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Center Directors Are Doing More than Running a Business

by Abbie Lieberman

Weekdays are hectic for Jennifer Ladner, a center director in Tulsa, Oklahoma. The Educare center that she runs provides early childhood education to 160 children from 7:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. She's in and out of meetings most days, making time for weekly one-on-ones with each of the people she supervises to reflect on their work and address questions or frustrations they may have. She also sits in on interdisciplinary team meetings in which staff sets and discusses goals for each child and his or her family. The rest of her day is usually spent completing paperwork, managing the budget, and making sure the center is in compliance with the various sets



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lead author on multiple policy papers, including: "A Tale of Two Pre-K Leaders: How State Policies for Center Directors and Principals Leading Pre-K Programs Differ, and Why They Shouldn't" (2017), "Building Strong Readers in Minnesota: Pre-K–3rd Grade Policies That Support Children's Literacy Development" (2015), and "Slowly but Surely: How Indiana is Building a Pre-K Program" (2016). Her writing has appeared in *Slate*, *The Hechinger Report*, *The Washington Monthly*, *Real Clear Education*, and *Pacific Standard*.

Prior to joining New America, she interned on the legislative affairs team at Education Trust and at the U.S. Department of Education working on the 2013 Race to the Top District competition. Lieberman graduated from University of California, Davis with a bachelor's degree in sociology and political science. She also holds a master's degree in public policy from Georgetown University.

of regulations to which it must adhere. She also plans professional learning for staff, which she tries to incorporate into everything they do.

Ladner's days are long but she knows that her job is important. "We have high expectations of eliminating the achievement gap. We can't just be child care; we have to be more than that," she says.

It's a noble goal that all early educators should share, especially those serving the most vulnerable children. However, some might not realize what an important role Ladner and other center directors play in accomplishing this goal. Research in K–12 education has found that school leaders are second only to teachers for their impact on child outcomes, and there is no reason to believe that program leaders have any less of an impact in the years from birth to age 5.

In fact, Ladner's job sounds very similar to that of an elementary school principal. Both are expected to be instructional and administrative leaders. Ladner needs to have a strong grasp on running a business and an equally strong understanding of how to support children's growth and development. Arguably, most importantly she is responsible for hiring, training, and retaining the teachers who provide

direct care and education to the infants, toddlers, and pre-K children in her center.

Despite the similar responsibilities between leaders working in child care centers and elementary schools, a report from New America finds that child care center directors are consistently held to lower standards, offered fewer supports, and compensated significantly lower than those leading elementary schools.

While most states require principals to have a master's degree, they have very minimal education and training requirements for center directors. As shown in the map on the adjacent page, New America found that eight states do not require center directors of licensed programs to have any formal higher education or training. Thirteen states require the Child Development Associate credential. Only seven states require an associate's degree. New Jersey and Vermont are the only states that currently require a bachelor's degree for directors, and even then the requirement only applies to larger centers. In Washington, D.C., directors who have been in their position for less than ten years will need to have a bachelor's degree with at least some coursework in early childhood by 2022.

Many states allow a candidate with a bachelor's degree to work as a center director, even if they have no prior work experience in child care. Formal education and training qualifications are inversely related to work experience in most states: the more education someone has, the less work experience they need, and vice versa. One benefit of this is that multiple paths exist to become a center director. On the down side, it means a director could have no experience working with children or may have substantial experience in child care with no knowledge of administration, finance, or the science of child development.

Oklahoma, where Ladner works, does not require any college coursework for center directors, but she has a master's degree in early childhood education. She also has seven years of teaching experience and previous administrative leadership experience. However, her skills and background are unique; the qualifications required by her employer are more stringent than most.

Reflecting back on her preparation, Ladner says, "I definitely would not be as successful as I am if I had not played so many roles within our agency before. Being the master teacher, mentor, coach, and supervisor was helpful for getting me more directly involved. Of course, before I worked here, I was an early childhood teacher for seven years.... As assistant director here I worked with families and the family advocates, did enrollment, recruitment, and that piece of it. It was really beneficial to have that experience as well, because as the school director here, I supervise the master teachers, the assistant director, [the] mental health specialist, and our resource coordinator.... All of those things combined helped me be more well-rounded to see the bigger picture."

Experts in the field agree that effectively leading an early education program

requires specific knowledge and skills. In 2015, the National Academy of Medicine (formerly the Institute of Medicine) and the National Research Council released the seminal "Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation" report, which recommends that center directors earn at least a bachelor's degree, with specialized knowledge and competencies related to how to help young children learn, how to assess children and educators, how to foster a professional workforce and build partnerships, and how to develop and manage an organization. In 2016 the federal Head Start program followed suit, increasing requirements for incoming directors to at least a bachelor's degree (not necessarily in early childhood education or leadership), with experience in administration and management.

It's clear from New America's findings that most state requirements have not caught up with the latest research. According to the National Academies, even when states do have detailed requirements for center directors, they tend to focus more on operational leadership than instructional leadership. Experts find that the competency statements for early childhood education leaders that exist "have to do with how well a leader can develop and manage a well-functioning organization." Of course, this is crucial knowledge for center directors to have since they are often running their own businesses.

As Teri Talan, director of policy initiatives at the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership and a former child care center director, explains, "One important difference to acknowledge [between principals and center directors] is that directors have to wear all administrative hats. The vast majority of children in child care are in programs smaller than 100 children.... They may have a center director and an assistant director. Compare that to a public school

where you have so much more staff and support. [Child care] administrators have less preparation and also a wider range of responsibility."

Center directors might have limited support outside their program as well. As Talan explains, "Principals also have supports from their district, not just more people in the building. A lot of the support that allows them to do the best job is coming from the district. They also have a principal association. Center directors do not usually have that kind of district level or regional level support."

Center directors need substantial training in administrative leadership, but this shouldn't come at the expense of training on instructional leadership. These leaders are usually in charge of choosing curricula and assessments, and selecting professional development opportunities for teachers. They also need a deep understanding of child development, the importance of adult-child interactions and nurturing relationships from the earliest age, and how young children learn.

Center director compensation usually reflects the minimal education and training requirements instead of the complexity of the job — the average pre-K center director salary in Oklahoma is \$43,470. Meantime, the average principal salary in that state is \$71,740. Child care centers may be smaller than elementary schools in general, but that doesn't mean the work is any less important. One might even argue that in some ways center directors have more responsibilities. Low compensation and salary disparities are evident when comparing the child care workforce to the K-12 workforce more generally. Inadequate compensation is a key factor undermining workforce stability. Leader turnover can be disruptive to all staff and can therefore impact the quality of care and educa-

tion children receive. According to the National Academies, turnover in child care settings is four times higher than in elementary school settings.

It is time for policies on director qualifications, compensation, and work supports to catch up with the science showing how important their roles are. New America's report offers four recommendations for states to help ensure that center directors start their jobs knowing how to run a business and be strong instructional leaders for early childhood educators.

First, states should increase center director qualifications to reflect the research on child development and early learning. State child care licensing standards tend to focus more on health and safety than teaching and learning, resulting in low qualifications for center directors. Quality Rating

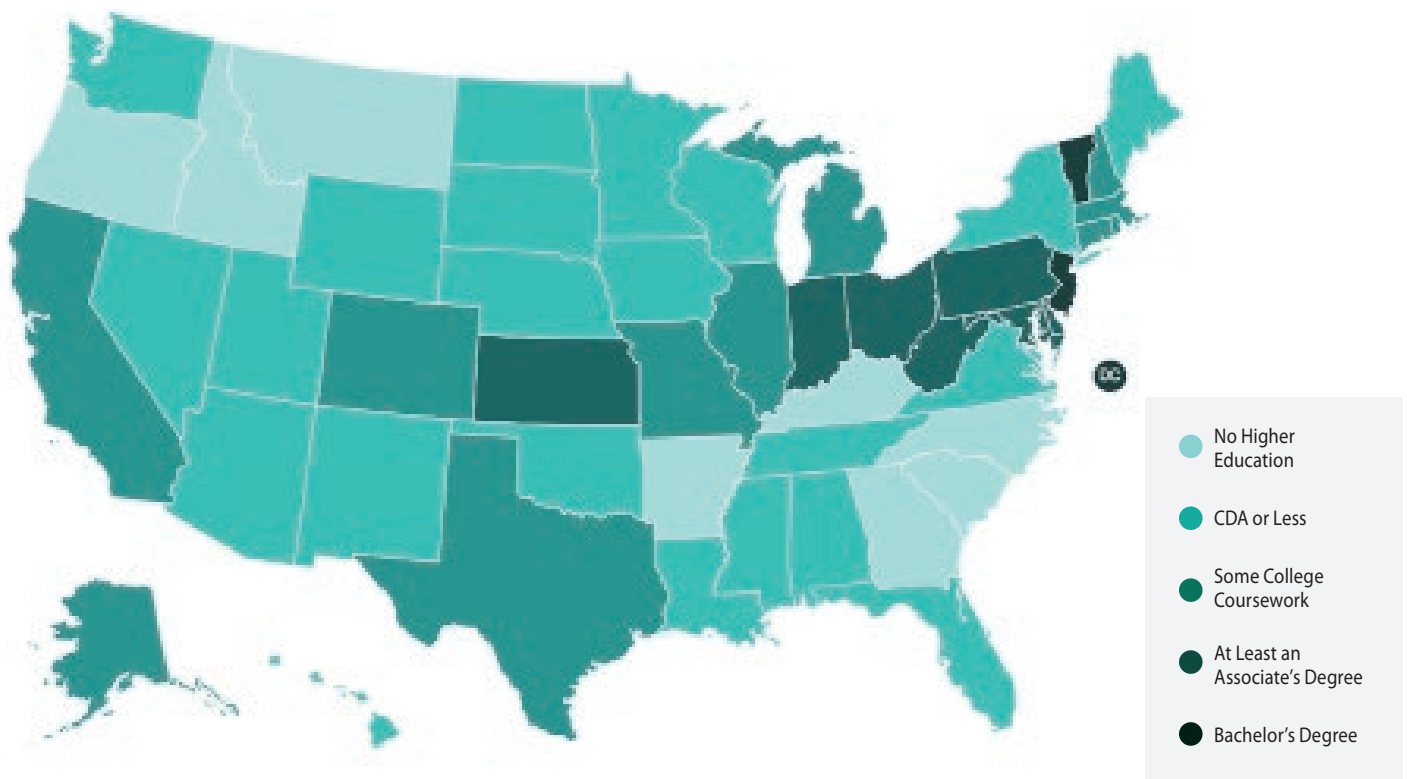
and Improvement Systems are the primary vehicle through which states are encouraging higher education and training, but participation in these systems is usually voluntary and the incentives might not be high enough to spark change. States should require center directors to have a bachelor's degree with specialized training in early childhood education, of course ensuring that institutes of higher education have the capacity to meet the greater demand.

Second, states should increase public infrastructure for early education to improve center director well-being and retention. Center director compensation remains low compared to leaders in comparable fields and the cost of early education and care is already too high for many parents to afford. Raising tuition is not the solution. Instead, more public funding is needed

to ensure that center directors are fairly compensated. Better compensation and more state and district support could improve retention, which benefits staff, children, and their families.

Third, states should increase opportunities for professional learning. This is the best way to reach leaders already in the field, especially those who came to the job with limited knowledge about running a business, how children learn, or how to support teachers. States should offer center directors professional learning in these areas. Because of the lack of state and local infrastructure for child care centers, professional learning that strengthens relationships between programs or brings together all leaders serving young children to determine the best use of community resources could also be beneficial.

What is the minimum level of education required to be a center director according to state licensing standards?



Lastly, states should streamline state regulations and eliminate redundancies. Center directors often spend too much time navigating the differing requirements for center licensing, accreditation, QRIS, state pre-K programs, and Head Start. Reporting can be repetitive, and sometimes even contradictory. Navigating these systems takes away from time a center director could spend supporting teachers.

Directors like Jennifer Ladner have the qualifications, training, supports, and compensation to be effective early education leaders. Too many early childhood directors, though, do not. Without putting more focus on improving preparation and support for leaders, it will be that much harder to ensure that young children have the strong learning and developmental opportunities they need to set them on the steps for success in school and later in life. Leaders are not just running a business; they are key to enabling teachers to teach in ways children learn best.

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