

# BUILDING A BETTER PRESCHOOL

SPECIALIZED PROFESSIONAL  
LEARNING IS KEY TO HIGH-QUALITY  
EARLY EDUCATION

BY ERIC CELESTE

**T**his quote from a report aimed at early education teachers seems ripped from today's headlines. "Early childhood education ...

is as dynamic and rapidly changing as any other field in human studies. It is increasingly difficult to stay abreast of new information because technological and ideological change is happening so rapidly. Recent attention has been given to early childhood education as a result of new investigations into the importance of preschool experiences, child welfare, and educational structures to support growth and learning."

It could have been written yesterday — but it wasn't. It's taken from a 2001 resource manual from U.S. Department of State titled *Early Childhood Assessment and Teacher Training* (Cobb, 2001). This shows that we've been talking about the unique aspects of professional learning for early education teachers for a long time, but many of the challenges are still largely the same.

First, even the highest-quality professional learning for 2nd grade

through 12th grade educators can differ in fundamental ways from high-quality professional learning for early education — especially if we expand the old pre-K through 2nd grade definition of early education to include ages 0 to 3 development.

And we should consider early education that broadly. That's why almost all early education experts now classify early education years as encompassing the ages of 0 to 8. This has only increased the need to differentiate professional learning between early education and traditional secondary schools.

"Traditional professional learning is grounded in the reality of working with children with more developed self-regulation skills, like the ability to sit in a seat and pay attention, as well as more developed brains," says Sadie Funk, executive director of First 3 Years, a Texas nonprofit that, over the past 35 years, has trained and mentored thousands of professionals in social-emotional care of infants and toddlers.

"Knowing that 80% of core brain development happens by age 3, and 90% by age 5, it's really important that

## SNAPSHOT OF EARLY EDUCATION PROGRESS

According to the National Institute for Early Education Research out of Rutgers University, in 2002 only two states enrolled 50% of their 4-year-olds and just three served more than 30%. In 2015-16, three states and the District of Columbia served more than 70% of 4-year-olds, a figure not reached by any state in 2002, and 18 states and the District of Columbia served more than 30%.

"This remarkable progress," the institute concludes in *The State of Preschool 2016*, "largely reflects change in states that committed to offer every child a high-quality early education." For example: Iowa went from serving 4% of 4-year-olds to 64%. The disparity state by state still varies widely. As of 2015-16, seven states still offered no public pre-K program at all.

That a state wouldn't offer public pre-K is increasingly surprising, given the overwhelming research suggesting tremendous benefits to children, communities, and the states' economic fortunes. The Harvard Center on the Developing Child estimates that about 80% of brain development happens in the first three years of life, when 700 to 1,000 neural connections form every second. As well, gaps in this progress emerge between children from different backgrounds. Researchers from Stanford University found that, by age 2, children from low-income families can be six months behind their peers from high-income families in language processing skills and vocabulary (Clark, Lautzenheiser, McBride, & Puckett, 2017).

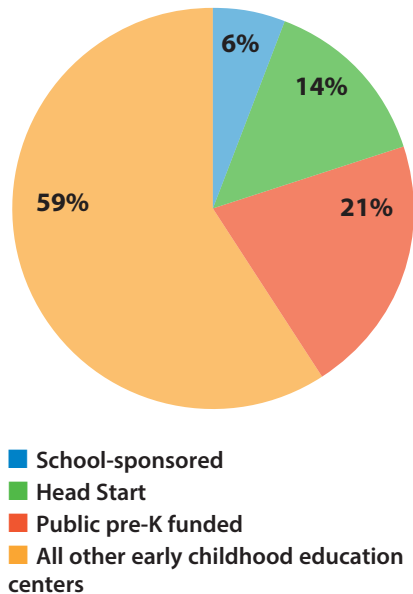
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**FACTS ABOUT THE EARLY CHILDHOOD WORKFORCE**

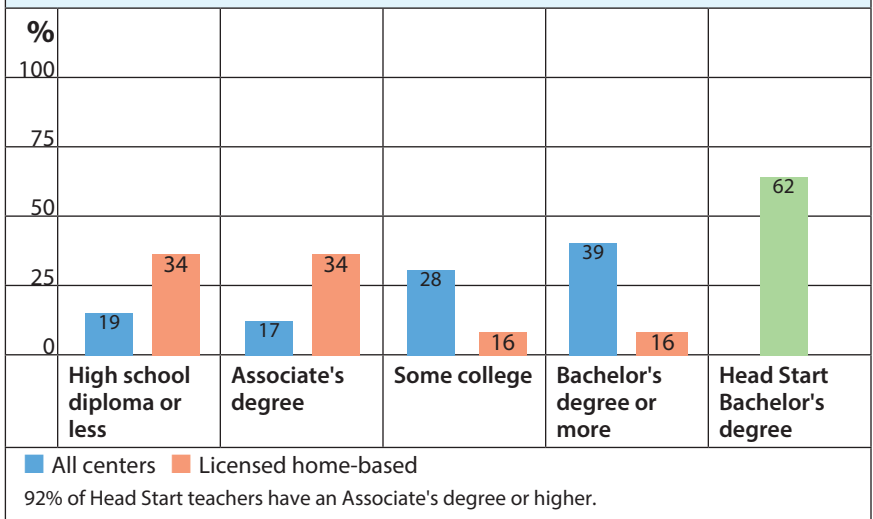
**Early learning workforce by setting**



**Size of the workforce**

An estimated 1 million teachers and caregivers working in center-based programs and an additional 3.8 million home-based teachers and caregivers with children from birth to kindergarten.

**Degree attainment**



early childhood education and ongoing professional learning focus on how the brain develops,” Funk says. “And knowing this, we must help teachers to support very young children — 0 to 5 years old — in developing a strong base for cognitive and literacy skills as well as emotional control. All of these things are necessary for children to do well in school.”

There’s a lot to unpack there, but doing so gives us an important window into two crucial challenges of professional learning for early education: teacher preparation and ongoing professional learning (especially keeping up with brain science and social-emotional research).

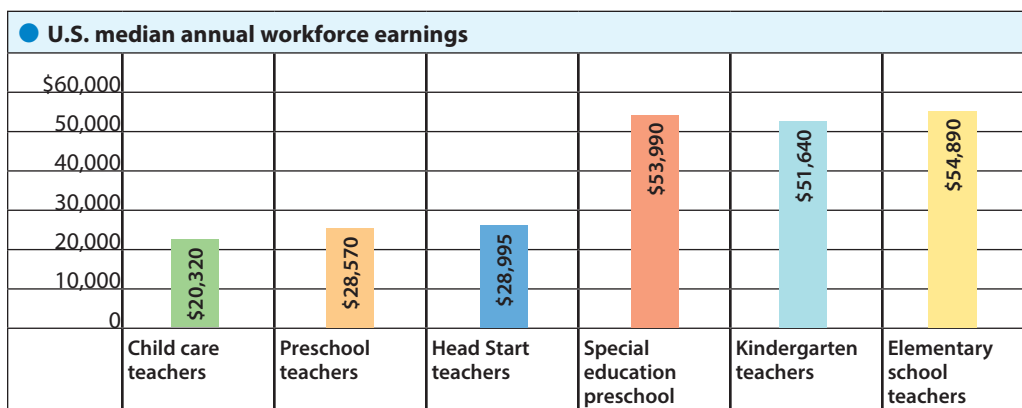
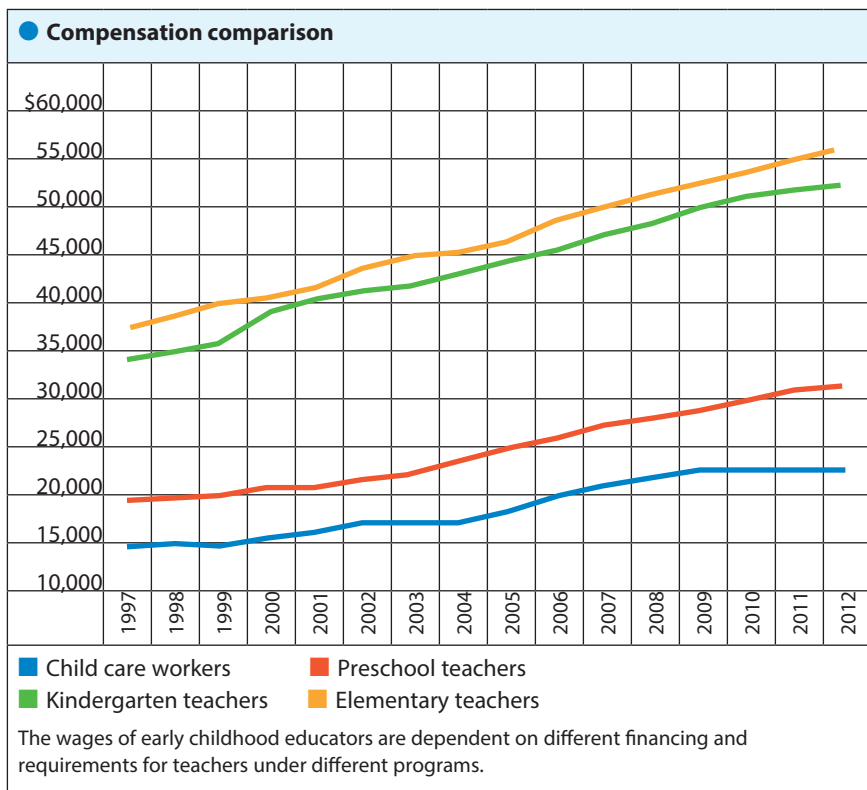
In fact, the premier early education advocacy organization in the country, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), says in its current policy paper that, for high-quality early education to exist outside of tiny islands

across the country, we must address these two problems and one more: disparity in early education teacher pay. To achieve widespread high-quality early education opportunities for all students, NAEYC says, “Early childhood professionals must have excellent preparation, ongoing professional development, and compensation commensurate with their qualifications and experience” (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2015).

What do we mean by high-quality early education? A simple but compelling case is made by Robert Lynch and Kavya Vaghul at the Washington Center for Equitable Growth in their report *The Benefits and Costs of Investing in Early Childhood Education* (Lynch & Vaghul, 2015). They, too, put professional learning and resources devoted to it as integral to a high-quality early education system. Lynch and Vaghul define a high-quality

pre-K program as having the following qualities:

- The program boasts low child-to-teacher ratios (10 to 1 or better), small class sizes (20 or fewer), and highly paid, well-qualified teachers and staff.
- Teachers are typically required to have at least a bachelor’s degree with a specialization in early childhood education, and classroom assistants usually have at least a child development associate’s degree or equivalent.
- Both teachers and assistants are encouraged and given opportunities to continue their professional development, and parental involvement in the education process is cultivated.
- The nature of teacher-child interactions tends to be warm, positive, supportive, and stimulating.
- The activities in the classroom



Source for all: Barnett, W.S., Friedman-Krauss, A. H., Weisenfeld, G.G., Horowitz, M., Kasmin, R., & Squires, J.H. (2017). *The state of preschool 2016: State preschool yearbook*. New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research.

and the instructional materials vary with emphasis placed on quality instruction in a wide range of subjects, among them art, music, science, math, problem-solving, language development, and reasoning.

- From a programmatic side, high-quality preschools provide meals and offer health services (such as hearing, vision, and

psychological health screenings) for their students.

- All of these aspects of high-quality programs are upheld and improved through rigorous monitoring to ensure that quality standards are being met or exceeded (Lynch & Vaghul, 2015, pp. 22-23).

A year later, the Learning Policy Institute added support to these

suggestions in its policy brief *The Building Blocks of High-Quality Early Childhood Education Programs* (Wechsler, Melnick, Maier, & Bishop, 2016). Learning Policy Institute added to this list familiar school improvement criteria such as early learning standards and curricula that address the whole child; assessments that consider children’s academic, social-emotional, and physical progress; and a well-



## How principals can create professional development opportunities specific to teaching young children

Excerpted with permission from *Taking Action: What Principals and Administrators Can Do To Ready Their Schools To Support Kindergarten Transitions* (Helsel & Gandhi, 2017).

**1. Provide teachers and other appropriate staff with the opportunity to attend national, state, or local conferences focused on teaching young children.**

The annual National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) conference provides multiple practitioner-friendly sessions regarding developmentally appropriate practice: [www.naeyc.org/events](http://www.naeyc.org/events).

NAEYC affiliates offer conferences as well. Check out this searchable directory: [www.naeyc.org/affiliates/conferences](http://www.naeyc.org/affiliates/conferences).

**2. Offer teachers and other staff the opportunity to participate in professional development that focuses on developmentally appropriate practice and the importance of play and movement.**

It is important to provide professional development to ensure quality teaching of young children. Principals, other administrators, and teachers need to build their knowledge about what is age- and developmentally appropriate across the continuum, along with whole-child learning and how young children learn. NAEYC provides information about upcoming professional development opportunities, including opportunities for principals specifically, at [www.naeyc.org/ecp](http://www.naeyc.org/ecp).

Also consider job-embedded professional learning opportunities for teachers by engaging teachers in activities

that include development and review of case studies and observation of fellow teachers. Encourage teachers to participate in professional learning communities (PLCs). Ideas for creating a PLC are at [www.edutopia.org/professional-learning-communities-collaboration-how-to](http://www.edutopia.org/professional-learning-communities-collaboration-how-to). One particularly helpful approach is to provide professional development opportunities for preschool and kindergarten staff together, which fosters a shared understanding.

**3. Use books and videos focused on developmentally appropriate practice as lower cost options for providing learning about teaching young children.**

Sue Bredekamp discusses developmentally appropriate practice at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ny1u9a7-EJc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ny1u9a7-EJc).

NAEYC offers the DVD *Developmentally Appropriate Practice: A Focus on Intentionality and on Play*: [www.naeyc.org/store/node/17110](http://www.naeyc.org/store/node/17110).

NAEYC also provides handouts on developmentally appropriate practice: [www.imaginationplayground.com/images/content/2/9/2964/Developmentally-Appropriate-Practice-Play.pdf](http://www.imaginationplayground.com/images/content/2/9/2964/Developmentally-Appropriate-Practice-Play.pdf) or [www.naeyc.org/dap/10-effective-dap-teaching-strategies](http://www.naeyc.org/dap/10-effective-dap-teaching-strategies).

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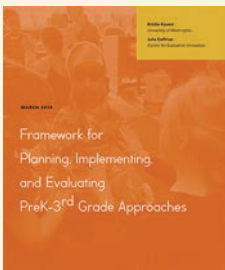
Helsel, F.K.I. & Gandhi, E.V. (2017). *Taking action: What principals and administrators can do to ready their schools to support kindergarten transitions*. Portland, OR: Education Northwest.

## TOOLS TO DOWNLOAD

*Framework for Planning, Implementing, and Evaluating PreK-3rd Grade Approaches* (Kauerz & Coffman, 2013) is a self-assessment tool designed to measure the depth of implementation and teacher teams as they align instruction across grade levels.

According to its authors, “this framework helps to address key questions facing those who are developing pre-K to 3rd-grade approaches in their school, districts, and communities.” It helps administrators, principals, and teachers answer questions such as:

- What does a comprehensive pre-K to 3rd grade approach include?
- The word “alignment” is used often, but what needs to be aligned?
- What kinds of changes need to take hold in adults’ behaviors before we can expect to see improvements in child outcomes?
- What kinds of responsibilities need to be shared among age 0 to 5 programs, grades K-3, families, and communities?



You can download the framework at [http://depts.washington.edu/pthru3/PreK-3rd\\_Framework\\_Legal%20paper.pdf](http://depts.washington.edu/pthru3/PreK-3rd_Framework_Legal%20paper.pdf).

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implemented state quality rating and improvement system.

The benefit of researchers and policy advocates campaigning for similar sets of high-quality criteria is beginning to resonate with policymakers and administrators, and the results are showing in the field, says Regen Fearon, executive director of Early Matters Dallas, an early education advocacy coalition of business, civic, and nonprofit organizations across Texas.

“Many organizations are partnering with other early education partners to share professional development resources because they’re able to agree on the outcomes desired,” Fearon says. “For example, Head Start is working with ISDs to host training sessions together. Same with Early Childhood Intervention [of Texas’ Health and Human Services department] with ECI

training districts on developmental delays. Four-year universities are bringing their research and science to bear in support of ISDs’ professional development.”

Fearon says colleagues from across the country are impressing her with the way in which they’re using teacher training and professional learning to meet high-quality early education standards. “Florida has a really strong online program focused on early childhood education,” she says. “They are heavily focused on communities of practice and coaching and believe in the reciprocity of the relationships they have with those in their program — for example, program developers are learning just as much from those using the teaching content and adjusting based on feedback, both positive and negative.

“They started by focusing on



## THE ECONOMIC BENEFITS OF HIGH-QUALITY EARLY EDUCATION

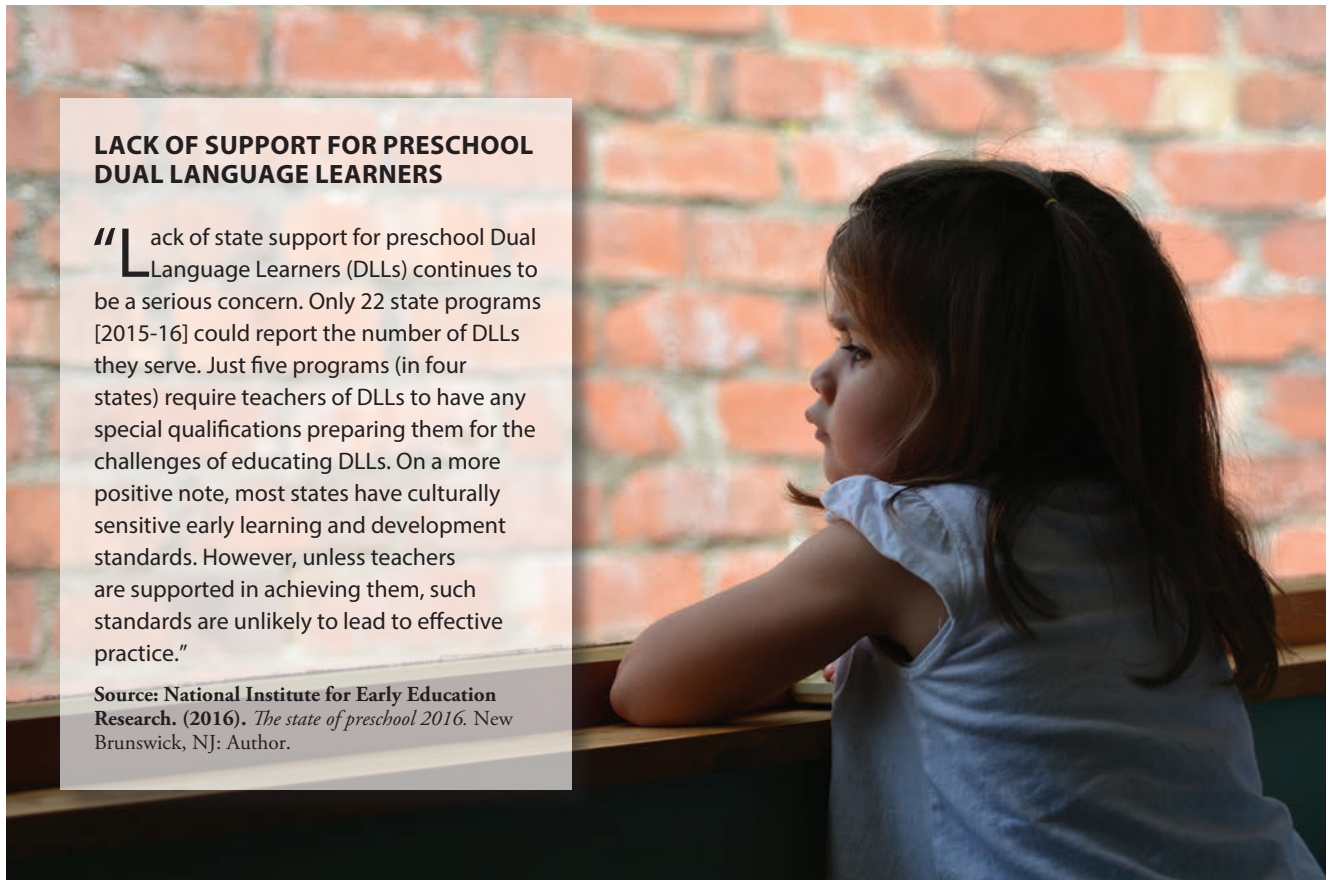
The list of high-quality early childhood education programs that have shown positive economic effects for children, communities, and states is considerable. These include (but aren’t limited to) the Abecedarian Project in North Carolina, the Perry Preschool Project in Michigan, and the Chicago Child-Parent Centers — each a long-term research project that has shown long-lasting positive outcomes for kids.

Researchers from the University of North Carolina have estimated that every \$1 spent on Abecedarian delivered \$2.50 worth of total benefits for society, as a result of higher incomes, reduced health care costs, and less need for public assistance (Lynch & Vaghul, 2015).

University of Chicago economist and Nobel laureate James Heckman has calculated that, for every \$1 spent on Perry Preschool, total benefits to society ranged from \$7 to \$10 in the form of increased lifetime earnings and reduced remedial education and welfare payments — what Heckman calls an “extremely high rate of return” (Lynch & Vaghul, 2015).

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**LACK OF SUPPORT FOR PRESCHOOL DUAL LANGUAGE LEARNERS**

“Lack of state support for preschool Dual Language Learners (DLLs) continues to be a serious concern. Only 22 state programs [2015-16] could report the number of DLLs they serve. Just five programs (in four states) require teachers of DLLs to have any special qualifications preparing them for the challenges of educating DLLs. On a more positive note, most states have culturally sensitive early learning and development standards. However, unless teachers are supported in achieving them, such standards are unlikely to lead to effective practice.”

Source: National Institute for Early Education Research. (2016). *The state of preschool 2016*. New Brunswick, NJ: Author.

developing the coaches and community of practice facilitators, so they could then handle the need among teachers,” Fearon says. “And it’s working. They’ve been able to show 52% improvement in teacher-child interactions and 43% improvement in teacher content knowledge.”

Professional learning programs are indeed showing results across the country. For example: Oregon’s Early Learning Kindergarten Readiness Partnership and Innovation grant program, created in 2013, has disbursed millions of dollars for professional development through 16 early learning hubs across the state. According to *Connecting the Steps: State Strategies to Ease the Transition from Pre-K to Kindergarten* (Loewenberg, 2017), the grant program helps pay full-time pre-K to 3rd-grade coordinators in high-need urban areas and funds summer

programs that acclimate kindergartners to their new schools.

As we can see from the sidebars, charts, and quotes on these pages, though, there are still tremendous strides that must be made across the board — especially in fair compensation for early education professionals. It helps remind us that the pockets of progress being made across the country are indeed just the first steps toward a system of professional training, learning, and monitoring that can lead to improved outcomes for all students in early education.

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