory and practice.

WHAT WE KNOW

- Early childhood classrooms led by teachers with specialized knowledge in early childhood education have lower rates of grade retention and special education placements, increased high school graduation, reduced incarceration, and stronger employment.²
- There are too few effective teachers who are able to provide optimal instruction and emotional support that young children need to thrive.³
- Teacher preparation programs are poor predictors of effective teaching because they are extremely diverse and diffuse.⁴
- New York's higher education faculty predominantly identify themselves as white women who are nearing retirement; there is a need to prepare a new more diverse generation of teacher educators who specialize in teacher preparation.⁵
- Effective teacher preparation programs offer content-rich coursework, strong connections between theory and practice, and intensive field based experiences in which prospective teachers can learn, practice, and develop their skills.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Institute has identified the following recommendations to raise the caliber of early childhood teacher preparation. These recommendations have been informed by the results of the New York State Early Childhood Higher Education Inventory, which provides a clear picture of the current state of teacher preparation programs' content, clinical experience, faculty characteristics, and institutional support.

- 1. *Strengthen Early Childhood Teacher Program Content:*** The content embedded in New York State's teacher preparation programs should be enhanced to address the full age span of children from birth through age eight as well as the diversity of children, including children from a wide range of linguistic and cultural backgrounds.
- 2. *Review and Unify Early Childhood Teacher Certifications:*** New York State's requirements for teacher certification drive many of IHEs' decisions regarding program content and field experiences. A review of these requirements could yield richer teacher preparation learning experiences that apply to the entire early childhood profession, including educators working in community based, public school, and home-based early education settings.
- 3. *Establish Comprehensive Requirements for Field Experience:*** Candidates' time in field experience is vital to their development. Field experience requirements should ensure that candidates participate in several placements, have the opportunity to implement lessons in diverse contexts, and receive frequent and responsive supervision. It is time to consider a well-resourced year-long residency.
- 4. *Support Cooperating Teachers:*** Cooperating teachers play a significant role in teachers' preparation. They deserve institutional support and opportunities to ensure they contribute to teachers' development.
- 5. *Enhance Doctoral Programs that Prepare Teacher Educators:*** New York's doctoral level programs prepare the majority of the tri-state region's early childhood teacher educators and supervisors. Doctoral students in these programs are the next generation of teacher educators. A critical examination of existing programs and the development of new programs is needed to cultivate the next generation of diverse teacher education faculty.
- 6. *Launch Best Practices ECE Teacher Preparation Workgroup:*** Faculty from New York's institutions of higher education can support one another in a best practices collaborative working group. Through

regular opportunities to come together, such as periodic conferences and an online community, faculty can share effective teacher education strategies. Consideration of successful strategies used in institutes of higher education across the country promises to strengthen New York's efforts to support a highly effective early childhood workforce.

- 7. *Enhance Access to Early Childhood Teacher Preparation Programs, including Taking Advantage of Excelsior Scholarships:*** Convene a CUNY-SUNY Work Group to consider strategies to ensure preparation programs are accessible for early childhood candidates who are non-traditional students because they are working, have children of their own, or are first-generation college students. CUNY is the City University of New York, the country's largest public urban university system, and SUNY is the State University of New York.
- 8. *Improve Articulation and Introduce New Transition Practices:*** Existing articulation agreements between 2- and 4-year teacher preparation programs need to support diversity and excellence in the early childhood workforce by helping students as they transition through the higher education system. Design effective transition practices to scaffold successful shifts from 2- to 4-year institutions and the management of new expectations and requirements.

A NEW APPROACH TO TEACHER PREPARATION

Caring for and educating children during the first eight years of life is a complex craft that requires a unique set of skills, knowledge, and competencies. Teacher preparation programs play a pivotal role to assure that early educators are well equipped to take on this work. As noted in the Institute of Medicine National Academy of Sciences' 2015 report, *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation*, the science of child development and early learning can and should inform the professional preparation of early childhood educators. This landmark report's call for all early educators to hold a bachelors degree underscored the importance of teacher preparation in shoring up the early educator career pipeline. New York is a model for the country in meeting this recommendation. The City's policies that require early educators to have a degree and the state's QUALITYstarsNY that supports educators throughout the state to get a degree lay the foundation for cultivating a strong workforce. To provide all young children with excellent educators demands an investment to ensure these degree programs prepare candidates for success. We have identified four features of New York's teacher preparation system that deserve

attention: (1) program content; (2) field experiences; (3) faculty preparation and support; and (4) access to higher education.⁶

1. Robust Program Content

New York has a diverse array of early childhood teacher preparation programs. Although all programs require candidates to complete both general education and specialized early childhood education content, coursework varies. The Inventory found that “New York’s early childhood degree programs report differing goals for preparing students.” Whereas associate degree programs tend to prepare students for multiple roles within a variety of early childhood settings, the vast majority of bachelor degree programs and nearly one-half of master’s degree programs focus on roles within early childhood/elementary settings.⁷ Across programs, some specialized content may be oriented toward child development and draw from the field of developmental psychology and family studies while other programs may focus on teaching young children and be guided by the K-12 education system. Some programs require coursework related to children from birth through age eight while most focus solely on the preschool years and children who are three and four years old.

The state’s requirements for educators across settings play a significant role in shaping teacher preparation content and essentially create two types of early childhood teacher preparation programs. Educators in the state’s universal prekindergarten program, those who teach in the early elementary grades, and educators in the City’s child care system are required to hold Early Childhood Birth to Grade 2 certification. Primary teachers and those who teach in child care and other early childhood settings also benefit greatly from earning this certification. Teacher candidates can attain that certification by graduating from approved bachelor’s and master’s program and meeting a set of criteria set forth by the State Education Department. Educators in other community based setting and family child care programs have quite different requirements.

This bifurcation of requirements leads to disparities within the higher education system. A systematic review of requirements to unify career pathways would strengthen program content across the board. Currently, QUALITYstarsNY, the state’s quality rating and improvement system, seeks to unify the qualifications for those who work with young children – and provides the supports towards this end. As its funding is increased it will be able to reach more of the field.

Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8

The National Academies of Science report examining workforce quality has elevated early childhood teacher preparation with several key recommendations:

Recommendation 2:

Develop and implement comprehensive pathways and multiyear timelines at the individual, institutional, and policy levels for transitioning to a minimum bachelor’s degree qualification requirement, with specialized knowledge and competencies, for all lead educators working with children from birth through age 8.

Recommendation 4:

Build an interdisciplinary foundation in higher education for child development.

Recommendation 5:

Develop and enhance programs in higher education for care and education professionals.

2. More High Quality Field Experiences

Teacher candidates’ classroom-based field experiences—sometimes referred to as clinical experience, practicum, or student teaching—are incredibly influential. At a minimum, teacher programs must meet the field experience requirements for teacher licensure, yet some programs require extensive practicum and student teaching requirements. In New York, there is a great deal of variation in early childhood field experience. The length of time a candidate spends in a given setting varies across programs and candidates’ responsibilities range from observing children and to implementing lesson plans and assuming full responsibility of all classroom duties for a period of time.

There are two factors that impact the quality of candidates’ field experiences. First, the variety and quality of field experiences matter. Researchers note that teacher candidates benefit from developing their craft in a range of early childhood contexts—infant/toddler settings, special education classrooms, early childhood programs, and early elementary school grades.⁸ The Inventory found that 70% of bachelor’s degree programs required practicum experience to focus on preschool-age, 75% had a focus on early elementary grades, and just 30% required a focus on infants and toddlers. At the master’s degree level, about one-half of the programs required a practicum focused on preschool-age children; 77% required a focus on children in the elementary grades;

and 42% required a focus on infants and toddlers.⁹ The quality of the teaching they are exposed to is also critically important as they develop the tools they will rely on when they assume responsibility for their own classrooms. There is little information about the quality of teaching that candidates are exposed to when they are in the field.

Second, the nature of the supervision candidates receive is critically important to ensure prospective teachers learn from their time in the field.¹⁰ Cooperating teachers' responsibilities are significant. Effective cooperating teachers model the strategies and lesson plans that new teachers rely on when they assume responsibility for their own classrooms. They must supervise, provide opportunities for student teachers to engage in meaningful classroom instruction, and possess personal skills to successfully mentor their less experienced colleagues.¹¹ Despite the role cooperating teachers play in new teachers' development, there is no systematic approach to prepare and support cooperating teachers.

3. *Improved Faculty Preparation and Support*

New York's early childhood faculty have great responsibility. They may structure the overall course of study, teach coursework, supervise clinical experiences, participate in the administrative elements of their department, and conduct their own research. Professors at New York's teacher preparation programs have a range of preparatory experience and backgrounds. Faculty who come to their positions from academia may be grounded in theoretical or research-based perspectives on early childhood education. Other faculty members come from the field and have years of experience teaching young children or administering early childhood programs. However, many faculty lack the content-rich education and experience commonly associated with effective teacher education. Doctoral programs as well as institutional support for faculty point to opportunities to strengthen New York's early childhood teacher preparation system.

Doctoral programs prepare students for a range of responsibilities within the early childhood field, including research, policy analyses, and teacher preparation. Currently, in New York, graduates from two institutions that offer doctoral level work—New York University and Teachers College—staff many of New York's early childhood teacher preparation programs.¹² These institutions have a tremendous influence on teacher educators who prepare an incredibly diverse pool of teacher candidates yet little is known about whether these doctoral programs equip candidates to become teacher preparation specialists. Critically, the objectives and measures for success in academia may even conflict with the teacher preparation function within these

programs. We must know whether these doctoral level programs prepare candidates to work with prospective teachers who have great promise working with young children but minimal academic writing, reading, and math skills. Attention and support to early childhood faculty preparation is a potent lever for improving the quality of preparation programs and the field writ large. It is time for a focused specialization on teacher preparation designed to build an effective and diverse workforce.

Institutional support is also critical. Early childhood education departments typically suffer from insufficient resources, resulting in high faculty student ratios and faculty without both classroom and theoretical experience.¹³ The institutional climate is driven by the positioning of an early childhood preparation program within an IHE as well as the resources devoted to the program. The number and caliber of the faculty who teach foundational theory and methods courses and supervise candidates in their clinical experiences impacts candidates' experiences while they are enrolled in school and their ability to integrate theory and practice when they enter the field. The number of faculty also influences the work environment. An early childhood department with several faculty members provides students with a range of views and allows for positive peer interaction and collaboration on program design and research.

4. *Greater Access to Higher Education*

Accessing teacher education is a challenge for many early childhood educators who may be characterized as “non-traditional” students who want to raise their qualifications while they work, have children of their own, or are first-generation college students. Many early childhood teachers who are enrolled in teacher preparation programs have considerable classroom experience but little experience in higher education settings. For these candidates who may have graduated from high school years ago or may speak English as a second language, higher education may be intimidating and challenging. As working adults, many struggle to balance home, work, and academics. Several strategies are needed to improve access to early childhood preparation programs.

Distance learning overcomes scheduling and geographic obstacles that confront many candidates. Best practices for online learners are beginning to take shape. For example, researchers and practitioners note the importance of student-centered tech support to build teacher candidates comfort and competence in using online resources.¹⁴ Although online learning is an increasingly prevalent form of teacher preparation, little is known about its overall usage and effectiveness.¹⁵

Promising Approach: CUNY ASAP

When it comes to supporting college going for non-traditional students, City University of New York's Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) program is a successful model program that the early childhood field can learn from. ASAP assists students in earning associate degrees by providing a range of financial, academic, and personal supports including comprehensive and personalized advisement, career counseling, tutoring, waivers for tuition and mandatory fees, MTA MetroCards, and funding for textbooks. Students also get support to transfer to 4-year colleges. The results of this intensive support have been impressive: "ASAP students perform better than comparison group students across all measures, including associate degree attainment, transfer to baccalaureate programs, bachelor's degree attainment and any undergraduate degree attainment. In addition, when compared to non-ASAP students who earned their associate degrees within six years, ASAP students earned their degrees more quickly."

A cohort model is another strategy designed to support the unique characteristics of many early childhood teacher candidates. A cohort is a small set of students who enroll in a higher education program at the same time and work in collaborative group context as they progress through their academic program. The cohort model also offers targeted support services, such as financial assistance, flexible schedules, convenient class meeting locations, and academic tutoring, to ensure candidates persist and complete their higher education program of study. This approach encourages students with similar backgrounds to build a positive peer group and support one another in their studies. This strategy provides a promising approach to help a diverse group of teachers attain their degrees and improve their work with young children.

Once candidates are engaged in teacher preparation, they also face obstacles in attaining their degrees, since many candidates may progress from taking an individual college course, to pursuing an associate, bachelor and then master degree. Effective articulation and transition practice are essential to ensure candidates can achieve their formal education goals. Articulation practices include the transfer of professional development credentials, courses, credits, degrees, and student performance-based competencies from one program or institution to another, ideally without a loss of credits.¹⁶ While many 2-year and 4-year institutions of higher education have articulation agreements, challenges remain in ensuring that graduates of 2-year colleges succeed when entering the 4-year context. Adding a focus on supporting the successful transition from one institution to the

other merits consideration. Research on students who transferred from an AA program at a New York City community college to a BA program identified some of the substantive challenges with the current articulation system. Students struggle in navigating the larger BA context where there is less individualized attention and more analytical academic expectations. Community college graduates with the drive to advance their careers would benefit greatly from specific support services, such as academic tutoring and orientation that is specifically tailored to early childhood candidates. Modest changes in assignments and instructions—such as creating a seminar in which community college students collaboratively study research—can help ease the transition for candidates who aspire to achieve higher degrees.¹⁷ It is incumbent upon teacher preparation programs to design articulation procedures that can attend to the needs of students who invest valuable time and resources in their professional development. Articulation that is sensitive to this transition can bolster both diversity and excellence in the early childhood workforce.

CONCLUSION

We cannot afford to provide early childhood educators with anything but stellar preparation. Early childhood teachers come to their work with passion, dedication, and a host of skills and experience that can help them positively impact young children's development. For our most at-risk children and families, effective teachers who possess the skills to scaffold development and truly connect with families are beacons of light. The diversity of the early childhood workforce demands innovation in teacher preparation. Teacher preparation programs must rise to the challenge of giving them the coursework, field experiences, and institutional support to thrive when they enter the classroom.



ENDNOTES

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