



Increasing Access to High-quality ECE Degrees

Taking Action in Your Community

by Jodi White and Billie Young

In 2015, the Institute of Medicine and the National Research Council issued a report, *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation*¹, which advocated for a more coherent policy framework for workforce standards and preparation based on the science of child development, in order to improve the consistency, continuity, and quality of early learning experiences for children. The report calls for moving to a minimum bachelor's degree with specialized knowledge and competencies for all lead teachers. The report recommends **seven principles** to support quality professional practice, including these four:

- Professionals need foundational and specific competencies.
- Professionals need to be able to support diverse populations.



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- Professional learning systems need to develop and sustain professional competencies.
- Practice environments need to enable high-quality practice.

Seven recommendations were made in the report to address the challenge of truly transforming the ECE workforce. In this article we will take a deeper look at two of those recommendations:

- Developing comprehensive pathways for transitioning to a minimum bachelor's degree qualifications requirement, with specialized knowledge and competencies for all lead educators working with children from birth through age 8. *We'll provide examples for creating degree pathways and increasing access.*
- Developing and enhancing programs in higher education for care and education professionals. *We'll take a*



Photo by Bonnie Neugebauer

look at how one college has worked to address the quality of their ECE degree programs.

Taking Stock of Where We Are Now

The goal of bachelor's degrees for all lead teachers of children ages birth to age 8 is lofty, and achieving it is dependent on a number of factors, including provision of worthy compensation, removing barriers to degree attainment, and assuring the quality of higher education programs. The National Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (NSCCE)² reported in 2017 that degree attainment for lead teachers varied widely across program types and funding requirements. The percentage of lead teachers with at least a bachelor's degree is as follows: Head Start, 62 percent; school-sponsored ECE programs, 58 percent; public Pre-K teachers, 36 percent; and other center-based programs, 34 percent. Though there may be a long way to go, the success of Head Start gives hope that achieving this goal is not entirely unrealistic.

Significant Barriers to Degree Attainment

There are many barriers to degree attainment, including a disconnect between degrees and compensation levels. Those working in ECE programs rarely earn enough to pay college tuition and related costs of education, and there is little financial reward for obtaining degrees. Few states and ECE systems require bachelor's degrees (Head Start is a notable exception) and rarely do employers require degrees.

Barriers related to access include tuition costs, funding for transportation, books, and child care; lack of time to take courses and do practice teaching; inaccessible locations for courses; and

language and cultural barriers. Support for navigating the higher education system, alignment of courses with degree pathways, academic advising and documentation of coursework are all additional barriers.

Not All Degrees Are Equal

The *Transforming the Workforce*³ report acknowledged that the quantity, quality, and types of professional learning experiences are extremely variable and occur within inconsistent, fragmented systems using differing tools and approaches. The 2016 *National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ)* study⁴ looked at Pre-K teachers earning a bachelor's degree and found that they were poorly equipped to educate young children. NCTQ studied 100 teacher prep programs in 29 states that certify Pre-K teachers, and found that only 35 percent require even a single course on child development focused on birth to age 8. Only 5 percent require aspiring teachers to student teach in actual Pre-K classrooms with classroom teachers who have been judged to be effective. Nearly 40 percent don't require teacher candidates to take a course on strategies to foster young children's language development. Clearly, the quality and consistency of higher education for ECE degrees is a problem.

There Is Hope for Change

Across the country, ECE advocates are partnering with institutions of higher education to create degree pathways, remove barriers to access, and ensure the quality of teacher preparation programs. Several states have professional development task forces or advisory groups that have created action plans for transforming the workforce. Highline College in King County, Washington, is an example of responsiveness to the recommendations from *Transforming the Workforce*. The story of its efforts to

create degree pathways, increase access, and ensure quality provides a portrait of an institution that demonstrates a commitment to playing a key role in transforming the ECE workforce in their community.

About Highline College

Highline College held its first classes at a local high school over 50 years ago and was the first community college to serve King County, Washington. With an enrollment of more than 17,000 students, Highline is the most diverse community college in the state. Some 75 percent are students of color and a significant number of students are English-language learners and are multi-lingual. The nationally recognized college has won many awards related to excellence in education, diversity, and successful service to surrounding communities.

Highline's education department offers multiple degree pathways, preparing early learning practitioners, para-educators, and elementary school teachers. The principles that guide the college's work emphasize relationships, reflective practice, and ongoing professional development, all through the lenses of cultural responsiveness and equity pedagogy. The result is a robust offering of coursework spanning days, evenings, weekends, online, and hybrid offerings, both on campus and in the community. Coursework is available in English, Somali, Spanish, and Arabic. In the spring of 2017, Highline became the first program in the state to earn accreditation from the National Association for the Education of Young Children and in May of 2017, Highline was approved to launch a bachelor of applied science degree in Teaching and Early Learning.

What are Applied Bachelor Degrees?

Bachelor's of Applied Science (BAS) degrees are career-specific degrees designed to prepare people to work

successfully in high-demand fields in Washington State. They were developed by community and technical colleges to address unmet need in specific areas. Highline's BAS Teaching and Early Learning builds on the Associate of Applied Science (AAS)⁵ in ECE. Within the AAS in ECE, students can earn up to seven industry-recognized certificates, including specialization areas in administration, family home child care, and infant/toddler or school-age care.

Creating Pathways to Degrees

In 2011, the Washington State Department of Early Learning convened a working group of ECE faculty and professionals from across the state to create clear education pathways for early learning practitioners. Senior Highline faculty participated in that effort, with the college becoming an early adopter of the state curriculum and credentialing system in 2014.

This year Highline was approved to offer a bachelor of applied science in Teaching and Early Learning. Historically in Washington, professional-technical degrees gave students important knowledge and skills to work with young children, but were notoriously difficult to transfer to a university bachelor program, often requiring considerable additional coursework to be considered. The AAS in ECE transfers directly into the new BAS in Teaching and Early Learning, creating a seamless degree pathway.

Increasing Access

In 2009, Highline partnered with the local Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR) organization to begin delivering coursework in Somali as a result of identified need in their service area. CCR connected the college with leaders in the Somali community and was able to help with the funding and marketing neces-

sary to get that program started. Four years later, a group of Latino providers approached Highline faculty about the possibility of offering coursework in Spanish and most recently community members requested coursework in Arabic. Today, coursework leading to certificate attainment is offered in all of these languages, in addition to traditional offerings in English. Through a partnership with the YWCA, Highline is able to offer many courses off campus, making them more geographically accessible to a large number of providers.

The cost of higher education poses a significant barrier for many in the ECE workforce. Thanks to the Washington State Department of Early Learning, financial assistance is available through Early Achievers⁶, which offers scholarships for working providers to obtain certificates and degrees. These scholarships cover tuition, books, and miscellaneous expenses including parking or background checks and may even subsidize release time for academic activities. Participating colleges also receive additional funds to offer individualized support for scholarship recipients such as navigating college systems, or individual tutoring.

Addressing Quality

In 2017 Highline became the first teacher education program in Washington State to be accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children. Accreditation was an important step, ensuring a rigorous academic program that closely aligned with national standards. The process strengthened Highline in many ways, most notably supporting faculty in the design of key assessments. Administered throughout the AAS program, these assessments of student performance are aligned with NAEYC standards and offer a venue to review

effectiveness in preparing early learning practitioners.

It's Time to Take Action

What can you do in your community and state to partner with local colleges and universities to be more responsive to the needs of the ECE workforce? Here are some suggestions to get you started.

- Be persistent and create relationships:
 - Identify a specific higher education faculty member to be an ally and meet in person when possible. If you don't get an immediate response, try again.
 - Understand that colleges are systems and that there are constraints on how much instructors can do; build your understanding of how things work.
- Act in solidarity with your local community and state advocates:
 - Think broadly — what are the workforce needs in your area? Collect data on the workforce from the workforce registry or state government. Be able to say, for example, "There are 25 people who need this."
 - Invite higher education partners to local meetings — director's groups for example — to learn more about your needs and make connections.
 - Navigating college systems can be daunting; support each other in the process.
- Be clear about your needs and be open to alternate ideas:
 - You may come looking for a specific service or credential — be open to hearing other options. Your higher education partners may be

able to offer something even better. Work together for creative solutions.

- Know your community. For example, are they savvy consumers of education who are familiar with how college works? Will they need more support? How can they get it? What can you do?

■ Assess your own resources and enlist others in your campaign:

- Are there other organizations that may help? Try engaging professional groups in your advocacy efforts. Reach out to your local NAEYC affiliate, Family Child Care Association, state scholarship or TEACH program, workforce registry or local offices of Child Care Aware or the CCR.
- Other potential allies include city or county governments, the state early childhood education office, and funders such as United Way.
- If you're interested in having courses offered in your community, are there resources for this? Can you offer space for the class? Time off for your employees to attend?
- Find out if there is a state professional development advisory group and what their vision and plans are for degree pathways. Share your ideas and needs with them and enlist their help.
- Propose a think tank on improving pathways to bachelor's degrees in your state.

You Can Do It!

It may seem that transforming the workforce is a daunting goal, but now is the right time to dig in and make progress. Research and our own experience with

the workforce tell us that young children deserve highly qualified and experienced teachers. Our task is to find strategies to boost compensation and allies for reducing barriers, ensuring equitable access, and providing clear pathways to degrees and a high-quality education for every member of the workforce in early childhood.

End Notes

- 1 Institute of Medicine & National Research Council. (2015). *Transforming the workforce for children birth through age 8: A unifying foundation*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.
- 2 Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley. (2017). *Comparison of personnel systems for K-12 and early childhood teachers: Qualifications and compensation*.
- 3 Institute of Medicine & National Research Council. (2015). *Transforming the workforce for children birth through age 8: A unifying foundation*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.
- 4 National Council on Teacher Quality. (2016). Some assembly required: Piecing together the preparation preschool teachers need. Presentation, June 2016. Retrieved: www.nctq.org/dmsStage/Preschool
- 5 Note that in Washington State, it is possible to earn Associate of Arts (AA) or AAS degrees and BA (Bachelor of Arts) or BAS degrees.
- 6 Early Achievers is Washington's Quality Rating and Improvement System.