

Steps for Policymakers

Drawn from:

Transforming the Early Education
Workforce: A Multimedia Guidebook

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Steps for Policymakers

As policymakers and those with influence over policymaking, you are probably well aware that there is a lot of work to do to transform the workforce. This section of the guidebook is intended for anyone at the federal, state, and local level who aims to help children learn and grow by ensuring that educators and other adults who care for them have opportunities and incentives to improve the quality of their work. Existing policies threaten the quality of the workforce, and thus threaten the quality of the education and care that children receive. The system is disjointed, with early learning programs, elementary schools, and educator preparation programs adhering to inconsistent quality standards and different regulations, and sustaining themselves on varying levels of funding.

You can address these and other systemic barriers. But figuring out where to begin is a challenge. In this section of our guidebook, we draw out specific points to help you focus your efforts. **You are the ones who can make the report's vision a reality.**

We encourage you to use this section in tandem with the **brief** published by the National Academies which also synthesizes the *Transforming the Workforce* report for policymakers. Note that financing and parenting—two crucial factors in developing policies to support young children—are covered in much greater detail in two additional reports from the National Academies Press, one of which is forthcoming in early 2018. Those reports and other related materials can be found in our **resources section**. Lastly, don't miss our **glossary** of key terms from the report.

How Biology and Environment Impact Child Development and Early Learning

Children's brains are developing rapidly from birth through age 8 [B-8]. What happens to children socially and physically during these years influences their long-term developmental and academic trajectories. Just as children's development can be hurt by negative factors, it is also strengthened by positive environments and relationships. High-quality relationships with adults, both parents and educators, during these early years are key to children's success.

As policymakers, you can take steps to ensure that both parents and educators have what they need to support young children's growth and development. Devoting resources so that families have avenues for avoiding undue stress and have better access to high-quality early education programs are among the most critical. Ensuring that early interventions and education programs are following state, district, or institutional guidelines that are up to date with the most recent social and cognitive science is also key. Appropriate guidelines and quality standards are first steps in guaranteeing that effective educators are able to provide quality instruction across cognitive domains, as well as support children's social and emotional skills and physical health and development.

Because children living in poverty are likely to experience multiple stressors, which can manifest as academic and social problems when they enter early childhood programs or school, make sure that these children in particular have access to high-quality education and care. Professionals should be trained to recognize the effects of **chronic stress** and assist children in developing skills such as persistence and emotional awareness that are necessary for coping with adverse experiences.

Questions:

- Does your state provide resources or encourage research-based interventions or other types of support to help reduce prenatal exposure to stress?
- How does your state provide resources to help children and their parents through adverse situations? Where are these services provided?
- Are policies in place that aim to support children and also give their parents access to workforce training or programs to reduce their stress levels?
- What is the state doing to help parents better understand the importance of talking with children starting as soon as they are born?
- Are the latest findings from social and cognitive science reflected in state, district, or institutional guidelines for young children's growth and development?
- Do the guidelines for the routines in children's classrooms allow for cross-domain learning and interplay between subject areas, such as using the teaching of early mathematics to also build oral language development?

*This synopsis was drawn from our summaries of **chapter 3** and **chapter 4** of Transforming the Workforce; we encourage you to go to those summaries for key takeaways, examples, graphics, important quotations from the National Academies' volume, and more.*

The Importance of Continuity for Children B–8

Continuity of learning is essential for ensuring that children’s early academic success and development are built upon by consistent educational experiences. But continuity can be difficult to achieve when children experience a variety of early care and education settings that adhere to different standards and regulations. Take steps to improve both vertical continuity (consistency of care and education across years as children age) and horizontal continuity (consistency across different services or entities that serve children and families). Both are essential to children’s success.

At the state level, early learning guidelines and standards for research-based instructional strategies should be aligned for educators across the continuum. This helps educators to develop shared understanding of the expectations and instructional approaches used across settings and ages. Local policies that support communication, planning, and coordination across settings and programs can keep educators informed about the learning experiences each child had before and those that will follow. Educators can also use bridging activities to ease the transition between years and reduce the adverse consequences that can result because of changes in personnel, expectations, and settings. Bridging activities can also be used to connect services across sectors, giving educators better context to guide children’s learning trajectories.

Educators also need reliable data to understand how children are progressing across the continuum. Provide guidance and financial resources on the state and local to ensure that educators have access to high-quality child assessments that are aligned across years.

Questions:

- Which policies are making it difficult for professionals to share information across vertical and horizontal continuums? Which of those policies do you have control over and could change?
- Do your state's K–12 standards align with your state's early learning standards?
- Does your state have policies that encourage joint planning time and professional learning opportunities for educators in pre-K and kindergarten to aid in smooth transitions?
- Do programs collect and share the child-level data (such as assessment data and information on prior early learning settings) that educators at each grade level should review to meet children's needs?

*This synopsis was drawn from our summary of **chapter 5** of Transforming the Workforce; we encourage you to go to that summary for key takeaways, examples, graphics, important quotations from the National Academies' volume, and more.*

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Educational Practices and the Competencies Required of Educators

As policymakers, you can play more of a role than you might think in making sure that educators have the knowledge and skills they need to teach young children. It starts by recognizing that to foster high-quality learning, B–8 educators will need a deeper knowledge of subject-matter content, the developmental progress of how children learn, and the instructional strategies that best promote learning.

The *Transforming the Workforce* report summarizes insights from multiple new studies on the effectiveness of various practices with young children that lead to development of **social and emotional skills**, **language** and **literacy** skills, **early math** and early science skills, and the use of technology, as well as how to tailor methods to support dual language learners and other diverse populations of young children. Yet many early educators enter the field ill-equipped to teach certain subjects, such as math, or support specific populations. This is in part because preparation programs are usually designed in response to state competencies, qualifications, and licensure requirements, which may not align with the latest research.

Transforming the Workforce includes a full list of the competencies that B–8 educators need on **pages 328–329**. However, there is no current consensus on what professionals need to know and be able to do. National statements and state expectations for B–8 educators overlap, but also vary in significant ways. While some aspects of practice need to be tailored to specific professional roles, specialization should be developed in the context of a shared foundation in child development and early learning. States and other entities responsible for competencies and standards should revise them to align with the latest research on child development and early learning. The report recommends that states expand their existing core competency statements on areas such as the science of child development, the use of assessment, and work with dual language learners.

On **pages 344–345**, the report lays out specialized knowledge and competencies for leaders in the field. Program leaders are important in ensuring the quality of early learning experiences, yet their training often does not prepare them to be both administrative and instructional leaders. There is a pronounced divide in expectations for leaders in elementary school settings and those in early childhood learning settings outside of the public schools. Existing state and federal policies, such as minimal qualifications for center directors and accountability systems focused on the later grades for elementary school principals, often fail to motivate or support leaders in acquiring the knowledge and skills necessary to lead early childhood educators and their students.

In addition to strong educator preparation programs and professional learning opportunities, which we expand on below, you should help ensure that educators have access to research-based curricula and other relevant materials instrumental in supporting their practice. States or districts can provide guidance around curricula selection and use.

Lastly, the report points out that B–8 educators and administrators need to learn how to foster collaboration with and to coordinate practices across early care and education settings and between the care and education sector and related sectors, especially health, mental health, and social services.

Questions:

- Are there particular subject areas that are weak among educators in your state or locality that need to be addressed? For example, what is the state of early math or science instruction? Are educators being trained in how to build language and literacy skills? Are there best practices for the use of technology with young children that need to be integrated into early learning guidelines and teacher training?
- Are all B–8 educators in your state or locality provided opportunities to learn more about child mental health and what services may be offered to the children and families in their care?
- Does the state have one foundational set of competencies that are expected for all educators B–8?
- Do documents exist that outline competencies for those working with young children in various capacities?
- When were these competency expectations last revised and how are they used?
- Are current state competency expectations aligned with those in the report?

*This synopsis was drawn from our summaries of **chapter 6** and **chapter 7** of Transforming the Workforce; we encourage you to go to those summaries for key takeaways, examples, graphics, important quotations from the National Academies' volume, and more.*

How Higher Education and Professional Learning Contribute to Quality Practice

Educators usually participate in some combination of pre-service and in-service activities to develop their practice, but huge divides exist across the B–8 continuum in terms of what type of professional learning is required and what is accessible. Why? Divergent state qualification and licensure policies for educators share a big part of the blame. Elementary school educators must have formal preparation before employment, usually a bachelor’s degree and state certification. Educators of children prior to kindergarten (with the exception of pre-K teachers in public schools) may not be required to have any formal higher education and often work in the field before pursuing formal higher education or training. Similar disparities in qualifications exist for leaders.

This bifurcated system is failing to produce well-qualified educators who possess all the knowledge and skills they need. State licensing, qualification, and accreditation policies should align with what research shows is best for young children. Policies should acknowledge that all educators of children B–8 need a similar foundation of knowledge and skills, and that preparation programs must include a focus on child development and early learning, as well as emphasize subject areas (early literacy, math, and science) and the content knowledge that emerges from them. Ensure that educators have opportunities to learn from what happens in everyday interactions with children by participating in high-quality clinical experiences.

It is also important to remove barriers that keep early educators from gaining more training and education. Early educators, especially those working in settings outside of public schools and making very low wages, are usually unable to go back to school because of the high costs of attendance and time constraints. You can take steps to increase access to higher education and support educator success by collaborating with institutions of higher education to create articulation agreements between community colleges and four-year institutions, stackable credentials, online degree programs, and scholarships. You can also support alternative preparation pathways, such as Teach for America, which put candidates on a fast track and often assist with employment.

In addition to reforming licensure and higher education, you can break down barriers, create incentives, and channel financial resources into programs that provide effective ongoing training, including mentoring and coaching. As with higher education, a bifurcated system exists across these in-service programs. Those working in elementary schools usually have to meet specific requirements around professional learning and may have greater access to opportunities for ongoing training. Educators in publicly-funded programs, like Head Start, are more likely to participate in professional learning during paid work hours. Other educators face barriers like limited funding, lack of support from leadership, and the inability to take time away from the classroom.

Questions:

- What credentials and licenses does your state require of educators working in B–5 settings compared to those working in elementary schools?
What types of professional learning opportunities does your state or district offer for early childhood educators? Are there opportunities for all educators [e.g., teachers, leaders, and paraprofessionals] working with children from birth through third grade? Are educators working with different ages of children participating together in these opportunities at times?
- Are there requirements that providers of ongoing professional learning help educators stay up to date on the latest science and best practices?
- Could your state or district help provide early educators with the funds necessary to pursue additional education?
- Given the needs in your state or locality, what topics for in-service professional development should be prioritized for early educators?
How can career ladders be constructed to ensure that early educators have opportunities for professional advancement?

*This synopsis was drawn from our **summary of chapter 8** and **summary of chapter 9** of Transforming the Workforce; we encourage you to go to those summaries for key takeaways, examples, graphics, important quotations from the National Academies' volume, and more.*

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Qualification Requirements, Evaluation Systems, and Quality Assurance Systems

Building mechanisms to identify quality is one of the primary ways that you can influence reforms to the early education workforce. Those mechanisms include requiring educators and leaders to show competencies and hold credentials, requiring systems for reviewing the performance of educators and leaders, and requiring systems for assuring the quality of programs and early education settings across the age spectrum.

Those working in elementary schools are consistently held to higher credentialing standards than those working in B–5 programs: states agree that early elementary teachers need at least a bachelor’s degree, but there is no widespread agreement about the appropriate level of education for those in early childhood programs. Similar disparities exist for administrative leaders in both settings.

This divided system for B–5 and elementary school educators perpetuate misconceptions that working with younger children requires less knowledge and skills. These disparities can foster inequities in practitioner compensation, making it more difficult to recruit and retain B–5 educators. Solving this problem is not as easy as simply increasing qualifications. Educators will need time and support to meet new guidelines. You should help ensure that increases in education are coupled with substantial salary increases.

Educator quality is mixed at least in part because the focus and overall quality of preparation programs for teachers vary widely. By itself, a degree or a specialization in early childhood education does not guarantee that a person will become a better teacher or that she can improve child outcomes for children B–5. Higher education accreditation and other markers of quality could be improved to help steer aspiring educators and the current workforce to more effective higher education programs.

States and programs have also been refining the ways that they determine the quality of current educators’ practice. Existing systems vary considerably in design and intent. Teacher evaluations in public schools are meant to improve instruction and child outcomes by differentiating effective from ineffective instructional practice. Policies should take into account that pre-K through third grade students

learn in ways that differ from their older peers. States and localities should provide evaluators with tools to understand what early learning should look like in these grades. Practice caution in using evaluation systems that rely on student outcomes in these grades since it is more difficult to obtain reliable and valid assessment data with younger children.

States and national organizations have been refining how quality is measured in B–5 programs with early education program accreditation systems and quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS). There is great variation in these systems, but when done well, they have the potential to positively affect educator knowledge, skills, and behaviors. They can also help parents make informed decisions about where to enroll their children. Help ensure that these systems align with the latest research on child development and early learning and that programs have the supports and incentives they need to improve.

Questions:

- What needs to change in your current credentialing systems? Could they be revamped to enable candidates to demonstrate their competencies as educators?
- What structures does your state have in place to ensure quality in preparation programs offered by higher education and other training institutions?
- When teachers and principals are evaluated, are those evaluation systems accounting for the ways that young children learn best? Do mechanisms exist to evaluate administrators of B–5 early care and education programs?

*This synopsis was drawn from our summaries of **chapter 10** of Transforming the Workforce; we encourage you to go to that summary for key takeaways, examples, graphics, important quotations from the National Academies' volume, and more.*

Status and Well-Being of the Workforce

The early education workforce is plagued with high turnover, particularly in the B–5 years. This workforce experiences more stress than many other fields, and teachers who are struggling to care for themselves will have difficulty caring for young children. As policymakers, you have the power to increase educators' quality of life and job satisfaction, improve job stability in the field, and attract high-quality teachers.

Wages and benefits that are commensurate with the demands of the job are essential to maintaining an effective workforce. Child care educators still earn poverty-level wages, making less than pre-K teachers and earning less than half of what K–12 educators do. Unfortunately, large income disparities persist between educators working in different settings even when education levels are comparable. Early care and education is already prohibitively expensive for many families and programs are already running on extremely tight budgets, so raising tuition to pay educators is not a solution. Increased public investment is needed to raise compensation. Some states, for example, have implemented pay parity policies to guarantee that pre-K teachers are paid the same as kindergarten teachers. A few states also participate in the WAGE\$ program, which provides salary supplements to low-paid educators. A few states offer tax credits to early childhood educators to supplement their wages.

The cost of higher education can be an additional financial burden. Because increases in educational attainment are not always coupled with meaningful increases in pay, it is important that students do not take on significant debt to pay for higher education. Establish grants and scholarships to help. T.E.A.C.H. scholarships, for example, have increased access to higher education in many states; in addition to help in paying for college, recipients are guaranteed small pay increases.

Limited opportunities for advancement also make it difficult to attract and retain a high-quality workforce. Devote resources to professional learning opportunities for educators and create career pathways to help educators advance in the field.

Questions:

- Do any of your current state or local policies aim to improve the working conditions and the well-being of the workforce? Are there viable career paths for early childhood educators?
- Is there pay parity between educators working in pre-K through third grade?
- Do educators have access to wages and benefits that reflect the skilled nature of their work?
- Do educators have access to education and training programs needed to further their careers—and the financial support to pay for them?

*This synopsis was drawn from our summary of **chapter 11** of Transforming the Workforce; we encourage you to go to that summary for key takeaways, examples, graphics, important quotations from the National Academies' volume, and more.*

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Recommendations: Transforming the Workforce's Blueprint for Action

The committee behind *Transforming the Workforce* offers a “Blueprint for Action” that puts forward 13 recommendations along with a discussion of necessary considerations to better connect the research with policy and practice and ultimately improve outcomes for children. Our overview of these recommendations, including key takeaways for implementation, is available **here**.

Transforming the Early Education Workforce

About this Project

This is a multimedia guidebook inspired by and drawn from the *Transforming the Workforce for Children From Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation* (National Academies Press, 2015). This guidebook adds to that volume with key takeaways, videos, interactive tools, a glossary, and more. We have designed it with three doorways for three different but overlapping audiences: **educators who work directly with children**, **educators in higher education who prepare those educators**, and **policymakers** interested in improving early learning settings for children from B–8.

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