

NEPC REVIEW: IT TAKES A COMMUNITY (BELLWETHER EDUCATION PARTNERS, FEBRUARY 2018) AND PRE-K TEACHERS AND BACHELOR'S DEGREES (NEW AMERICA AND BELLWETHER EDUCATION PARTNERS, FEBRUARY 2018)



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May 2018

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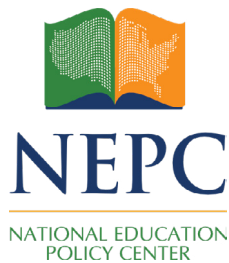
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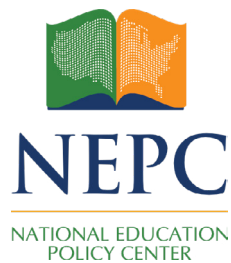
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Summary of Review

Recent reports from Bellwether¹ and New America² each review the current state of early childhood education (ECE) teacher preparation programs at the community college and university levels. Both raise awareness about the challenges facing the ECE workforce and educational institutions in dealing with the recent policy push to increase the required educational credentials for pre-K teachers. Specifically, these policies elevate the requirement from the Child Development Associate certificate to an associate's degree or to a bachelor's degree with early childhood specialization. The reports also illustrate innovative practices that some states and colleges are implementing to improve the quality, flexibility, mobility, and diversity of ECE teachers. They end with policy recommendations for states, colleges, and ECE leaders. The methods consist of simple literature reviews (which generally rely on think tank white papers, as opposed to peer-reviewed journal publications). The reports also incorporate informal interviews with ECE stakeholders and leaders, but the methodology and selection procedures used are unclear. Notwithstanding these limitations, the analyses appear sound and the conclusions and recommendations made are generally reasonable, supported by the relatively limited data available. The longer report from Bellwether on the role of community colleges appears useful for policymakers and the public, due to its depth and effectiveness in presentation. The report from New America is too short and rather awkward in presentation, which limits its effectiveness.



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I. Introduction

Policy interest in early childhood education is high. The vast majority of states have publicly funded pre-K programs, and those that don't are in the process of developing them.³ State and federal governments are committing funding to increase access to, and quality of, pre-K programs.⁴ Many are excited about the potential of early childhood education to help reduce large, income-based achievement gaps observed among children at school entry.⁵ The research is clear, that for early childhood programs to have a noticeable, positive effect, pre-K programs and early childhood classrooms have to be of very high quality.⁶ Arguably the most critical determinant of quality in the classroom is the early childhood teacher herself – how she interacts with the children, organizes the classroom activities, and creates a positive social-emotional climate.⁷ How well teachers do these things is at least partly related to the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that they have developed through their own education, experience, and training.

Ensuring that the early childhood workforce is highly skilled, well-trained, certified, diverse, and well-paid is of fundamental importance for the success of these programs. As more and more children experience formal early childhood education, more teachers are needed, and it becomes harder to find well-qualified teaching staff. Determining how best to prepare early educators is challenging, given the complexity and diversity of early childhood settings, such as public school pre-K, center-based care, family childcare, and Head Start. Many different funding mechanisms are in place, and there are many training institutions and certification/degree options available (community colleges, four-year universities, online programs, accreditation systems, requirements for quality improvement and improvement systems,

[CDA], BA degrees, etc.), which also complicates things. And, of course, all of this plays out within the larger societal and historical context of an early childhood profession that is undervalued and underpaid, a child population that is becoming more ethnically and linguistically diverse, and an early childhood teaching workforce that is primarily comprised of women in poverty with limited education and resources.

This review examines two recently released reports (February, 2018) addressing the issues of how best to train early childhood educators, and considering the roles of community colleges and four-year BA degree-awarding institutions. The first report, authored by Marnie Kaplan, is *It Takes a Community: Leveraging Community College Capacity to Transform the Early Childhood Workforce* from Bellwether Education Partners. The second is *Pre-K Teachers and Bachelor's Degrees: Envisioning Equitable Access to High-Quality Preparation Programs* from New America and Bellwether Education Partners. The authors are Emily Workman, Lisa Guernsey, and Sara Mead.

The New America report summarizes the ideas and conclusions that came from a day-long meeting held in Washington DC on September 26, 2017, convened by New America and Bellwether Education Partners. This meeting was itself in response to the Institute of Medicine and the National Research Council's report, *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through 8: A Unifying Foundation*,⁸ which recommended developing systems to require lead ECE teachers to have at least a bachelor's degree with specialized training in ECE. At the meeting, a group of 42 experts on early childhood teacher preparation discussed "what preparation for current and future early educators should look like and the potential of new, more accessible and higher-quality models for degree programs." After the meeting, the group conducted follow-up interviews with members of the panel in addition to seven other experts not at the meeting. The experts consulted appear to be solid, experienced leaders in the field. They represent relevant stakeholders/ sectors in early childhood including research, state education agencies, practitioners, policymakers, foundations, accreditation/ teacher development organizations, and educational administrators.

The Bellwether report also involved interviews with 23 practitioners, state or accreditation agency personnel, community college ECE training program administrators, and faculty. The names of the interviewees are listed in the appendix. However, this methodological aspect of the report was not really discussed in the report itself, which is a serious limitation. Both reports acknowledge the Joyce Foundation for financial support (amount not disclosed).

II. Findings and Conclusions of the Reports

New America *Pre-K Teachers and Bachelor's Degrees* report

The New America report on ways to increase the quality of bachelor's ECE preparation programs starts by laying out the five broad competencies that early childhood teachers should have according to the *Transforming the Workforce* report: 1) core knowledge of the science

of child development and early learning, 2) practices to help children learn and develop based on this science, 3) knowledge and skills for working with diverse populations of children, 4) development and use of partnerships with families and support services to bolster child learning and development, and 5) ability and motivation to continually improve the quality and effectiveness of one's practices. The report laments that these competencies tend to be aspirational, and that it is unclear how higher education programs are using these guidelines to make sure current and future teachers master these skills. Teacher credentials (i.e., a BA degree with an early childhood specialization, or a CDA) are typically used to ensure quality. The report summarizes 2016 National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) data on how about 60 percent of state-funded pre-K programs require lead teachers to have a BA degree, with about half of those also requiring early childhood specialization. The report also discusses variation by ECE setting (Head Start, public school, community center) and by state.

In a brief, two-page section, the report next tries to tackle the complex question of whether teacher credentials like the BA degree actually mean that classroom quality is better and that kids learn more. Although some have found that more teacher training in K-12 is related to better classroom quality and child outcomes,⁹ the evidence for links between teacher education and child outcomes for pre-K teachers is less clear.¹⁰ The report correctly concludes that the variance in quality within teachers having the same credential is greater than the variance across degree attainment categories. Yes, degree attainment helps, but it is likely not enough. We still need to do more and have a better way to make sure that teachers actually have the skills needed.

The next very brief one-page section is devoted to pointing out the problem of diversity in the ECE workforce. On the one hand, ECE does a better job of ethnic diversity of its teachers. Forty percent of ECE instructors are minorities, which is closer to the 50 percent of children age 0-5 who are non-White.¹¹ By contrast, 18 percent of K-12 teachers are minorities,¹² compared to 49 percent of K-12 students.¹³ The report correctly points out the central problem – requiring a BA degree to be an ECE teacher effectively reduces the ethnic diversity of the ECE workforce because, given the financial condition of most ethnically diverse students who choose the early childhood profession, it is difficult for them to obtain a four-year degree. The report points out that the average preschool teacher (and community college attendee) is a first-generation college attendee and a person of color who lives in poverty trying to support a family. It is very difficult for such individuals to pay expensive tuition to complete graduation requirements for an (additional) four-year degree.

The rest of the New America report is devoted to suggesting strategies for overcoming the barriers involved in teachers obtaining a BA. These strategies include increased financial assistance and scholarships, flexible program offerings that allow students to continue to work full time (many are already in ECE settings), training pathways that utilize community colleges more effectively, better advising for students to ensure efficient degree completion and non-repetition of content, and stackable credentials so that students who started in community colleges with an AA degree can finish the BA degree without too much redundancy. Also discussed are novel instructional/credit granting mechanisms such as online education and competency-based models, whereby students can receive credit for their prior experience in the ECE field if they figure out some way for to demonstrate their relevant competencies.

These novel approaches also include allowing students to do their teaching practicum at their employment site, apprenticeship programs where ECE teachers can engage in mentorship and coaching experiences for credit at work, and residency programs where teachers receive their training at a center and participate in extensive PD and coaching for credit. Also briefly discussed are dual enrollment programs whereby high school students can receive college and CDA course credit for ECE-related courses.

The report concludes with six recommendations (but it is not clear who would pay for these reforms). These recommendations include:

1. Trying to improve the quality of BA-level teacher education programs (rather than just improving access)
2. Creating better ways of operationalizing early childhood specialization
3. Getting state teacher licensure requirements to be more flexible so existing ECE teachers don't have to quit their jobs
4. Motivating teacher education programs to revamp their programs for a diversity of student needs.
5. Recruiting and retaining the next generation of ECE teachers from high schools.
6. Figuring out how to increase compensation for the ECE workforce.

Bellwether It Takes a Community report

The Bellwether report on the role of the community college in ECE teacher education starts by giving an excellent overview of the state of ECE teacher training programs. Most ECE degree programs are offered at two-year institutions. Community colleges are attractive for future preschool teachers given their affordability and accessibility. The problem is that students who attend community colleges have many financial, situational, and academic skill challenges that make it difficult for them to complete a four-year degree program. The argument is that we need to keep community colleges as a major setting for ECE teacher preparation, either as a terminal degree or as a seamless stepping stone to a later BA.

After a nice summary of the state of ECE training in community colleges and the students served, the report highlights promising, innovative strategies used by community colleges, university partners, and state agencies. Such strategies help early childhood educators complete their two-year degree, successfully transition to four-year colleges, and enter (or, as is the case with many students who are already in the classroom, remain in) the ECE workforce. Recommendations for community college leaders, policymakers, and ECE advocates are provided throughout. The report also includes examples of exemplary community college programs and practices.

Almost 80 percent of the country's 1,000-plus public community colleges have either an early childhood or family studies program.¹⁴ These programs can either provide students with a CDA certificate (or a state-specific version of the credential), a "terminal" associate's degree (associate of arts [AA], science [AS], or applied science [AAS]), or an associate's degree de-

signed to transfer to a BA degree program at a four-year institution.

The central problem discussed very clearly is that the minimum requirements for ECE teacher certification have historically been changing from a CDA, to an associate's degree, and now to a four-year bachelor's degree. This means that there are many experienced, current ECE teachers with a lower-level credential who are now not allowed to be a lead teacher in the many state-funded pre-K programs that require a BA degree. The training systems historically in place at community colleges were designed to produce a certificate or 'terminal' degree at best. This makes it very difficult for graduates to go back to a university to complete a bachelor's degree while working full time. The coursework doesn't transfer well so it takes many years with much repetition. The price of additional years of tuition is prohibitive for most ECE teachers. Programs lack the flexibility necessary for low-income, returning, employed students with families. Further, ECE teachers often do not yet have the academic skills to be able to finish the advanced-level coursework and general education requirements of most BA programs. For current and future community college students, there is the additional challenge of providing appropriate advising to select the correct degree/credential options and courses that will provide them with the smoothest transition to a four-year degree.

The final very serious issue discussed is that requiring a bachelor's degree to teach in the early childhood classroom effectively reduces the relatively strong ethnic diversity of the ECE workforce. Only those with sufficient financial resources are able to complete a bachelor's degree. Requiring a BA degree to teach preschool effectively makes the ECE workforce more White.¹⁵

The report goes on to present a variety of creative solutions and innovative strategies that are in place in several states, community colleges, and universities. The goal here is to remind policymakers of the important role that community colleges play, and provide policymakers and higher education ECE leaders ideas for how they can help address these critical barriers to enhancing quality teaching in the ECE classroom. Strategies for degree offerings include allowing community colleges to award a bachelor's degree, and offering the associate of arts in teaching (AAT) degree which is better designed to transfer to a four-year institution. Other suggestions include implementing post-baccalaureate/alternative teacher certifications, loan forgiveness programs and/or special scholarship funding for these socially important but low-paid jobs. The report suggests changing the data collection systems in place at community college to be able to better track the trajectories and final educational and workplace outcomes for ECE students. It also proposes coming up with better mechanisms for measuring the quality of ECE training programs at the community college level.

The report offers many helpful suggestions for community colleges, state and federal policymakers, and researchers. Specific suggestions include providing flexible course scheduling and employing cohort models where a tight group of students go through the entire program together. The report also suggests allowing students who are currently teaching to do their practicums at their current places of employment. Alternative remedial coursework should be provided for those less skilled and for students with limited English proficiency. Community college students also need proactive "intrusive advising." Other needs include stackable credentials, better formal articulation agreements, and uniform course numbering systems that facilitate transfers between two- and four-year institutions. The report also suggests

giving students credit for prior experience and competencies demonstrated from learning on the job. Finally, the report notes that states need to incentivize community college programs to continue and revamp (rather than abandon) their early childhood programs.

III. The Reports' Rationale for Their Findings and Conclusions

The rationale for both of these reports is clear, simple, and appropriate. It is important to identify the current institutional barriers inhibiting the improvement of the quality of the ECE workforce, and to make suggestions for relevant policymakers and ECE stakeholders based on the existing (limited) research evidence.

IV. The Reports' Use of Research Literature

Both reports do an excellent job in terms of including the most relevant and recent white papers, policy, and government reports on the topics of ECE teacher preparation. However, both reports fall short in terms of citing the relevant scholarship found in professional journals. For the New America report, only six of the 47 works cited are peer-reviewed publications. For the Bellwether report, this figure is seven out of 159 (non-unique) citations. There is some relevant, peer-reviewed scholarship in this area that should likely have been included.¹⁶

Most statements made in the reports do appear to be responsible and accurate summaries of the state of the literature. The reports could be more nuanced and subtle, however. A fundamental omission was a discussion of the research on whether increasing credentials for ECE teachers leads to better classroom quality and improved student outcomes. The research findings are more mixed than the report implies, relying too much on the K-12 literature. Also, the ECE teacher-child ethnic match and child outcome literature briefly discussed in the New America report is more nuanced than the report's presentation.¹⁷

The reports are generally silent on whether the various suggested innovative strategies tried by certain programs/states actually work to improve quality. It is likely that the evaluation research simply doesn't exist but if that is so, it would have been good for the reports to say so. In the few places where some preliminary evidence for the effectiveness of a practice was provided, information was lacking about the methods used in the study and the rigor of the evaluation.

V. Review of the Reports' Methods

The methods used for both of these reports are fairly simple. They include literature and document review, and summaries of interviews with ECE experts and administrators. In the case of the New America report, a meeting was also held with relevant experts. The Bellwether report involved interviews with relevant experts as well, but the methods used for conducting the interviews and selecting the personnel to be interviewed were never described in either report. This is indeed a shortcoming. It would have been helpful to know how the experts were selected, whether they were sufficiently qualified, and what questions they were asked. The reader is unable to determine potential biases and agendas present in either the facilitators or the respondents. However, for these kind of reports designed as awareness-raising reviews of problems, this is fairly standard practice.

In the Bellwether report, it would have been helpful to define “public community college.” Higher education training institutions vary in terms of funding streams and orientations. It was not clear what kind of institutions were included in the definition. The Bellwether report employed useful sidebars, but these were not coordinated with the text. They disturbed the flow for the reader, with abrupt shifts, including a sudden end to the report when the helpful state profiles appeared.

Both reports misuse the term “data” which diminish the documents. Data are plural. It should never be “data is...” Further, the New America report also makes the related grammatical error with respect to “practicum.” “Practicum” is singular and “practica” are plural. There is no such thing as “practicums.”

Finally, the reports' recommendations were piecemeal in some places. Some could have been better connected to the issues raised earlier in the documents. The reports do not specify how we should go about getting states to undertake the recommendations, and who will pay for the reforms.

VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions

The conclusions of the reports seem valid and reasonable on the whole, although they are based mostly on opinions of experts and the limited data that are currently available. The new practices and program models suggested have yet to be examined empirically with any kind of scientific rigor. Nevertheless, progress needs to be made and we have to do something to improve the quality of ECE. The ideas and suggestions here appear to be solid, promising, and reasonable pathways to pursue. We need to be sure to do the rigorous research needed to see if these suggested strategies work.

VII. Usefulness of the Reports for Guidance of Policy and Practice

Although the content is somewhat useful, the New America report is too short and oddly formatted to be helpful to policymakers and the public. The 17 pages of content are embellished with huge margins, and large section breaks and headings. A one-page figure is confusing and not worth the space consumed. The content could have been presented in half the number of pages. It is really more a brief than a report. It brings up some issues, admits that they are complex, but then doesn't really get into the issues well enough for others to understand nor to put themselves in a position to make actionable recommendations.

The Bellwether report on the role of community colleges, on the other hand, is more effective and useful for policy and practice. It has an excellent, fair, and sufficiently deep discussion of the current state of affairs, the problems and challenges, and the policy angles where action is needed at multiple levels. The format and level of discussion are appropriate and effective.

In conclusion, these reports summarize key policy issues that are currently being discussed at multiple levels in the ECE policy community. Figuring out how best to ensure that our preschoolers are receiving high-quality educational and developmental appropriate experiences at ages 3 and 4 is high on the list of priorities for many. Elevating the status, value, and pay for the ECE profession is critical. Determining how best to increase the quality of children's experiences in pre-K through enhanced teacher preparation and certification for early childhood teachers is clearly important.

Notes and Resources

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