EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Transforming the Early Childhood Workforce

A Call to Action for the State of Illinois

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Illinois has long been a national leader in early childhood education. Yet, the state lacks the workforce it needs to ensure that all children – particularly those most vulnerable to negative developmental, school and life consequences – receive the care and learning opportunities they deserve.

Recent research in child development, brain science and economics has transformed what we know about the needs and potential of young children. The research underscores that the qualifications, compensation, and linguistic and cultural competencies of the adults working with children play an enormous role in their development, learning and overall well-being.

Nationally, our early childhood workforce suffers from fragmentation, low compensation, uneven professionalism and varying qualifications. Illinois is no different. Our system is driven by multiple funding streams and a tangled web of conflicting program requirements rather than the needs of children. Fortunately, in Illinois, change is underway.

In 2015, the National Institute of Medicine (now called the National Academy of Medicine), published "Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation." That landmark report provided a blueprint for how to improve our nation's early childhood workforce. To facilitate implementation of these recommendations at the state level, the Academy launched the Innovation to Incubation "i2I" program. Illinois was selected by the Academy as one of five states to participate in the i2I program and to develop a state-specific plan based on the Academy's recommendations. This report reflects the work and input of Illinois' i2I team, with input and guidance from a broader array of early childhood stakeholders across Illinois. While the guiding principles and recommendations contained in this report closely align with the Academy's report, our recommendations are specific to Illinois, and some already are being implemented.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Four guiding principles, based on research, data and findings from the Academy report, inform our report and recommendations.

Principle 1: Adults are central to the healthy early learning and development of children. Educators have a greater impact on classroom quality than any other variable.

Principle 2: Early childhood educators must have a common set of core competencies, and must reflect the diversity of the children and families that they serve.

Principle 3: Professional development programs and pathways must be designed around the needs of the existing early learning workforce.

Principle 4: Policy decisions must be guided by a knowledge base consisting of relevant scientific research, accurate and comprehensive data from the Illinois early child care system, and input from the stakeholders responsible for implementation.

Recommendations

Our recommendations are organized into three major categories: Qualifications, Pathways and Knowledge Base. These categories are interconnected and purposely overlap.

Qualifications

Early childhood settings vary greatly across Illinois, primarily because different types of programs are governed by different agencies and funded through sources with specific regulations and administrative rules. Each funding stream has different qualification requirements for early childhood administrators, teachers, and assistants; therefore, the workforce inevitably ends up with different levels of education and expertise. This variation creates a job market plagued by constant turnover as educators who earn higher education degrees and credentials often leave less lucrative positions in child care settings for better-compensated employment in settings such as public schools. Ultimately, this inconsistency in employment qualifications results in real inequities for children and families across program types.

To address these challenges, we recommend:

1 Adopting workforce qualifications that are aligned with a uniform, competency-based credentialing system.

The National Academy of Medicine report recommends a uniform, competency-based credentialing system designed to ensure that all workforce members in similar positions, regardless of the setting, are operating from the same set of knowledge, skills and experiences.

These qualification requirements do not align across early childhood settings and were not created around a set of uniform competencies.

Fortunately, a competency-based system is being developed in Illinois, using the Illinois Gateways to Opportunity® Early Childhood Education (ECE) Credentials as a framework. The Gateways Credentials are recognized across the state and already integrated into preparation programs and the state quality rating system. We recommend the continued effort in developing competencies and related assessments. We also recommend creating a cross-agency group to align educator qualifications with each other.

2 Increasing minimum qualifications

We recommend that all lead teachers working with young children in licensed Illinois child care centers hold a bachelor's degree, coupled with an Illinois Gateways Level 5 ECE Credential. We also recommend that all teacher assistants in both licensed centers and school-based programs demonstrate foundational competencies in early childhood education. These ambitious changes to qualification requirements will require changes in statute and possibly also in rules and regulations. More importantly, any new qualification requirements must be accompanied by coordinated and supportive pathways for workforce members to attain the new qualifications. Changes should be rolled out incrementally, with adequate time to earn the required degrees and credentials, and as part of uniform qualification system. Progress towards these goals should be carefully monitored to identify and avoid unintended consequences.

Pathways

Transformation of the Illinois early childhood workforce requires affordable, accessible and clear pathways towards degree and credential attainment. Yet, our current system is fraught with duplication and barriers that prevent and impede the completion of degrees and credentials, and general advancement. These barriers are most detrimental to members of our existing workforce and minority students.

To solve for this, we recommend:

1 Continued development and alignment of competency-based pathways.

Once a uniform system of qualifications has been adopted, institutions of higher education must a) align coursework to competencies, b) develop and incorporate shared assessments, and c) increase coordination between two-and four-year institutions to support articulation and transfer.

2 Increasing access to pathways for targeted populations.

Data on the educational levels of the early childhood workforce continually reveal that most of the cultural and linguistic diversity in the workforce exists among educators in positions with lower qualifications. These individuals are critically important to quality programming and we should focus on providing more opportunities for them to increase their education and earn credentials. We recommend developing and implementing policies that remove barriers and offer more flexible program options. We also recommend increasing capacity within preparation programs to provide more intensive advising and to tailor programming to better serve these targeted groups.

3 Promoting workplace conditions that support educators as they pursue degrees and credentials.

Coordinated pathways across and within early childhood preparation programs is a necessity, but not enough. The workplace must also support the degree and credential attainment of employees. Many childcare programs, however, lack the organizational structure and conditions to fully support the professional development and continuing education of their employees. We recommend convening a group of stakeholders from various childcare settings to identify the conditions, policies and practices that will best support the professional development of a diverse and well-qualified workforce.

Knowledge Base

To build a highly qualified early childhood workforce in Illinois, it is essential to build a knowledge base specifically designed to better inform early childhood workforce policies such as qualification requirements and pathways to increased educational attainment and credentials. This knowledge base must be built on sound scientific principles of child development, include Illinois specific information about the characteristics and qualifications of the existing workforce, and incorporate the voices of professionals that work directly with young children and their families. These policies, in turn, will lead to continuous quality improvement in programs for young children and their families.

To accomplish this, we recommend:

1 Adhering to sound research principles and the science of early childhood development to ensure the appropriate use of data.

Data from the assessments of children, teachers, and classrooms should be used to improve teacher and program quality—not to evaluate job performance, or to compete for funding, as there is little evidence to support this type of use. We must balance the need for accountability with appropriate assessment of young children and their teachers, as well as the use of assessment data for high-stakes decision making. We emphasize using extreme caution with child assessment data in particular. We recommend that a group of Illinois early childhood stakeholders conduct a review of existing policies and practices related to the assessment of children, teachers, and classrooms and then revise policies as needed.

2 Ensuring that data systems across all programs are accurately and consistently collecting data over time.

Comprehensive data that accurately describes the characteristics of Illinois' early childhood education workforce is a foundational element of our knowledge base. For example, a more comprehensive database could help determine whether the most vulnerable children have access to qualified educators or it could illuminate how members of the workforce advance their credentials. The Gateways to Opportunity Registry and the Illinois Longitudinal Data System (ILDS)—an intergovernmental agreement to share data across systems--provide a strong foundation for Illinois to become a leader in building a robust knowledge base. These data-sharing agreements across agencies are a necessary first step but they are not enough. We would like to see the design of data collection and storage that allow linking and sharing of children and educator data across state agencies, which will enable researchers to examine workforce patterns and trends over time. We also recommend that state agencies review their own data systems and identify necessary changes and additions in order to collect better data and align it across agencies.

3 Creating a collaborative of researchers, policymakers, key stakeholders and practitioners

We must shift away from the linear progression of research to policy or research to practice and move toward a more integrated, dynamic approach that includes the voices of early childhood practitioners and focuses on the real problems of everyday practice. We recommend that researchers, policymakers and practitioners work together to design studies and use study results to inform policies that will address real-world problems.

CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

Here is our vision: Increased qualifications for the early childhood workforce aligned with a statewide competency-based credentialing system accompanied by more accessible pathways that ensure a diverse workforce. That effort will be informed by an aligned and collaborative knowledge base, and will result in the kind of high-quality, well-prepared and fully-equipped workforce that Illinois' youngest children so desperately need.

Acting upon these recommendations will require engagement at local, state and federal levels among policymakers, advocates, government agencies and institutions of higher education. Those conversations inevitably will be complex and even uncomfortable, but also worthwhile. This report is intended to help prompt, guide and inform these critical conversations.

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For more information about *Transforming the Early Childhood Workforce: A Call to Action for the State of Illinois,* please contact Catherine Main at cmain@uic.edu or Karen Yarbrough at karen@kyarbrough.net.